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Exploring the views of Malaysian principals and novice teachers on the school-based support programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: Despite many studies examining the initial challenges faced by novice teachers, few studies address the challenges of school-based support programmes implemented within Malaysian schools. Therefore, this study examines novice teachers' challenges concerning the school-based support programmes. The study interviewed 20 novice primary school teachers as well as ten primary school leaders. Principals were selected based on the purposive sampling approach. Age limit of the selected principals ranged from 44 to 54 years old. All teachers and principals interviewed were serving in public schools. The results reveal that low confidence, lack of skills and knowledge, issues in using online teaching and administrative positions were the main constraints. Issues that halted the school-based support programmes are restricted activities due to COVID-19 when most programmes are postponed and cancelled or conducted online. Significantly, school-based support programmes and COVID-19 have hardly been studied in reference to novice teachers' challenges within their inception years in Malaysia.

Keywords: novice teachers; school-based support programmes; principals; COVID-19; CPD; Malaysia.

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1 Introduction

In the 21st century, teachers' roles are increasingly challenging as they are expected to support and assist students, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gonzalez et al., 2020). During the pandemic, teachers played a critical role in assisting school management (Alhouti, 2020) by taking students' temperatures, ensuring social distancing as well as ensuring symptomatic students isolated when schools reopened. Teachers also played a major role in implementing online teaching (Sahlberg, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Zhao, 2020; Alhouti, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). In facing this critical phase, schools need committed, skilled and competent teachers to improve learning quality and effectiveness (Coker, 2017). This critical situation is challenging for teachers (Stone-Johnson and Weiner, 2020; Sahlberg, 2020), especially novice teachers who are newcomers and in the learning phase. Novice teachers are commonly defined as newcomers to the teaching profession and have less than two or three years of experience (Coker, 2017; Widiati et al., 2018). As novices, they are in a phase of professional identity formation and adaptation to become an educator (Berman et al., 2020; Buchanan et al., 2013; Rashad and Bin-Hady, 2018).

The topic of novice teachers is one of ongoing research (Voss and Kunter, 2020) across educational landscapes such as England (Spencer et al., 2018), Indonesia (Widiati et al., 2018), Malaysia (Yee and Hassan, 2019), Turkey (Kozikoglu, 2017; Ergunay and Adiguzel, 2019), Qatar (Al-Naimi et al., 2020; Chaaban and Du, 2017), Pakistan (Dayan et al., 2018), Sweden (Karlberg and Bezzina, 2020) and other educational systems. Corcoran (1981), Korte and Somenson (2018), Nemaston (2020), Goh et al. (2017), Voss and Kunter (2020), Van den Borre et al. (2021) and Kelchtermans (2019) found that novice teachers face comparable problems in their early years that lead to a transition 'shock'. In this phase, novice teachers realise that there are significant differences in their

idealism in teaching with the classroom realities (Al-Naimi et al., 2020). In addition, they face issues in terms of their professional identity (Schatz-Oppenhimer and Dvir, 2014; Dayan et al., 2018), lack of skills in completing heavy and challenging tasks (Day et al., 2007), lack of experience, skills and competence in instructional aspects and pedagogical content knowledge (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Shulman, 1987; Marrongelle et al., 2013; Dickson et al., 2014), socialisation issues (Joiner and Edwards, 2008) and failed to adapt and understand their school cultures (Coker, 2017; Adeogun and Olisaemeka, 2011). Novices lack knowledge of classroom management, assessment as well as building positive relationships with students' parents (Fantilli and McDougall, 2009; Menon, 2012), the school's rules, policies and procedures (Yee and Hassan, 2019) and implementing 'pedagogy-technology' such as technology-based learning (Banerjee and Waxman, 2017; Sutton, 2011).

Although novice teachers have minimal experience, they receive similar roles and responsibilities as their senior colleagues (Fantilli and McDougall, 2009; Al-Naimi et al., 2020; Sozen, 2018; Van den Borre et al., 2021). They also receive less support from senior teachers and school leaders, leading to a lack of skills in adapting to the work environment, excessive stress, lack of communication, lack of opportunities and development programmes, fatigue and anxiety (Harmsen et al., 2018). Additionally, they are reported to have problems within socialisation and professionalism, resulting in a confrontation with other teachers and students (Ahmad et al., 2020). Heavy workloads and responsibilities negatively cause pressure and stress (Tynjala and Heikkinen, 2011; Thomas et al., 2020; Harfitt, 2015; Van den Borre et al., 2021). Consequently, many novice teachers quit or leave the profession (Mulkeen and Crowe-Taft, 2010; Sozen, 2018), resulting in teacher shortages (Thomas et al., 2020) and adversely affecting student achievements (Ronfeldt et al., 2013).

