



Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Social Studies in the Context of COVID-19 in Oman

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Education in Omani schools switched to online learning in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Within this context, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore pre-service social studies teachers' perceptions of some aspects of teaching social studies. In particular, the study explored pre-service social studies teachers' perceptions of the positive and challenging aspects of teaching social studies, ways of integrating COVID-19 into social studies instruction, the importance of social studies, and suggestions for improving social studies. The participants were a cohort of 16 pre-service social studies teachers participating in the practicum for one semester. The data were collected using open-ended online surveys, semi-structured interviews, and portfolios. Overall, the participants were positive in their perceptions of social studies and their teaching experiences. The most positive aspects of teaching social studies were the integration of technology, diversity of teaching approaches, and collegial support received. On the other hand, the most challenging aspects were related to weak Internet networks, a lack of communication, difficulty in implementing assessments, a lack of instructional time, and difficulty in executing hands-on activities. The findings of the study have important implications for social studies and efforts to improve pre-service teacher education in Oman.

Keywords: social studies, pre-service teachers, perceptions, COVID-19, practicum, Oman

INTRODUCTION

Since early 2020, the COVID-19 crisis has become a challenge for many educational institutions worldwide. It has led to the closure of public schools and institutions of higher education. In Oman, public schools began closing in mid-March 2020 and continued to do so until the end of the 2019/2020 academic year. For the 2020/2021 academic year, the Ministry of Education implemented a hybrid learning approach that combined face-to-face instruction and online learning through two e-learning platforms for grades 1-4 and 5-12. Several factors were taken into consideration when implementing hybrid learning, including school size and location (Ministry of Education, 2020). With the increase in the intensity of the pandemic in late February

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2021, most schools switched to online instruction for all grade levels except for grade 12, which proceeded with hybrid learning until the end of the academic year.

In the context of the rapid development of public education in Oman, there have been urgent calls to enhance the quality of education for pre-service teachers (Ministry of Education & World Bank, 2012; The Education Council, 2018). For example, a report by the Ministry of Education and the World Bank (2012) indicated that teacher preparation programs do not match the requirements of public schools' curricula well, and the practical component of teacher education courses is minimal. This finding is in line with those of international literature that highlights the need for more research on the knowledge, perceptions, and experiences of pre-service teachers of social studies and its associated subjects to improve the quality of learning experiences in schools (e.g., Avci, et al., 2016; Catling, 2014).

Within the context of the COVID-19 crisis, educators have expressed interest in enhancing the teaching and learning of social studies and its associated subjects. For example, Kidman and Chang (2020) urged geography educators to explore "crisis education" and "examine how education is able to address the knowledge, skills and dispositions required for people in precarious times" (p. 107). However, some aspects of teaching social studies have remained under-explored nationally and internationally. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore pre-service social studies teachers' perceptions of some aspects of teaching social studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the current study sought to answer the following research questions: What are the positive aspects of teaching social studies during the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the challenging aspects of teaching social studies during the COVID-19 pandemic? How do pre-service social studies teachers address COVID-19 in social studies instruction? What is the importance of teaching social studies during the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the suggestions of pre-service social studies teachers to improve social studies instruction?

Literature Review

The literature review begins with the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning social studies. Subsequently, some aspects of social studies in the Omani context are explored.

Impact of the COVID-19 on Teaching and Learning Social Studies

The literature highlights the opportunities and challenges associated with teaching and learning social studies in the context of COVID-19.

Opportunities

One important opportunity is related to the increased use of technology in social studies/geography classes (Bagoly-simó et al., 2020; Çakmak & Kacar, 2021; Geraghty & Kersiki, 2020). For example, Bagoly-Simó et al. (2020) reported that digital atlases, along with cartographic apps, were increasingly being used in geography classes at the secondary level in Germany. They further emphasized that less digitally skilled teachers,

along with their students, were “forced to deal with alternative communication channels and educational media, such as Google Earth, GIS, and digital maps” (p. 234). Considering the power of GIS in transforming geography education, Geraghty and Kersiki (2020, p. 20) stated that “if there was anything positive about the timing of COVID-19, it was at least that it came at a time when GIS had enough history behind it to have evolved into a web-enabled platform.” It should be noted that the increased use of various technologies during the current pandemic has been noted in other fields, such as science education (cf. Chadwick & McLoughlin, 2020).

