

## **Lived Experiences of Post Graduate Diploma in Education Students During the Covid 19 Pandemic**



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**ABSTRACT:** This phenomenological study was carried out in order to explore the lived experiences of Post Graduate Diploma in Education students on the strengths and weaknesses of the program during the Covid 19 Pandemic. It also aimed at mapping up the way forward based on what works in the light of the new normal. The inception of the Covid 19 Pandemic resulted in sudden disruptions in most national systems including the educational systems in Zimbabwe. The Government responded to the pandemic with lockdowns, travel restrictions and social distancing. Within the tertiary education realm, the teacher training system was among those that were hard-hit because the teacher education program includes both theoretical and practical components. The practical component is the teaching practice, the hands-on experience that is significant to the student teachers. This meant that the nationally enforced COVID 19 restrictions would need adjustments in and restructuring of the pedagogical activities and practices that complied with the COVID 19 restrictions. Such strategies included adopting e-learning on various virtual platforms. Both teachers and students had to upscale their computer technology skills as fast as possible in order meet the demands and duration of the program. The study adopted a qualitative approach and thematic analysis was used to categorize responses. Five major themes emerged from the data collected as follows: Financial constraints, poor and unreliable internet connectivity: capitalizing on strengths of the program: students' developed coping strategies and COVID 19 experience as a learning curve. The recommendation is a total embrace of the new normal by institutions of higher learning. In addition, the study also recommends that crisis preparedness and adequate student orientation are very necessary for smooth running PGDE program.

**KEYWORDS:** Postgraduate Diploma in Education, Pedagogy, Online learning, Teaching Practice, Covid 19 Pandemic

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The inception of the Covid 19 Pandemic resulted in sudden disruptions in most national systems including the educational systems. As the Government responded to the pandemic with lockdowns, travel restrictions and social distancing this meant the educational systems had to respond and adapt accordingly, (Londoño-Monroy, Alvarez-Maestre, Melenge-Escudero, Pérez-Fuentes & Aguilar-Barreto, 2021). Among these systems are primary school, secondary school and the tertiary education systems. Within the tertiary education systems the teacher education (teacher training) systems are among those that were hard-hit because they include both theoretical and practical components. The nationally enforced Covid 19 restrictions required adjustments in academic calendars and restructuring of the pedagogical activities and practices. To ensure continuity of studies under the lockdown conditions meant the teacher education programs had to engage strategies that complied with the Covid 19 restrictions. Such strategies included adopting e-learning on various virtual platforms for some time (Londoño-Monroy, et al, 2021). Both teachers and students had to upscale their computer technology skills as fast as possible in order meet the demands and duration of the program. Further, some teachers and students who did not have electronic gadgets were compelled to purchase appropriate technological devices. In addition to this, some educational institutions faced internet connectivity challenges. In brief, we could say, most educational institutions were not adequately equipped for such sudden changes. Despite all these setbacks the educational programs did not grind to a halt. There were adoptions and adaptations of new strategies according to the prevailing circumstance and contexts. Hence, the focus of this study is to s finding out the lived experiences of the Post graduate diploma in Education (PGDE) students during the Covid 19 pandemic.

### **1.2 Purpose of Study**

The Purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of Post Graduate Diploma in Education students about the PGDE program during the Covid-19 Pandemic and to map the way forward based on what works in the light of the new normal.

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## 1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to.

1. Describe the lived experiences of PGDE students about the challenges they faced in their teacher training process during the Covid 19 pandemic era.
2. Establish the strengths of the PGDE program as perceived by the PGDE student during the Covid -19 Pandemic era.
3. Describe the coping strategies used by the PGDE students during the Covid 19 pandemic era in order to successfully sail through the crisis.
4. Suggest strategies for improving the PGDE Program based on the recommended strategies from participants.

## 1.4 Research questions

1. What are the lived experiences of PGDE students in the light of the challenges they faced in their teacher training process during the Covid 19 pandemic era?
2. What are the strengths of the PGDE program as perceived by the PGDE students during the Covid -19 Pandemic era?
3. How did the students manage to sail through the Covid 19 pandemic era and Post Covid -19 Pandemic era?
4. How best can the challenges faced by the participants be used as stepping stones to optimize the effectiveness of the PGDE program in the light of the new normal?