In Malaysia, in order to enhance teachers' roles in schools, the Ministry of Education Malaysia has introduced various strategic approaches which stated in the Malaysian Educational Blueprint (MEB) 2013 to 2025 within the second and third waves. Through the MEB, senior teachers were asked to mentor and coach the novice teachers with the purpose of enhancing their knowledge, values and skills in teaching profession (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2013). With the implementation of MEB's policy, a peer-lead culture of teachers' professional values and excellence are cultivated to all schoolteachers. In this sense, senior teachers share their best and effective practices with their juniors or novices to meet the required school standard (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2013). The strategic approach taken by the MOE is based on significant reasons that mentoring training is considered an effective session when teachers capable to provide feedback through the mentoring platform (Jin et al., 2022; Morin et al., 2015; Langdon et al. 2016; Hudson and Hudson, 2018)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers have more significant teaching roles and responsibilities when schools are closed, and students are losing their normal face-to-face learning experience (Aytac, 2021) to educational technology approaches using the internet, laptops and cellular phones (Izhar et al., 2021; Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2012; Aytac, 2021). Teachers face difficulties providing support learning materials to students since some teachers lack the knowledge and skills to convert hardcopy learning materials, have limited experience in online teaching, difficulties in catering students' needs from various levels of performance into one learning session, and limited internet connection when delivering their lessons online (Izhar et al., 2021; Aytac, 2021). Novice teachers are confronting challenges similar to their senior colleagues during COVID-19.

They reported having issues in conducting their classes online, such as lack of experience in teaching, difficulties in making decisions, anxiety due to lack of resources, insufficient training and mentoring opportunities (School Education Gateway, 2020), limited social interactions and technological advancements challenges. The pandemic also causes novice teachers' stress, dissatisfaction and insecurity in their positions.

In this sense, it is the critical role of a school's personnel to support novice teachers to overcome their challenges (Clandinin and Connelly, 1998; Fox et al., 2010), especially during the pandemic. Novice teachers need to be supported within their inception phase (Boyd et al., 2011) through support programmes, motivation and guidance (Karlberg and Bezzina, 2020) to excel in their personal and professional development (Nemaston, 2020). Such support enhances novice teachers' commitments and preserves them as teachers (Lee et al., 2011; Ingersoll, 2003). School-based support programmes such as mentoring (Menon, 2012), inculcation of positive attitudes (Thomas et al., 2020) are examples of suitable school-based support programmes for novice teachers to overcome teachers' attrition issues, as seen in the cases of Belgium (Thomas et al., 2020) and Norway (Smith and Ulvik, 2017). Although the significance of school's roles in helping novice teachers have been explored widely within the international literature, in Malaysia, related studies lack exploring novice teachers' challenges especially during the critical situation such as COVID-19 pandemic. To date, there are still limited studies that have explored school-based support programme in assisting novice teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic situation although it was argued that programmes organised by teachers own schools are considered more effective than the off-site offered programmes (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2013). Despite the wide numbers of studies that explored novice teachers' experiences during their initial phase of teaching profession, studies that explored the support-programmes provided by the Malaysian schools are still small in numbers.

Thus, this study is based on five main gaps lacking in the context of novice teachers and the role of school-based support programmes in Malaysia. First, this study concentrates on novice teachers' school-based support programmes (Cheng and Szeto, 2016). Second, we hypothesise that novice teachers receive minimal school-based support programmes, which were reported by previous studies as lacking, unclear (Van den Borre et al., 2021), inconsistent and does not meet novice teachers' needs (Coker, 2017; Senom et al., 2013). Third, there is inconsistency regarding which school-based support programmes are provided to novice teachers (Keown et al., 2014; Yee and Hassan, 2019). Fourth, studies pointed out the role of principals and their leadership and had neglected other school personnel such as the middle layer leaders and experienced teachers in assisting novice teachers' growth. Fifth, few studies have explored this issue within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia.

This study focuses on the role of school leaders in providing guidance and the school-based support programmes into a conceptualisation called 'the school'. It focuses on novice teachers' school-based support programmes as their Continuing Professional Development (CPD) initiatives prepared by the school personnel in COVID-19 based on three research questions:

- 1 Given the views of novice teachers and their principals, what are the problems and challenges faced by primary novice teachers in the early phase of their service during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2 What are the most frequently employed school-based support programmes provided to support primary novice teachers based on the views of principals and novice teachers?
- 3 What are the issues within the school-based supports programmes faced by primary novice teachers in COVID-19?

In general, this study explores the challenges and problems faced by novice teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic; the school-based support programmes provided to novice teachers based on the views or standpoints of the novice teachers themselves and their principals. Significantly, this study could be used as a guideline by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in providing school-based support programmes and training for novice teachers, especially in a crisis situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, as for school leaders and their middle layer leaders, the findings could help in preparing novice teachers with school-based support programmes during the novice teachers' induction phase. Third, avoiding novice teachers' dissatisfaction is another importance as novice teachers feel that they are hardly supported and welcomed by their schools. In Western countries, novice teachers' satisfaction and commitment have strong implications in reducing novice teachers' layoffs stemming from a lack of support as well as dissatisfaction (Coker, 2017; Soergel, 2013; McNulty and Fox, 2010). Chong (2011) mentioned that disclosure of support given to novice teachers can indirectly influence their decision to remain in the profession.