Furthermore, social studies educators can discuss the pedagogical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of a wide range of content and instructional practices (Kidman & Chang, 2020; Usher & Dolan, 2021; van der Schee, 2020). For example, addressing the COVID-19 pandemic through geography provides teachers with opportunities to connect geography to the real world and everyday experiences and encourages the use of a wide range of student-centered strategies (Usher & Dolan, 2021). In civic education, Akbulut et al. (2020) reported several examples of the roles of social media during the pandemic in increasing student participation in national festivals such as National Day and Children Day. In terms of the use of innovative instruction during the pandemic, a study by Indrawati (2021) reported that the use of archiving video media and online learning resulted in positive and significant effect on high school students’ learning and innovation skills—communication, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration.

Challenges

Social studies educators have identified several challenges facing teaching social studies and its associated subjects amid the pandemic. First, with the closure of parks, zoos, and museums, students in many countries are missing out on unique outdoor learning experiences (Collins et al., 2020; Quay et al., 2020).

Furthermore, some administrative challenges have been recognized in the literature. For example, Bagoly-simó et al. (2020) reported several administrative challenges facing geography teachers in the German educational context, such as finding balance between the right amount of supervision and providing support for students of various socioeconomic backgrounds in terms of access to equipment, the availability of spaces for learning, and parental supervision.

Another important challenge discussed in the literature is the readiness of schools to support social studies instruction, including issues with connectivity and accessibility (Akbulut et al., 2020; Bariham et al., 2020; Çakmak & Kacar, 2021). It should be noted that schools’ preparedness for the adoption of online education is an important concern in many contexts worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). Regarding this issue, other studies have reported insights into student participation in online classes (Çakmak & Kacar, 2021; Bariham et al., 2020; Niemi & Kousa, 2020). According to Bariham et al. (2020), the use of digital technology in Ghanaian social studies classes by students is minimal and ineffective. In the Turkish context, Çakmak and Kacar (2021) found inadequate

participation of students in live social studies lessons and low levels of student morale and motivation.

Although COVID-19 has had many real-world implications globally, it has not received enough coverage in social studies and geography curricula (Akbulut et al., 2020; Bagoly-simó et al., 2020). This may be due to the use of predetermined curricula that provide limited opportunities to cover emerging topics and issues.

Social Studies in Omani Schools

Social studies is a compulsory subject for students in grades three through 12. In the basic education stage (grades 1-10), it is taught as an integrated subject, with an emphasis placed on three main areas: geography, history, and citizenship (Al-Nofli, 2013). In the post-basic education stage (grades 11-12), it is taught as a separate subject (Table 1) (Ministry of Education, 2011, 2020). Geography and history are offered to students as elective subjects.

Table 1
Social studies subjects in the post-basic education stage

Subject	Grade
My homeland (Required)	11
Islamic civilization (Elective)	11
Economic geography (Elective)	11
My homeland (Required)	12
The world around me (Elective)	12
Geography and modern technologies (Elective)	12

As with other subjects, the status of social studies in Omani schools has improved since the implementation of the Basic Education Reform in 1998 (Al-Maamari et al., 2014; Al-Nofli, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2006). For example, the reform places great emphasis on student-centered approaches and continuous assessments. The curriculum has been revised to include relevant content knowledge and skills for students to prepare them for real life and careers (Ministry of Education, 2006). With the increasing use of geo-technologies to engage students in active learning and prepare them for future careers, the integration of geo-technologies in Omani schools began in 2007 under a new geography subject called “geography and modern technologies,” which emphasized the study of global positioning systems, geographic information systems, and remote sensing (Ministry of Education, 2013; Al-Nofli, 2018).

Despite the importance of social studies, social studies teachers have traditionally viewed the subject as less important than other ones (e.g., mathematics, science, Arabic, English, and Islamic education) (Al-Maamari et al., 2014). In addition, Al-Kharousi (2014) found that students showed negative attitudes toward social studies using a sample of 1,000 post-basic education students (grades 11-12) in public and private schools. One reason is that students view social studies as providing fewer future career opportunities than some other subjects, such as mathematics and science.