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Post graduate diploma studies are intermediate studies between undergraduate studies and Masters Studies. This diploma is usually taken as a steppingstone to a Master's degree in a specialized field. It is also taken by graduates to acquire specialized skills in education so as to work as trained teacher. Hence, with a Post graduate diploma in education one can be certified to teach in primary schools, secondary schools or in tertiary level depending on the specialization.

### 2.1 Components of teacher training program

Like any other teacher training program, there are key components that ensure quality and viability of the program. These key components are; educational foundations, class management and educational administration, teacher professionalism, pedagogical skills and the practical aspect (teaching practice). Since post graduate teachers in training already have much of the content, the program duration is usually one and half years (3 semesters). The first two semester are spent studying the theory aspect while the last semester is spent on the practical .i.e. the teaching practice.

Pedagogy is derived from the Greek words 'paid' meaning 'child' and 'agogus' meaning 'leader of ' Hence, the term literary means 'the art and science of teaching children' Knowles and Swanson (2015, p.41). Pedagogy refers to the way of teaching students, whether it is the theory or practice of educating. It is a relationship between the culture and techniques of learning. The main aim of pedagogy is to build on previous learning of the students and work on the development of skills and attitudes of the learners (Gómez-Galán, López-Meneses, & Molina-García, 2016).

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary further defines pedagogy as the "art, science, or profession of teaching" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com> > dictionary). This includes teaching methods and techniques, delivery of instruction and assessment or provision of feedback after teaching and learning. Pedagogy includes the class interactions, classroom management and the classroom setting. Pedagogy also refers to the teacher's teaching style and how he/she relates to the different theories they use. Teaching strategies are the set of educational decisions a teacher must make to facilitate the personal development of students and, from an educational perspective, this would have an impact especially on teaching-learning processes. It is, therefore, an extremely far-reaching, delicate process (Gómez-Galán, López-Meneses, & Molina-García, 2016). Considering the teacher as the main driver in any classroom setting means s/he develops the schemes of work, lesson plans, and delivers the lessons timeously and effectively. In addition, the teacher as the Classroom practitioner has many roles, s/he is *in-loco-parentis*, acts as a parent as well as a counsellor. To be adequately equipped as a competent classroom practitioner, there is need to rigorously go through every aspect of the program. Employing diversity of effective pedagogical approaches is very imperative as it equips the student teachers with skills and competencies that enable them to reach their full potential. Such strong foundation bolsters their self-confidence and self-esteem (Learning Journals). <https://learningjournals.co.uk/what-are-the-different-pedagogical-approaches-to-learning/> However, due to the Lockdown restrictions during the Covid 19 pandemic, it was a bit of a challenge to depend on only the traditional teaching methods. Hence, there was need to be innovative to meet the new normal and at the same time without compromising the standards.

As stated earlier, during the last semester of the teacher training program the student teachers (teachers- in- training) enrol for teaching practice. According to the Collins Dictionary teaching practice is a period that a student teacher spends teaching at a school as part of his or her training. (<https://www.collinsdictionary.com>). Caner (2010, p 80) regards teaching practice 'as a course for Bachelor of Education students that is planned to offer "critical opportunity for pre-service teachers to demonstrate their ability to write lesson plans, deliver individualised instruction and manage the classroom'. Simply put, teaching practice is the hands on experience to the student teachers. The concept *teaching practice* is an umbrella term that represents a set of specific

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preparation for teaching and the actual hands –on teaching experiences which student teachers are expected to be actively engaged in as they work under mentorship and supervision in real life classrooms and schools (Marais and Meier, 2004). The process of training to be a seasoned classroom practitioner hinges on thorough and well- grounded teaching practice. According to Kiggundu & Nayimuli, (2009) “teaching Practice is a pivotal and integral component of teacher training”. As an integral part of teacher education, teaching practice is expected to allow student-teachers to apply the theories learnt in the first year of training into practice (Mannathoko, 2013).