2 Literature review

2.1 Primary schools in Malaysia

Primary education in Malaysia significantly aimed to provide fundamental and basic skills related to writing, numerical aspects and reasoning (Malaysia Education Act, 1996). In primary education, students spend six years at the basic education level to prepare for public examination called Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (Primary School Assessment Test) which is considered as mandatory to all primary school students. According to Barghi et al. (2017), primary school education in Malaysia is free and compulsory for all children in Malaysia from the age of 6+ years to 12 years, regardless of their ethnicity. Level wise, basic education is divided into two; Level One (Standard 1–3) and Level Two (Standard 4–6). The newly revised curriculum known as the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) [Primary School Standard Curriculum] was introduced and commenced in 2010 and fully executed in 2016. The introduction of KSSR has the significantly aimed at preparing primary school children in Malaysia with knowledge, skills and values necessary in facing the challenges of the 21st century (Ministry of Education, 2012).

As mentioned earlier, the level of studies in primary education encompassed two levels: The Level 1 (Standard 1–3) and Level 2 (Standard 4–6). In Level 1, primary students are taught subjects such as languages (Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil), mathematics, physical and health education and religious and moral-based subjects such as Islamic studies or moral education. Primary school students are also taught subjects such as science and technology, visual arts and music. In addition, Arabic, Chinese, Tamil, Iban dan Kadazan-Dusun are also taught as electives modules. As for level 2, the subjects comprise 12 modules: Bahasa Malaysia, English, Chinese or Tamil (for Chinese or Tamil vernacular schools), mathematics, science, Islamic studies or moral education, physical education, health education, visual art, music, design and technology/information and communication technology and history (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Unlike the secondary education, the primary education in Malaysia has only one stream which called the normal academic stream. In terms of types of school, there are three main types of public primary school: the normal medium public primary school, Chinese-medium primary school and Tamil-medium primary schools. Other than the mentioned, there is another type of school which catered for students with special needs. These primary schools are government-funded schools which fully administered by the Ministry of Education. There is also religious-based private primary schools which funded by the private organisation. In order to ensure the smooth operation and administration of primary schools, a primary principal or headmaster is appointed by the State Department of Education and the Ministry of Education to lead the primary school with assistance from four deputy principals appointed in every school with responsibilities for administration, student affairs, evening sessions and extra-curricular activities (Ayob, 2012). In primary schools, the headmaster or the primary principal is held accountable for making difference in the school performance and students' achievements (Ayob, 2012).

2.2 Novice teachers' issues and problems

Many scholars believe that as new members of the teaching profession, novice teachers are meeting challenges within their inception phase or in their novice year of teaching (Ergunay and Adiguzel, 2019; Zhukova, 2018; Nemaston, 2020). The challenges novice teachers face are sometimes overwhelming and stressful (Van den Borre et al., 2021). The inception years are considered challenging years for novice teachers wherein they decide whether to stay or leave the teaching profession (Lee et al., 2011).

In a similar way, Kozikoglu (2017) argued that novice teachers are confronted with four discrepancies related to instructional, networking, adaptation and facilities elements. In the instructional aspects, novice teachers reported lacking in managing the classroom and executing instructional tasks, even assessing students' performance. Second, in networking, novice teachers have difficulties in building a positive relationship with students' parents, school administrators and colleagues. They also failed to adapt and understand the school's policies, culture and climate. The last element is a lack of school resources that retarded novice teachers' professional and personal development.

As a new member, novice teachers face challenges, issues, and obstacles that require them to grow in skills, competencies and professional identities (Al-Hadi et al., 2020). In general, the issues and problems of novice teachers have been classified into several themes: problems in implementing teaching and classroom management, problems in adapting to the culture of the school, lack of confidence, lack of interest and lack of

support. Empirically, novice teachers' most frequently notable problem is lack of confidence in implementing learning and classroom management (Yee and Hassan, 2019). Studies conducted with local Malaysian schools also reported that novice teachers are facing problems in teaching and classroom management (Goh and Wong, 2014; Syed Ali et al., 2014). Similarly, in Korea, Lee (2017) found that novice teachers' issues stemmed from differences in a school's culture which is difficult for novice teachers to adopt and understand. Therefore, it is suggested that schools provide novice teachers with that latest information significant to novice teachers to understand the profession. Furthermore, novice teachers are unfamiliar with heavy teaching workloads and burdensome academic tasks such as student assessments, academic assignments, and changes in the curriculum (Al-Hadi et al., 2020; Collie and Martin, 2016). Novice teachers face problems in assessing students, guiding students from various backgrounds, and advising troubled students (Kelly and Northrop, 2015). According to Gaikhorst et al. (2017), novice teachers face difficulties in conveying the information and making decisions related to the subjects taught. They are said to take a long time to plan activities related to learning and teaching in the classroom (Koni and Krull, 2018).