One of the factors limiting social studies instruction is the lack of instructional time allocated to the subject. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the amount of instructional time ranged from two to four class periods per week (approximately 40-45 minutes per class period) devoted to social studies across the basic and post-basic grade levels (Ministry of Education, 2011, 2017). The amount of instructional time during the pandemic has been reduced to one hour per week for all grade levels (Ministry of Education, 2020). With the time constraints imposed during the pandemic, the amount of content related to social studies for each grade level was further reduced to fit within the time constraints.

Given the heavy reliance on e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Omani schools, Al Hadhrami and Al Saadi (2021) reported several advantages and challenges as perceived by a sample of 346 parents in a single school district. Some of the perceived advantages of e-learning included the fact that it helps children learn to use modern technologies ($M = 3.8$), is considered a suitable medium for continuing instruction during the pandemic ($M = 3.3$), and helps children manage their study time ($M = 3$). On the other hand, the main perceived challenges included the limitations of the network and issues with accessibility ($M = 4.4$), difficulty with time management ($M = 3.97$), the lack of student readiness to use e-learning as the main instructional medium ($M = 3.64$), and the complexity of the educational materials used in e-learning ($M = 3.4$).

METHOD

In this study, a qualitative research design was adopted to explore pre-service social studies teachers' perceptions of social studies. In qualitative research, a researcher attempts to study naturally occurring phenomena with a focus on their complexity (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Within the realm of qualitative research, a phenomenological research approach was utilized in the current study. As Patton (2014, p. 116) pointed out, the aim of this approach is to gain a "deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences." A phenomenon (e.g., an activity or situation) is the focus of this type of inquiry. It is assumed that there is *an essence or essences to shared experience* (p. 116). These essences are the essential qualities or characteristics of the experience commonly shared by the people experiencing a phenomenon. The researcher seeks to identify and understand the essence of various participants' experiences of some phenomena.

Participants

The participants in this study were a cohort of 19 pre-service social studies teachers enrolled in the higher diploma in education at the Faculty of Education and Arts at Sohar University during the 2020/2021 academic year. Of the 19 pre-service social studies teachers, 16 participated in this study (14 females and two males). All the participants held a Bachelor of Arts degree (15 majoring in geography and one in history) prior to joining the higher diploma program. They had lived experience teaching social studies during the pandemic, and they participated in the practicum in public schools for three days per week during the second semester of the 2020/2021

academic year and taught social studies to students in grades five through 11. In this study, the researcher was closely involved with the participants and context of the study, as he supervised the participants throughout the practicum and collected the data.

Data Collection

The study was based on data collected through an online survey, semi-structured interviews, and portfolios, which were used to capture pre-service social studies teachers' perceptions of social studies in detail. The survey focused on open-ended questions that allowed the participants to present their perceptions concerning some specific aspects of social studies in detail, including the positive and challenging aspects of teaching social studies during the pandemic, addressing the pandemic in teaching social studies, the importance of social studies, and suggestions for improving social studies instruction. The survey also included demographic questions concerning the participants' gender and major and the grade levels that they taught. It was administrated near the end of the second semester of the 2020/2021 academic year following approval of the study by Sohar University.

Following the administration of the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants (four females and one male) to get more ideas and clarifications of responses concerning the participants' perceptions of social studies in schools. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and telephone interactions according to the participants' preferences. The participants were given the freedom and flexibility to express additional comments.

Regarding the portfolios, the participants were required to prepare a portfolio documenting their progress in the practicum and engage in reflection on a wide range of practices related to social studies instruction. They were given the following guidelines for the preparation of their portfolios:

- Inclusion of lesson plans.
- Evidence of the learning activities and instructional media used when teaching social studies.
- Evidence of participation in school activities.
- Reflections on the teaching and learning of social studies with self-evaluations of progress in the practicum.

The portfolios were analyzed for evidence of participants' use of technology and teaching strategies. They were also analyzed for evidence of participants' perceptions of the practicum.

Data Analysis

Schutt (2012) outlined five main techniques shared by most qualitative approaches: documentation; conceptualization, coding, and organization; examining relationships; authentication of conclusions; and reflexivity. Therefore, the analysis process involved reading transcripts of the data collected through the surveys and interviews to obtain a

foundation for participants' responses and assess the quality of their responses. The responses were organized by questions and were read to identify similarities and differences. They were coded and categorized into themes. The analysis also involved reading the responses several times to determine whether they represented similar themes and to check for emergent concepts and themes. Credibility is considered an important feature of qualitative research (Schutt, 2014; Patton, 2012). The triangulation of the survey responses with the interview responses and portfolios was considered throughout the analysis process. In addition, the responses from both the surveys and interviews were examined by an experienced geography teacher in terms of the positive and challenging aspects of social studies instruction. Discussions were held to resolve any differences in the analyses.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study are reported under the following headings: positive aspects of teaching social studies, challenging aspects of teaching social studies, addressing COVID-19 in teaching social studies, importance of social studies, and suggestions.