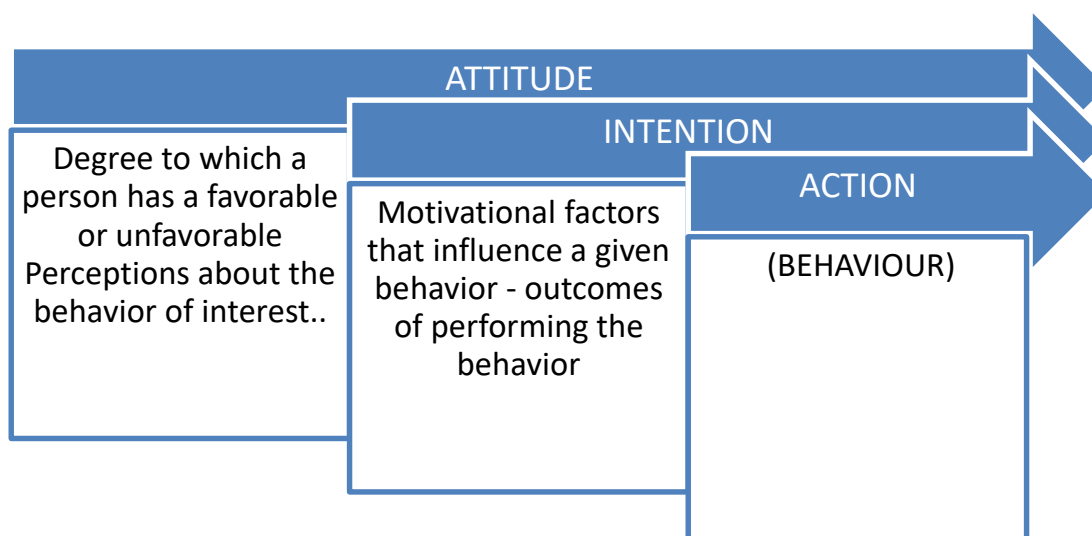
### 2.3 Theoretical Frameworks

This study is underpinned on two theories; Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen and Fishbein) and Technology Acceptance Model (1989).

#### 2.3.1 Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)

The Theory of Reasoned Action and Theory of Planned Behaviour was developed by Icek Ajzen in the 1970s and 1980s. The TRA posits that the decision and intention to adopt a certain behaviour is determined by the attitude toward that behaviour.

Theory of reasoned action on how attitudes influence action is illustrated as a chain reaction between a person's attitudes, intentions and behaviour.



**Attitudes influence intention and intentions in turn influence behaviour** (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

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The saying that “attitudes can make or break” is very true. Generally, attitudes can be defined as the positive or negative feelings, or beliefs regarding a specific issue (Binder & Nierdele, 2006). However, the good thing is that attitudes have also been described as predispositions that are learned and can be changed through influence.

#### 2.3.2 Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model was developed by Davis, 1989. According to the technology acceptance Model, there are two factors that determine whether a computer system or new technology will be accepted by its consumers or potential users (Urhiewhu & Daniel, 2015): These are; (a) perceived usefulness, and (b) perceived ease of use

In this case the students were faced with the sudden school closures and lockdowns due to Covid 19 Pandemic, traditional face to face mode of instruction had to be suspended and adopt the shift to online learning. Both students and lecturers had to embrace technology and adopt virtual pedagogical modes. But whether this paradigm shift was to be acceptable or not depended on those two factors in the TAM model; perceived usefulness, and perceived ease of use. Hence, some tech savvy students with some technological competencies found it easy to adapt whereas those less competent were a bit sceptic and more hesitant to venture into full time online learning on virtual platforms. Studies indicate that for effective online distance educations, largely depends on the availability of appropriate online gadgets and accessible online presentation methods, Hence, it is very necessary to have the appropriate technological tools (Segbenya, Bervell, Minadzi, et al., 2022). This will ensure free participation by all learners

The Technology acceptance model is very similar to the Theory of reasoned Action. The beauty of the TRA is its emphasis on attitudes. According to the TRA model, attitudes (whether positive or negative) emanate from one’s perceived judgement of usefulness of the new technology and its relative ease of use. The attitude greatly determines the ultimate decision to accept or resist change or introduction of technology. Combining these two theories, the TAM and TRA, it can be concluded that the research participants’ attitudes towards online learning greatly influenced their perceptions and their responses (Edmunds,

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Thorpe & Conole, 2012). Research indicate that attitudes contribute a lot to accepting or resisting (formation of barriers) to new technologies (Donat, Brandtweiner and Kerschbaum, 2009; Meerza & Bauchamp, 2017).