Wolff et al. (2015) and Blomberg and Knight (2015) shown that novice teachers lack competencies in managing students' development, such as handling students who have disciplinary issues when more time was spent focusing on students' disciplinary issues. Similarly, novice teachers face problems adapting to the culture of the school (Zakaria et al., 2016). In defining issues related to school culture, Al-Hadi et al. (2020) reported that it is strongly related to contextual issues. Among the issues reported is difficulty in understanding the school's culture, policies and rules that influence their job dissatisfaction to remain or leave the teaching profession (Powell, 2014; Penuel et al., 2010). On the other hand, a positive and supportive school culture strongly influences novice teachers' growth (Van den Borre et al., 2021). Thus, a positive school culture such as mutual respect, collaborative cultures and shared objectives are common factors that determine novice teachers' decision to remain in the profession (Long et al., 2012).

In their inception years, novice teachers face a lack of school resources causing them discontent. Issues related to the lack of a school's facilities, such as lack of good references and learning materials and lack of professional training to enhance their teaching and instructional competencies are stressed by novice teachers, especially those who served at rural and disadvantaged schools (Warren and Miller, 2013). Another challenge reported is the lack of suitable school facilities, which resulted in reduced students' academic achievements. In disadvantaged schools, there are issues and problems related to classroom design, poor ventilation, unsuitable furniture, noisy, insufficient safety and lack of physical and instructional facilities which negatively impact novice teachers' performance and students' achievements (Ahmad et al., 2020).

Besides the schools' facilities, novice teachers complained that they received minimal support from schools related to their personal and CPD programmes. To novice teachers, the personal programmes are significant in changing their personal identities from students to educators and leaders. Nevertheless, novice teachers mentioned that there is a lack of CPD programmes to prepare them to improve their personal growth and change their professional identities and overcome or encounter their instructional challenges to be effective teachers (Kabilan and Veratharaju, 2013).

2.3 *School-based support programmes for novice teachers*

The school-based support programmes, exposures and initial training provided to novice teachers are seen as very significant and beneficial as part of the school's initiatives to support and motivate novice teachers (Van den Borre et al., 2021; Warsame and Valles, 2018). Quite the opposite, novice teachers receive minimal support from schools in improving their knowledge and skills, especially those related to their professional development (Kabilan and Vertharaju, 2013; Ahmad et al., 2020). Their novice teachers decided to leave the profession due to poor support programmes provided and the non-cooperative attitudes of the school leaders (Chaaban and Du, 2017).

Empirically studied, the school-based support induction programmes received by novice teachers influenced their sense of belonging and decision to remain in the profession (Korte and Simonsen, 2018; Warsame and Valles, 2018; Ronfeldt and McQueen, 2017). In schools, novice teachers should be guided and mentored in instructional and leadership to become future teacher leaders (Lambert, 2003; Muijs et al., 2013; Cheng and Szeto, 2016) which initially suggested by Verman (1984) in supporting novice teachers since they are new to the teaching profession. In assisting them, the role of the school is critical in guiding and supporting their professional and personal growth (Coker, 2017). This means that schools need to provide a supportive culture capable of improving teachers' quality and productivity as well as contribute to students' academic achievement. In discussing this issue, Wiggins (2011) explained that a conducive school culture such as collaboration between teachers, school leaders and parents, transparency in the decision-making process and fairness without favouritism among staff also improves students' academic performance.

In schools, the school leadership implemented several CPD programmes or school-based support programmes with the objective to improve the efficiency and skills of novice teachers. All these forms of exposure and guidance programmes aimed to improve the skills and competencies of novice teachers. Nevertheless, Cheng and Szeto (2016) viewed that in ensuring the effectiveness of development programmes for novice teachers, several factors should be given priority. Factors such as the opportunity to lead novice teachers, awareness and willingness of novice teachers, and the facilities provided by the school also play a vital role in determining the success of professional development programmes for novice teachers. In facilitating novice teachers to acquire competencies and skills in the instructional element, several support approaches and strategies such as mentoring (Menon, 2012), PLC participation and positive attitude development (Arnup and Bowles, 2016; Struyve et al., 2016) are recommended.

Compared to other approaches, mentoring is the most frequent and significant method employed by schools to support novice teachers (Angelle, 2010; Coker, 2017; Smith and Ingersoll, 2004; Menon, 2012; Cameron and Grant, 2017; Daly and Milton, 2017; Van den Borre et al., 2021). In the mentoring approach, novice teachers attached with mentors who are experienced teachers. In this mentoring platform, the experienced and senior teachers will share their experience through advice and guidance and technical assistance to novice teachers as part of sharing knowledge and experience on how to adapt to the school culture (Coker, 2017). In this sense, Hobson (2016) believed that through mentoring, senior or experienced teachers are trusted to build a positive relationship with novice teachers and later disseminated and shared their knowledge in fulfilling novice teachers' learning needs and developing their professional development. The second effective method that is essential is participating in the PLC, which also

targets helping novice teachers during the induction phase (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Coker, 2017). PLC is a platform for teachers to share experience from professional development for teachers to share their effective and suitable instructional methods and experience and working together regardless of the teacher trajectories. It involves research as well as collective partnership in improving the instructional methods and strategies (DuFour et al., 2010). Thus, PLCs are expected to contribute significantly to teacher development, knowledge, skills and professionalism (Huffman et al., 2015; Owen, 2014) particularly for novice teachers.