Positive Aspects of Teaching Social Studies

The participants mentioned three positive aspects of teaching social studies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Integration of Technology

The dominant positive aspect in both the surveys and interviews was the integration of a wide range of technologies into social studies instruction. Evidence gathered from the portfolios demonstrated several examples of technologies that were utilized in social studies lessons during the practicum (Table 2).

Table 2
List of technologies used by participants in social studies instruction

Type of technology	Participants (n = 16)	Percentage	Examples of use
PowerPoint	16	100	Presenting content, class activities, and assessments.
YouTube	16	100	Explaining concepts and themes through videos (e.g., desertification).
Wordwall	14	87.5	Presenting interactive visual activities (e.g., labelled diagrams and spinning wheels).
Class 123	10	62.5	Enhancing classroom management (e.g., using activity timer).
LearningApps	10	62.5	Increasing student participation in class activities (e.g., presenting concept maps).
Padlet	10	62.5	Collecting quick answers to a question (e.g., importance of tourism).
Interactive boards (e.g., Jamboard) and MyViewBoard)	9	56.3	Engaging students in interactive activities such as sketchnoting and labelling.
ClassDojo	9	56.3	Reinforcing positive student behavior through accumulated points.
Liveworksheets	8	50	Assessing student learning through interactive exercises with feedback.
ClassPoint	8	50	Checking understanding through interactive assessment options.
Google forms	8	50	Surveying students' understanding and opinions of a wide range of topics.
Google maps	7	43.8	Checking directions and traffic in a city.
Slidesgo	5	31.3	Engaging students in interactive class presentations.
Class quiz	5	31.3	Checking understanding through interactive assessment options.
Online atlases	3	18.8	Locating places on maps (e.g., world largest cities).
Mozaik3d	2	12.5	Presenting interactive 3D models (e.g., the water cycle).
Google Earth	2	12.5	Discussing ancient trade routes.
Excel	2	12.5	Presenting population data in figures and charts.

Some of the participants indicated their reasons for relying heavily on technology, which included the usefulness of technology for explaining complex concepts, the lack of instructional materials in schools, and technology's role in compensating for the absence of face-to-face instruction. Some typical responses were as follows:

Using technology helps me present content to students more effectively. I used to illustrate many concepts in the textbook with photos, videos, websites, and other means to increase student interaction during each lesson (Grade five, female student teacher).

It becomes easy to create e-activities for students and practice them during class. Using explanations with presentations and videos greatly facilitates the

teaching process, and it becomes more enjoyable (Grade seven, female student teacher).

Diversity of Teaching Approaches

In line with the increased use of technology, the majority of the participants (87.5%) also relied on a wide range of teaching approaches to support student learning. Although the participants used generic terms to describe this category in both the surveys and interviews, they referred to several teaching approaches in their portfolios, including brainstorming, inquiry, concept maps and Venn diagrams, KWL, problem-solving techniques, and cartoons. The participants aimed to reach all the students and overcome the limitations associated with e-learning in terms of student involvement in class activities. Some typical responses included the following:

Social studies is full of distinct teaching strategies. This experience [practicum] helped me to gain knowledge of some strategies that I had not dealt with [in microteaching] and had not heard of before, so I expanded my knowledge, and my use of these strategies created an atmosphere of fun and reduced the monotony that accompanies distance learning in most school subjects (Grade six, female student teacher).

It provides a great opportunity for self-directed learning and the provision of various activities for lessons, to which the student can refer at any time (Grade 11, male student teacher).

Collegial Support

The third and final positive aspect of teaching social studies was centered on the support provided by cooperating teachers and school administrators. Ten participants (62.5%) described their teaching experience of social studies as being valuable because of the support that they had received in schools. Given the nature of teaching during the pandemic, it seems that support from colleagues was available to the participants. It should be noted that the participants completed all the university courses online except for the practicum, which provided them with opportunities to interact with teachers and administrators in schools. Some typical responses were as follows:

The period that I spent in school for training was one of the most important and beautiful periods, as the administration and the teaching staff were among the most cooperative people I met (Grade 11, female student teacher).