Similar to most crises, the Covid 19 Pandemic has both positive and negative impacts (Magomedov Khaliev, and Khubolov, 2020). While some lament and drop out of school due to the pressure from the crisis other consider this as an opportune time to grow. This is called post traumatic growth, a term coined in the 1990s by psychologists Tedeschi and Calhoun. The Post Traumatic Growth Theory (PTG) posits that some people can emerge from trauma or adversity having achieved positive personal growth. According to Tedeschi & Calhoun, (2004) this growth may be in either one or more of the following five areas; interpersonal (relating to other, personal strength, cognitive (recognizing new possibilities), appreciation of life or spiritual change. This is evidenced in the participants reports as the unexpected benefits that emerged from the crisis experience

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study follows a qualitative approach. A phenomenological study was carried out describing the lived experiences of Post graduate Diploma in Education students on the strengths and weaknesses of the PGDE program during the Covid 19 Pandemic. Phenomenological research is one of the types of qualitative research which describes lived experiences of participants during a particular phenomenon. According to Creswell, (2009) phenomenological research is one of the strategies of inquiry in which the researcher carries out in-depth interviews on several individuals and identifies the essence of human experiences about a specific phenomenon as described by participants. The researchers had to bracket (suspend) their personal prejudgements, values and prejudices so as to enhance the validity of the study.

It also describes the coping strategies used by each participant to successfully sail through the Pandemic crisis. Seven volunteers from the class of 13 Postgraduate students in Education that enrolled for the PGDE program during the 2020-2021 at the exemplar institution of higher learning (Name of institution has not been disclosed for ethical reasons), participated in this study. All the 13 students were solicited to participate but since this was voluntary according to ethical standards, only 7 responded. Online in depth interviews were conducted on these participants as they responded to the research questions about their perceptions about the PGDE program during the Covid 19 Pandemic period. For ethical reasons the participants' names are kept anonymous and codes (P1-P7) are assigned to each participant.

### 4.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The Data collected was coded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to categorize similar responses first into clusters, then further analysis of similar concepts revealed some emerging themes. Five major themes emerged from the data collected.

Theme 1: Financial constraints

Theme 2: Poor and unreliable internet connectivity,

Theme 3: Capitalize on the strengths of the PGDE program

Theme 4: Students developed coping strategies

Theme 5: Every experience is a learning curve

#### 4.1 Research Question One

**What are the lived experiences of PGDE students in the light of the challenges they faced during their teacher training process during the Covid 19 pandemic era**

There were several challenges which the PGDE students encountered during the Covid 19 Pandemic era. Among these were financial constraints, poor internet connectivity, inadequate technological competencies. These were succinctly described by the respondents as reported in the following section. Two themes emerged as participants responded to research question One. These include financial constraints and unreliable internet connectivity,

##### Theme 1: Financial Constraints

Effective learning during the Covid 19 pandemic era required use of technologically efficient electronic devices and internet data bundles as observed by some respondents. Online learning is associated with "*challenge of expenses for purchase of data bundles and good IT devices*" (P4). Without an efficient technological gadget the learning process was very slow.

This concurs with studies in Ghana (Segbenya, et al. 2022) and in Bangladesh, (Dutta & Smita 2020) which indicated that online learning during the pandemic was hampered by several hurdles such as unavailability of effective electronic devices, limited internet access, low speed internet and high costs of internet. Hence, for effective online distance education there is need for educational management to procure the appropriate technological tools for every student then bill their respective accounts.

We may need to add a source that also speaks to this theme, maybe from our lit review

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### Theme 2: Poor and unreliable internet connectivity,

Due to the frequent electricity load shedding internet connectivity became unreliable for conducting synchronous online classes at regular schedules. The poor and unreliable internet connectivity was associated with the following challenges;

*"I found it difficult to meet deadlines for submission of assignments"* (P1)

In addition, student engagement was difficult as observed by some of the respondents *"Electricity challenges led to poor internet connectivity...and student engagement (P3)*. Another respondent added that *"Unreliable internet connectivity made synchronization of class meetings and Examinations complicated (P7)*. Because *"Interactive discussions were difficult (P1, P3), "in order to sail through we had to stay in touch with lectures even out of lessons times" (P3)*, just in case the lecturer could call for a class meeting.