Moreover, Thomas et al. (2020) argued that novice teachers should be given exposure to positive attitudes towards their schools. Accordingly, a psychological approach that tries to apply positive aspects to the school is very important in fostering a sense of belonging among novice teachers. As for George and Jones (2015), emphasis should be given to a positive attitude to the profession to nurture positive feelings, beliefs and concerns about their profession and career as an educator. In this sense, this concept is associated with the organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Thomas et al., 2020) and is significant to retaining novice teachers in the profession (Zembylas and Papanastasiou, 2006). According to Thomas et al. (2020), the concept of positive attitude towards school and profession contains two main elements, namely (a) motivation to teach and (b) three components in organisational commitment related to the concept introduced by Meyer and Allen (1991) namely affective, normative as well as ongoing commitment. This motivation is strongly related to feelings and beliefs that highly influence teacher behaviours, such as the desire to remain in the profession (Canrinus et al., 2012).

Novice teachers should be given guidance and instruction in all aspects related to instructional and leadership aspects to train them to become teacher leaders (Lambert, 2003; Muijs et al., 2013). In assisting novice teachers, the role of the school in assisting novice teachers is critical in guiding and supporting the professional development of novice teachers (Coker, 2017). This means that schools need to have a supportive culture that is capable of improving teachers' quality and productivity and contributing to students' academic achievement. In discussing this issue, Wiggins (2011) explained that a conducive school culture such as collaboration between teachers, school leaders and parents, transparency in the decision-making process and fairness without favouritism among staff are contributing factors to improving student academic performance. In school, the school leadership has implemented several programmes such as workshops and in-service courses to improve the efficiency and skills of novice teachers. Nevertheless, Cheng and Szeto (2016) view that in ensuring the effectiveness of development programmes for novice teachers, several factors should be given priority. Significant factors such as the opportunity to lead should be given to novice teachers, their awareness and willingness, as well as the suitable facilities provided by the school, are elements that play essential roles in influencing the efficiency of professional development programmes for novice teachers.

2.4 Challenges and obstacles in the school-based support programmes

Apart from reported studies that explored the support programmes for novice teachers, there are limited studies or research that examine the issues within the school-based support or CPD programmes (Chaaban and Du, 2017; Burger et al., 2021). Nevertheless, many researches have pointed out the vital role of school leaders (Cheng and Szeto,

2016) and few supported programmes prepared for novice teachers in facing challenges as part of novice teachers' professional development.

Initially, Goddard and Goddard (2001) highlighted a significant issue is the non-positive relationship or conflicts between novice teachers and the school administrators. This non-positive situation will bring discomfort to novice teachers, especially when school leaders are entrusted with overseeing and monitoring the instructional guidance as well as the evaluation aspects of the performance and attitudes of novice teachers. Another issue is the lack of sufficient time for school leaders to be novice teacher motivators and supporters, where the role of supervision and mentoring are often given to middle leaders in leading novice teachers (Hallinger, 2003).

There is also the issue of the school's administration's mentoring programmes meant to support novice teachers during their professional adjustment. For example, an initial study conducted by Fantilli and McDougall (2009) found that the challenges and obstacles were related to the issue of mentoring selection which was less suitable to mentor novice teachers and lacked time to interact with mentors. According to Burger et al. (2021), school-based mentoring has issues despite being frequently employed as effective support programme for novice teachers. Rarely mentored, insufficient compensation and lack of acknowledgement for those selected to be mentors are issues faced by mentors and mentees within school-based mentoring. Researchers reported weaknesses of school-based mentoring when serving as mentors, and lacking clear direction on the amount of guidance the mentor need to provide, dual roles as mentor and teachers (Burger et al., 2021) and a lack of training to be mentor teachers (Aspfors and Fransson, 2015; Jaspers et al., 2018). In addition, novice teachers felt that they needed an initial course to address issues related to skills as well as practical aspects to handle challenging tasks. As stressed by Long et al. (2012), the selection of mentors to guide novice teachers is critical since only suitable mentors can be novice teachers' role models and guide and coach novice teachers who lack experience.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, educational technology has played a significant role and platform for learning. Thus, teachers frequently used ICT as a mediator to conduct teaching and learning with their students from diverse locations. Teachers use online learning platforms to reduce workloads and improve pedagogical skills and professionalism (Mwendwa, 2017; Ahmad et al., 2020). Nevertheless, due to a lack of preparation in using ICT in teaching and learning, most teachers reported having technical issues in using ICT in their teaching and learning approaches (Ahmad et al., 2020). Similarly, novice teachers reported having difficulties in conducting their teaching and learning online due to a lack of technical skills in modern technology in their teaching (Spencer et al., 2018). Nevertheless, most teachers and schools are trained in the use of educational authorities to reduce workloads and improve pedagogical skills and professionalism (Mwendwa, 2017; Ahmad et al., 2020).