The cooperating teacher has a clear role in smoothing the [teaching] process in terms of orientation and finding solutions to student problems, technology, and development of the student teacher's teaching style (Grade nine, female student teacher).

The participants reported in their portfolios that they had participated in several workshops at their host schools to enhance teaching and learning, especially in relation to the use of the e-platforms launched recently by the Ministry of Education and some applications and software (see Table 2).

Challenging Aspects of Teaching Social Studies

The data from the surveys, interviews, and portfolios revealed five main challenges faced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges were centered on weak Internet networks, lack of communication, difficulty in assessing student learning, lack of instructional time, and difficulty in executing hands-on activities.

Weak Internet Networks

There was strong agreement among all the participants that weak Internet networks were the most challenging aspect of social studies instruction in public schools. This resulted in delayed student attendance in online classes and affected the quality of instruction in terms of presenting videos and interactive presentations. Some typical responses were as follows.

The network is very weak most of the time, even in schools. This delayed many lessons and wasted time. I hope they provide strong networks in schools (Grade six, female student teacher).

The weak network. Not all the students could enter the class for technical reasons or they needed to be excused for technical reasons. Some of the students attended the class without any interaction. Thus, participation was limited to a small group of students (Grade seven, male student teacher).

Lack of Communication

In addition to citing weak Internet networks, the majority of the participants (81.3%) raised concerns about communication with students during online classes, but they failed to provide the details of communication with other stakeholders, such as parents. This might have been the case because communication with parents and other stakeholders was the responsibility of the cooperating teachers and administration. Some typical responses were as follows:

The implementation of lessons involved some challenges, the most important of which was the difficulty of communicating with the students due to bad Internet service in some areas. The distance education process also prevented direct contact with the students. Consequently, it was difficult to determine students' level of understanding, and, as a teacher, it was difficult not to be able to use body language to facilitate explanation and communication with the students (Grade 11, male student teacher).

Distance learning widened the gap between me and the students, so I did not enjoy teaching like I had imagined. Our body language did not stand out and our emotions were not transmitted as required, but I managed to convey some of the message by changing the tone of my voice (Grade six, female student teacher).

Difficulty in Assessing Student Learning

Eleven participants (68.8%) raised concerns about assessment, especially in terms of using suitable assessment approaches, identifying the actual achievement level of their

students, and dealing with individual differences. A few of the participants associated this challenge with the lack of face-to-face contact with the students.

Difficulty in assessment, which is limited to some activities, such as homework and a quiz (Grade nine, female student teacher).

The difficulty of assessing students and measuring the extent of their understanding of the materials due to the absence of direct face-to-face contact (Grade seven, male student teacher).

Lack of Instructional Time

Nine participants (56.3%) expressed concern over the amount of instructional time devoted to teaching social studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. They said that one hour per week was insufficient for social studies instruction. The following was a typical comment.

The lessons were poorly matched to the time allotted for them. Most of the lessons, such as those related to desertification and global warming, had varying content and materials, but the amount of time allotted for them was only one hour [per week]. This resulted in several issues, including the need to speed up the teaching process, the need to reduce the teaching strategies to be implemented in the class to only one, and the need to forgo reviewing the answers to the textbook activities (Grade 10, female student teacher).

Difficulty in Executing Hands-on Activities

The last challenge to emerge from pre-service teachers' responses was related to executing hands-on activities. Seven participants (43.8%) expressed concern about two main areas: active learning approaches and subject skill acquisition. In terms of active learning, the participants raised concerns about implementing active learning approaches, such as ones involving group work and fieldwork. Concerning skill acquisition, the participants expressed difficulty in teaching map-reading skills and the use of geographical instruments (e.g., globes and models). Although the participants provided few details on this challenge, it was frequently mentioned in their portfolios. Some typical comments were as follows.

I found it difficult to implement practical activities and fieldwork. There were no local field trips for some lessons, such as those about agriculture. The class was supposed to visit a farm. As part of the social work lesson, we were also supposed to organize a campaign to clean up the beach to help the students acquire social work skills, but this was not done because of the pandemic (Grade five, female student teacher).