Although lecturers could reschedule class meetings for lecture, on the other hand it resulted in compromised examination integrity (P7) as noted by P6, *"The online internet assessment had some challenges due to internet problems as electricity could suddenly go off while I am writing an examination"*. P2

According to respondent P4, *"Online Assessments were not as effective as the face to face Assessments... I then had to wait for in person learning because online was not adequate enough"*.

The pressure was so much for some with poor finances and low technological competencies that some opted to drop out for a while. This concurs with findings by Dutta and Smita, (2020) that indicated that some tertiary students were in great distress because of the sudden switching from face to face to online learning; they struggled to cope with the new normal of online lectures, online assessments and the associated heavy academic workloads. Similar studies in Greece (Tsolou, Babalis & Tsoli, 2021) concurred that due to deprivation of appropriate technological infrastructure, lack of private quiet studying space and lack of digital competencies resulted in several dropouts in schools. Unfortunately, few students from this batch were forced to drop out temporarily, hoping to resume when things normalize.

### 4.2 Research Question Two

**What are the strengths of the PGDE program as perceived by the PGDE students during the Covid -19 Pandemic era?**

#### Theme 3: Capitalize on Strengths of PGDE program.

The PGDE program comprising of several theory course and practical component (teaching practice) engages several specialized lecturers for each course. Hence with such complement of competent faculty, they were able to be innovative and use diverse teaching methods such as *projects, online discussions, online assignments you tube videos*, (P5).

In appreciation of their support from lecturers, respondent P7 also made the following observations; *"Innovativeness of lecturers with available tools motivated teachers in training to also embrace technology and practice it in their future classes. Lecturers were willing to go extra mile to make up for lectures missed In addition, some Lecturers used multimedia to complement each other; eg a. Video conferencing, b. Audios, Handouts, c. WhatsApp calls. d. Asynchronous class discussions. e. projects"*

The use of Moodle platform was greatly appreciated by many of the respondents as evidenced in the following comments.

Moodle platform had provision of *"Readily available online notes-(on Moodle)* which was associated with the following advantages (which translate to strengths of the online PGDE program) as pointed out by participants P1, P7;

- *Readily available content which could be easily referred to later as needed*
- *Reduced burden of note taking as lecture is on-going (P3)*

In addition, the lecturers were able to schedule virtual synchronous and asynchronous learning sessions so as to accommodate learners' diverse learning styles. *"The class interactions were lively as the lecturers incorporated social applications and video conferencing tools that enabled students to meet and interact in live session (P3, P7)*. Then respondent P5 added, *"I listened to YouTube channels explaining concepts as I am a listener than a reader. It helped me to grasp concepts better"*. Although there were hiccups here and there, in appreciation, another respondent (P7) made the following comment; *"But compensation came from the virtual access, interactive Online classes were very Good; Online Assessments were done very Strictly and I appreciated them"*

### 4.3 Research Question Three

**How did the students manage to sail through the Covid 19 pandemic era and Post Covid -19 Pandemic era?**

#### Theme 4: Develop Coping strategies.

Faced with a host of challenges associated with the pandemic, such as financial constraints, poor network connectivity, health risks there was need to keep focused and remain determined to achieve their dreams. To be able to cope, the student developed Optimism, efficient time management, self-discipline and good organizational skills. And this is what most of them did, they focused on the positive aspects of the program as indicated in some of the comments from the respondents;

- Online learning *"helped to boost confidence in incorporating technology in teaching as an educator P2, "content was relevant, connecting theory to practical" P3*

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• *Lively lectures with practical examples and video conferencing.... Online classes were very interactive we learnt to be innovative and to embrace ict tools in education* P4

Respondent P5 affirmed one of the advantages of online learning as follows; *“Online lectures- overcome distance barrier. No need to travel to class during lockdown, the responded P7 added another advantage of flexibility of Online learning in this way; “I am more inclined to the assymetric (meaning asynchronous) style of online teaching and learning”*.