3 Methodology

This study examines and explores the perspectives of primary novice teachers and principals on novice teachers' challenges concerning school-based support programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study uses a qualitative research approach that

aims to detail the behaviour of a particular individual or group in providing an in-depth understanding of an issue based on school culture and environment in a real-life context (Creswell, 2007; Punch, 2005; Yin, 2014). Specifically, this study focuses on the perspective of novice teachers and principals related to the professional development of novice teachers while focused on the initial challenges and school-based support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1 Study participants

A total of 20 novice or beginning teachers aged between 24 years to 30 years (16 female and 4 male novice teachers) who teach in public primary schools were selected as participants in this study. Their selection is based on several key criteria as suggested by Szeto and Chen (2016), namely; (a) all novice teachers have between six months and three years of teaching experience, (b) selected novice teachers teach various subjects in selected primary schools (c) all selected novice teachers are graduates of a Bachelor's degree in education either from public universities and teachers' college institutes that offer degree programmes in education. The 20 novice teachers were selected using the 'snowball' sampling approach when initially researchers managed to obtain participation and consent from only six novice teachers. Six novice teachers later introduced researchers to another 20 novice teachers who were members of a *WhatsApp* group that encompassed 40 novice teachers. Although researchers have approached 40 novice teachers, only 20 consented to be participants. In terms of academic qualification, majority of novice teachers hold bachelor's degree. Details of the 20 selected novice teachers are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 Primary public school novice teachers

<i>Labels</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Experiences</i>	<i>Novice teachers</i>	<i>Academic qualification</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Subjects</i>	<i>School's category</i>
GN1	24	1 year	Novice Teacher 1	Bachelor	Female	Science	Rural
GN 2	25	1 year	Novice Teacher 2	Bachelor	Female	Malay	Urban
GN 3	24	1 year	Novice Teacher 3	Bachelor	Female	Mathematics	Rural
GN 4	26	2 years	Novice Teacher 4	Bachelor	Female	Mathematics	Urban
GN 5	24	1 year	Novice Teacher 5	Bachelor	Female	English	Rural
GN 6	25	1 year	Novice Teacher 6	Bachelor	Female	English	Urban
GN 7	26	2 years	Novice Teacher 7	Bachelor	Female	Islamic Education	Urban
GN 8	25	1 year	Novice Teacher 8	Bachelor	Female	Malay	Rural

Table 1 Primary public school novice teachers (continued)

<i>Labels</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Experiences</i>	<i>Novice teachers</i>	<i>Academic qualification</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Subjects</i>	<i>School's category</i>
GN 9	25	1 year	Novice Teacher 9	Bachelor	Female	Islamic Education	Rural
GN 10	28	2 years	Novice Teacher 10	Bachelor	Female	English	Urban
GN 11	27	2 years	Novice Teacher 11	Bachelor	Female	Islamic Education	Urban
GN 12	29	2 years	Novice Teacher 12	Bachelor	Female	Science	Rural
GN 13	30	3 years	Novice Teacher 13	Bachelor	Female	Mathematics	Rural
GN 14	25	1 year	Novice Teacher 14	Bachelor	Female	Music Education	Urban
GN 15	27	2 years	Novice Teacher 15	Bachelor	Female	Music Education	Urban
GN 16	25	1 year	Novice Teacher 16	Bachelor	Female	Special Education	Rural
GN 17	26	2 years	Novice Teacher 17	Bachelor	Male	Mathematics	Rural
GN 18	25	1 year	Novice Teacher 18	Bachelor	Male	Malay	Urban
GN 19	25	1 year	Novice Teacher 19	Bachelor	Male	Psychical Education	Rural
GN 20	26	2 years	Novice Teacher 20	Bachelor	Male	Technology design	Urban

A total of 10 primary principals were also selected as participants (six male and four female leaders). In addition, the primary principals in this study are seven primary principals from public urban schools and three primary principals from rural public schools. All primary principals were chosen as participants using purposive sampling (Johnson and Christensen, 2014). Table 2 lists a total of 10 primary principals involved in this study.

Table 2 Profile of primary principals

<i>Label</i>	<i>List of primary principals</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Academic qualification</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>School's category</i>
P1	Principal 1	45	Bachelor	Male	Urban
P2	Principal 2	44	Master	Male	Rural
P3	Principal 3	43	Bachelor	Female	Urban
P4	Principal 4	50	Bachelor	Female	Urban
P5	Principal 5	52	Bachelor	Male	Rural
P6	Principal 6	53	Bachelor	Male	Urban
P7	Principal 7	54	Bachelor	Female	Urban
P8	Principal 8	50	Master	Male	Urban
P9	Principal 9	48	Bachelor	Male	Rural
P10	Principal 10	49	Bachelor	Female	Urban

The identities of all 20 novice public schoolteachers as well as 10 primary principals from public schools interviewed were replaced with labels in line with the ethical code, which insisted researchers ensure the confidentiality aspect of the research' participants (Coker, 2017). In terms of age, the 10 principals range from 45 to 54-years-old. Eight of the selected primary principals obtained their Bachelor's degrees except for 2 primary principals who obtained the Master's degrees. Initially, all novice teachers and principals provided their voluntary consent and were permitted to withdraw as participants at any time (Marshall and Rossman, 2011).