Lack of acquisition of skills related to locating places on maps and group work (Grade nine, female student teacher).

Regarding this challenge, the participants reported specific reasons for such issues, including the need to follow school regulations regarding social distancing before

switching to online instruction in some schools, lack of instructional time, and the absence of face-face interaction.

Addressing COVID-19 in Teaching Social Studies

This section presents the findings concerning the participants' views on addressing COVID-19 in social studies classes. There was substantial agreement among the participants regarding the importance of teaching lessons related to COVID-19 in social studies classes. However, COVID-19 was not a part of the social studies curriculum. Most of the participants integrated this topic into their instruction according to the type of content they taught. An analysis of the responses revealed several examples that were well-positioned in terms of COVID-19. For example, the participants involved in teaching citizenship addressed COVID-19 in terms of solidarity and adherence to the rules and regulations of the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling the effects of COVID-19.

In the volunteer work lesson, I explained the concept of social solidarity and how solidarity appears between the members of a society during disasters and pandemics, such as [cyclone] Gonu and COVID-19. When some commercial activities ceased and the lives of some people became difficult, voluntary campaigns appeared to help those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic by providing food and paying their bills (rent, electricity bill, etc.) (Grade five, female student teacher).

Regarding the geography component, the participants connected COVID-19 to a wide range of topics at both the local and global scales, including economic activities (e.g., tourism), transportation, services, and cities' problems. When asked to elaborate on examples of COVID-19-related topics that should be included in the social studies curriculum, the participants mentioned several items, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3
Examples of COVID-19-related topics for the social studies curriculum

Domain	Examples of topics
Knowledge	COVID-19 crisis (definition, syndromes, causes, consequences, geographical distribution, and coping strategies); medical geography; duties and responsibilities (citizens and agencies); personal hygiene; healthcare services; and ways of dealing with crises.
Skills	Identification of accurate information; map skills (e.g., pandemic distribution); data analysis; and problem-solving.
Values and dispositions	Adherence to rules and regulations; responsibility; social distancing; social relationships; social solidarity; cooperation; patience; volunteer work; appreciation for others (e.g., social workers, citizens, public agencies, etc.); and effective use of time during lockdown and quarantine.

Importance of Teaching Social Studies

This section presents participants' perceptions of the importance of teaching social studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. All the participants stressed the importance of social studies. Their responses to the survey and interviews were divided into two

categories. First, they viewed social studies as an important means to explore various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, with an emphasis on core social studies themes, such as places, scales, and interdependence. Second, they viewed social studies as an important part of the school curriculum. Their responses were focused on the transmission of values and cultural heritage, instruction in the core concepts and themes of the subject (e.g., history and geography), and teaching skills and processes. Some typical responses were as follows.

Social studies is also important. The subject is classified within the humanities, the subject of which is the human experience. We understand that it is one of the subjects that the student must study to understand life and ways of living and adapting to global changes, such as what is happening now with COVID-19. One of the roles of social studies teachers is to instill values and correct attitudes and teach students how to deal with COVID-19 as precautionary measures (Grade seven, male student teacher).

The subject is important because it covers many topics related to various countries, the environment, the economy, and other issues. All these topics are important for students, and the pandemic can also be linked to the topics studied in class, such as the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the environment, as we know that emissions and pollution have decreased significantly during the pandemic (Grade 10, female student teacher).

Suggestions

The participants were asked to provide suggestions on how to improve social studies instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, most of the responses were centered on the following suggestions:

- Enhancing the quality of the Internet network.
- Increasing the instructional time for social studies.
- Enhancing teachers' skills in implementing student-centered approaches within an e-learning context.
- Updating social studies textbooks with recent data and topics.
- Supporting social studies instruction with geo-technologies.

Emerging Theme: Participants' Perceptions of the Practicum

Despite the challenges mentioned earlier, the participants were positive about their perceptions and experiences in relation to teaching social studies. They reported acquiring useful learning experiences and important teaching skills through the practicum, including lesson planning, diversification of teaching approaches and technology use, time management, and mastery of discipline-specific content. The following was a typical response.

The practicum was very useful. We got to know the school environment and the nature of the teaching profession intimately, understand time-management, and benefit from class time, classroom management, and mastery of the subject content in addition to applying the methods and strategies that we learned from the university and getting acquainted with the latest programs and technologies (Grade 11, female student teacher).