The challenge of completing online assignments was echoed by several respondents. *“although online assignments were difficult to complete (for those of low technological competencies) P6; the assessment was “efficient and good quality, Online assessment, feedback recieved was very effective and motivating (P3); Online assessment, feedback was timely and very effective. Through networking in class projects; “we were helped to develop resilience and to be ready to tackle every challenge” (P3)*

Fortunately, Teaching Practice was carried out towards the end of the Covid 19 pandemic but still there were a few challenges as observed by some respondents;

Teaching Practice: Respondent P3 noted that *“TP was done physically (face to face) not via the virtual space although at times it was enhanced by complementary video recordings of a class in session. Respondent P4 was quick to add the challenging aspect of Teaching practice during the Covid 19 Pandemic era. “however, TP was not easy during this era as school terms were affected as well as challenges with having learners attend lessons”*.

Theme 5 emerged as participants responded to research question Four

### 4.4 Research Question Four

**What recommendations can be made to improve the PGDE Program to optimize its effectiveness.**

#### **Theme 5: Every experience is a learning curve**

Having gone through the teacher training phase under Covid-19 induced lockdown restrictions the participants had a lot of suggestion to recommend for the improvement of the training of teachers even during the post pandemic era.

There are several lessons learnt through the lived experiences of the participants and this led them to make the following recommendations: there are unexpected lessons learnt through learning during the Pandemic crisis.

One respondent remarked that *“ I learned to develop interpersonal skills through virtual discussions.” (P4). Even on the virtual platform students developed netiquette.*

Respondent 5 added, *“I also benefited as a parent in psychology and counselling. I'm a better parent because of the program I did during Covid 19 Pandemic”*.

On the other hand, many valuable lessons were learnt while embracing technology, there are great financial constraints. In order to defray the burden of financial constraints several participant made the following recommendations.

- Crisis preparedness: *“The institution should provide internet data bundles to students so that everyone gets the opportunity to learn and get information as early as it come” (P1, P3).*
- Adequate Student Orientation: There is need for proper orientation of students to using ICT tools and virtual platforms, *“There is need to expose learners with various on line platforms and ensure that they are able to understand and use them”*. P2, P7

Interestingly while some wished to have more individualized assignments, others opined that group projects as reflected in the following statements.

- Use more individualized assignments and less group assignments (P3)
- More group projects should be added to encourage innovative thinking. More discussions that enable critical analysis to ideas and concepts must be promoted. This also aids in retaining knowledge we would have learnt thus benefiting society in a better way (P6).
- Pre-Recording the lessons either as video or audio and keeping them saved on moodle makes them readily available to students (P1, P 7)
- Enhancing Class interactions: using Moodle forums and Moodle Workshops
- Enhance examination integrity by using invigilator applications (P7)
- Develop a positive attitude leads to success.

Attitudes and technological competencies also greatly influenced the respondents perceptions. While some appreciated an opportunity to harness technology in achieving academic goals others felt disadvantaged and threatened by engaging in totally online classes. As noted from assertions from respondent P 2 *“Online Assessments were not as effective as the face to face Assessments.*

In addition, some lamented that in the virtual class *“we Lacked the face face interactions with lecturers and fellow students” (P4). While others commented that the virtual class discussions were lively; “class interactions were lively as the lecturers incorporated social applications and video conferencing tools that enabled students to meet and interact in live session” (P3, P7). Although due to inadequate technological challenges, some students dropped out as evidenced in this statement “I then had to wait*

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for in person learning because online was not adequate enough “P4. This is affirmed by the Theory of Reasoned Action by Ajzen & Fishbein that explains the influence of attitudes on intentions and ultimately how this may predict possibility to engage in a behaviour at a specific time and place. Those individuals who developed positive attitudes became intentional and determined to sail through.

### 5.0 CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the lived experiences of the PGDE students and the challenges they faced in their academic journey, one can wonder how it was possible for most of them to complete. It was like swimming against the current trying to defy the odds. Some faced financial challenges, some faced electricity power outages and poor internet network connectivity and still others had a difficult time completing the practical (Teaching practice) component in time as some of the secondary schools where they needed to be attached delayed opening for face to face learning. However, through the competence and innovativeness of their supportive lecturers, they sailed through. This helped them to become confident and competent classroom practitioners as they embraced technology and developed practical strategies of harnessing it to improve their pedagogic skills. Although Covid 19 pandemic is associated with negative impacts, the lived experiences of the PGDE students in this study proved that there can be post-traumatic growth after the crisis. The study recommends that crisis preparedness and adequate student orientation are very necessary for smooth running PGDE program.

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