3.2 *The interview protocols*

In obtaining details on the challenges, the school-based support programmes and issues related to the support programmes experienced by novice teachers, semi-structured interviews were administered. This method provides an opportunity for researchers to acquire perceptions as well as real stories about situations and phenomena (Patton, 2002; Marshall and Rossman, 2011) based on complex natural environments (Merriam, 1998). This study refers to the support, challenges or forms of initial exposure and programmes to novice teachers. The semi-structured interview facilitates the participants express feelings and tells real stories and how the process takes place (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Coulter and Smith, 2009).

Before proceeding with the interview, the interview protocol, which contains the interviews' items or questions was developed. Two sets of interview protocols were prepared for this study: one for novice teachers and another for primary principals. Both interview protocols encompassed three major sections: the reflective questions related to novice teachers'/principals' backgrounds, challenges faced within initial years as novice teachers, the school-based support programmes prepared for novice teachers and issues related to the school-based support programmes. In developing the protocol items, the researchers' experience as a novice teacher and educator were employed based on the concept of 'connoisseurship' that acknowledged the researcher's experience and knowledge (Eisner, 1997; Coker, 2017) in developing the interview items. On top of that, previous studies that explored novice teachers' challenges and issues were also considered in developing the interview items/questions.

Before proceeding with the interviews, a pilot study was conducted using two online interview sessions with a primary principal and a novice teacher. The significant reason is to obtain the credibility and validity of the items/questions in the interview's protocol. After completing the pilot studies, some changes are made on the interview questions/items to provide a clear understanding of the participants and ensure the suitable and accepted timeframe for each interview session will not exceed 70 minutes. Thus, in the interview sessions, novice teachers/principals were asked four items; (a) what challenges do novice teachers/you face within the initial years as teachers? (b) what are the school-based support programmes to assist novice teachers/you? (c) do you think the school-based support programmes managed to assist you? and (d) what are the challenges and issues related to school-based support programmes?

3.3 *The interviews*

The data collection in this study employed the interviewing sessions, which involved two phases. In the first phase, 20 novice teachers were interviewed using *Google Meet* due to

lockdowns and Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia. As for novice teachers, focus group interviews were conducted using online interviews where novice teachers were grouped into six major focus group sessions, consisting of three to four novice teachers for each session. Participants were gathered and interviewed simultaneously to discuss and share their experience and standpoints on a particular topic, theme or issue (Krueger, 1994; Krueger and Casey, 2009; Wikinson, 2011). According to Morgan (1998), participants' perceptions, whether negative or positive, were obtained with a shorter time than face-to-face interviews. Before the interviews, all 20 novice teachers were contacted and notified using *WhatsApp*, *Telegram* and phone calls to arrange the interview sessions. Each interview session lasted for 80 to 110 minutes. All interview sessions were digitally recorded along with sketch notes based on the answers provided by 20 novice teachers. Prior to the interview, the novice teachers' permission were obtained to record or audiotape the session.

In the second phase, ten school leaders were interviewed online using *Google Meet* to explore novice teachers' challenges and issues, the school-based support programmes and issues faced by novice teachers while participating in the school-based support programmes. Each interview session with the principals lasted 60 to 120 minutes. As for primary principals, ten online interviews were conducted separately with all ten primary principals. All ten sessions were recorded digitally with the permission of the primary principals. The researchers also prepared sketch notes on the answers given by the interviewed primary principals.

3.4 *Data analysis*

Interview transcripts were analysed based on the thematic method suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998) in classifying the challenges, the school's support programmes and issues on the school-based support programmes. The experience shared by novice teachers were analysed separately (Yin, 2014). All transcripts were analysed with NVivo software 10. Cohen's Kappa coefficients were also implemented in assessing the reliability between values between coding, which calculated as 0.86, indicating that they reached an agreement about the themes and codes that the researchers had constructed.

4 **Findings**

This section reports on the findings based on the transcripts obtained from the interviewed novice teachers and principals. The section is divided into three main themes: novice teachers' initial challenges and issues, school-based support programmes provided and issues related to the school-based support programmes that might slow the process of supporting novice teachers.

4.1 *Novice teachers' initial challenges and issues*

There are seven emerging themes ascended related to novice teachers' challenges and issues within their inception years. The seven emerging themes are labelled as lack of knowledge on instructional, lack of administrative skills, issues related to online teaching, classroom management challenges, lack of confidence, personal issues and communication barriers.

4.1.1 Lack of knowledge on instructional and teaching

During the interviews, novice teachers admitted that they lack knowledge related to various aspects of instruction. Based on the online interviews, two novice teachers underlined that they lack knowledge of how to assess students:

‘As novice, I need knowledge on how to assess students, which most of us lack knowledge on how to assess, such as giving them marks and guiding them’ (GN2).

‘I’m not sure how to assess and give marks to my students related to their tasks, especially when they have to submit online. We also lack knowledge on the concept of school-based assessment’ (GN5).