At the same time, many of the participants reported the need for additional support to enhance some teaching skills—using their voice in classroom interactions, teaching values and attitudes, connecting the content to students' lives, applying active learning strategies in online classes, utilizing formative assessments, and using standard Arabic in the classroom.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore pre-service social studies teachers' perceptions of teaching social studies during the unprecedented times brought about by COVID-19. Overall, the most positive aspect of social studies instruction was the ability to utilize a wide range of technologies to support student learning. This finding is consistent with the literature on teaching and learning in K-12 education and higher education contexts globally (e.g., Bagoly-simó et al., 2020; Çakmak & Kacar, 2021; Chadwick & McLoughlin, 2020; Hazaymeh, 2021). It should be noted that most of the technologies used by the participants were used less often in Omani social studies classrooms prior to the pandemic (Al-Nofli, 2013). This reflects participants' commitment to adapting technology to suit the context of the teaching and learning of social studies.

Analysis of the responses indicated that the participants in this study valued support from the cooperating teachers and administrators. This confirms the critical role of school professionals in supporting new teachers in Omani schools (Al-Blooshi, 2009; Al-Bahri, 2009). Some examples of support provided during the practicum included peer observations, peer teaching, cooperating teacher classroom visits, and a range of professional development activities related to the implementation of teaching methods and technologies.

Although COVID-19 is a recent phenomenon and is not yet part of the Omani social studies curriculum, the participants viewed the topic as an important event and they stressed several examples of integrating it into their instruction. This view is consistent with the argument that COVID-19 offers rich opportunities for meaningful teaching and learning in social studies and geography education (Kidman & Chang, 2020; Usher & Dolan, 2021; van der Schee, 2020). In line with this finding, the participants stressed the importance of social studies in Omani schools as a vehicle to teach about various aspects of the pandemic along with other rationales—teaching important knowledge, skills, and values associated with the subject. Surprisingly, their view of the importance of social studies contradicts previous research findings, which reflect the view that social studies is a marginalized school subject (e.g., Al-Maamari et al., 2014; Leming et al., 2006).

The participants identified several challenges associated with social studies instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. They stressed the weakness of Internet networks as a key challenge, as it affected many aspects of teaching and learning, including student attendance in online classes, the quality of instruction, and the ease of communication. This finding was in line with Al Hadhrami and Al Saadi's (2021) study that reported the limitations of the Internet networks as one of the main challenges of e-learning during COVID-19 as perceived by Omani parents. To address this challenge, it will be vital to make investments in the network infrastructure to support e-learning in Omani schools, as this type of instruction seems likely to increase in the future.

While the participants were positive about their experience of teaching social studies during the COVID-19 pandemic, they reported the need for additional support in relation to some teaching skills, including engaging students in active learning, using their voice in class interactions, teaching values and attitudes, and implementing formative assessments. This concern supports Catling's (2014) call for further investigation into pre-service teachers' capabilities in teaching primary geography, including their understanding of assessments, their awareness of the national curricula, and the classroom contexts in which they teach. This area also requires attention to enhance the quality of the preparation provided to both pre-service and in-service teachers.

One limitation concerning the findings of the current study was the fact that the participants' perceptions of social studies were limited to online teaching experience for one semester as part of the practicum in public schools. They spent three days per week teaching social studies during the second semester of the 2020/2021 academic year. If the participants had spent a longer period in schools, the practicum could have provided them with additional knowledge and experience in teaching social studies.

CONCLUSION

The current study provided insights into pre-service social studies teachers' perceptions of social studies instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although online learning is a new experience in the Omani educational context in both K-12 schools and most higher education institutions, pre-service social studies teachers were positive in their views of social studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. They relied on a wide range of technologies and teaching approaches to reach their students in a collaborative school environment. However, the results of the study showed that the greatest challenge in facilitating social studies instruction was the weakness of Internet network, which requires an urgent response. With the rapid switch to online learning in public schools and teacher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need to support pre-service social studies teachers with hands-on learning experiences related to important teaching skills.

While this study provides a glimpse into pre-service social studies teachers' perceptions of teaching social studies, there is further potential for in-depth research on the preparation of pre-service social studies teachers in Oman. For example, how do pre-

service social studies teachers view the effectiveness of their preparation? What are their expectations and concerns in terms of social studies instruction?

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