4.1.2 Administrative burdens

In the online interviews, novice teachers commented that they were given administrative responsibilities and positions while in schools, although they had much to learn. Owing to their lack of experience, they were uncertain of the quality of their work and whether they achieved the expected standards;

‘I have limited knowledge on administrative duties, and yet I were asked and given the position such as handling meetings, the SPBT where we have many tasks such as e-orders and our textbooks’ stocks. Actually, we have many responsibilities and lack of knowledge, and we are not sure on the outcomes’ (GN13).

‘I was asked to hold the subject’s chairperson (ketua panatia) although I’m new. Actually, I lack of knowledge to how to lead and completing my chairperson’s tasks. I also received many positions in school’ (GN7).

Similarly, novice teachers expressed that they had to postpone some of the planned activities due to the pandemic.

‘We can’t proceed with the programmes that we have planned due to the pandemic. All programmes are postponed and to wait until the school reopen.’ (GN10).

4.1.3 Issues in online teaching

Although novice teachers were assumed to have been exposed to the knowledge of ICT while studying in universities, novice teachers shared that they also faced problems in conducting the online sessions with students due to COVID-19;

‘I have a problem using gadgets in my teaching session with my students due to COVID-19. Actually, I am not familiar with using the gadget for teaching purposes’. (GN9).

Equally, another two novice teachers stressed that they face problems conducting classes online due to COVID-19;

‘I have lack of skills on how to attract students to communicate and changing ideas during the PDPR (online) sessions.’ (GN11).

‘I’m not sure whether I’m conducting the PDPR (online) session correctly based on the right procedure’ (GN12).

4.1.4 Classroom management challenges

Novice teachers also stressed that they face problems controlling students who have disciplinary issues. Thus, they insisted receiving training of skills of handling students with negative behaviours;

‘I have problem in handling students who have negative behaviours and ‘naughty’. Thus, I need more skills in handling this type of student since we are new and need to learn more skills in encountering naughty students.’ (GN3).

Likewise, primary principals believed that novice teachers face problems in performing their duties as educators, especially in regards to classroom management. They face problems controlling student discipline as well as lack the confidence to deliver their lessons in classrooms.

‘Most novice teachers will face problems in the teaching process because they have no experience with students with various type of behaviours. Thus, they were easier to be bullied by naughty students and easily feel pressured in controlling the classroom.’ (PS5).

4.1.5 Lack of confidence

During interviews, primary principals mentioned that novice teachers’ confidence level was also a major issue for novice teachers during the beginning of their service.

‘There are also those who lack self-confidence, especially in the early stages of their careers, because this new teacher is considered reluctant or shy to speak in front of the class. They also do not understand school’ policies thoroughly and are unable to get along with colleagues in the early phase’ (PS8).

4.1.6 Personal issues

In guiding novice teachers, primary principals acknowledged that novice teachers face personal problems that disrupted their focus. In this context, principals will try to solve the problems faced by novice teachers;

‘... it seems that novice teachers usually have personal problems (young people), for example, those who are away from their families. Just started a new life. Eventually, they will adjust to a new life. Most importantly, these novice teachers become ‘silo’ meaning ‘doing the work by yourself’ which is doing a job in isolated or by themselves’ (PS7).

4.1.7 Communication barriers

Apart from professional-related problems, novice teachers face problems communicating with senior teachers and students. This view was expressed by a primary principal who pointed out that novice teachers are having trouble communicating;

‘In terms of social, their difficulty in communicating. If it’s personality, to build a teacher’s personality, it needs to be emphasised in the Teaching Ethics’ (PS6).

Based on interviews with another principal, novice teachers experienced communication problems.

‘The problem I see is that these novice teachers find it difficult to adjust themselves to their senior teachers’ (PS9).

4.2 School-based support programmes

Based on the interviews, several approaches have been employed by the school-based support programmes in assisting and supporting novice teachers. Among the usable methods are mentoring programmes, participation in the PLC programmes, creating a platform for novice teachers to exchange views and teaching strategies outside the classroom and other relevant strategies.

4.2.1 Mentoring programme

As discussed, mentoring programmes are the most frequently implemented approach used in guiding novice teachers. It is believed that through mentoring, novice teachers' skills and competencies can be enriched to adapt to the new school culture and climate. Based on the interviews, the novice teachers felt they needed guidance because they believe they are new and inexperienced.

'Mentoring. For me, programme is considered effective. I always welcomed any initiative as long as it can assist me such as collaboration; cooperative and how to handle a situation really assist novice teachers in adapting themselves and understanding their roles in school.' (GN5).

Another three novice teachers acknowledged that the mentoring programme exposed them to effective instructional practices;

'Mentoring... my session with my mentor really helps me. The senior teacher shared her experience and new knowledge meant for novice teachers to know in facing future challenges as a teacher' (GN2).

'As for me it is mentoring. This programme really provides me with new knowledge in handling students, classroom management and also we learn on how to lead' (GN13).

'Very effective. To me, this mentoring support programme helps me on how to adapt myself and understanding my roles in schools' (GN19).

School leaders often use mentoring to guide novice teachers, especially to enhance their skills and competencies in instruction.

'I don't have any special strategies, only usually I will ask the head of the committee and the senior assistant or any experienced teacher to guide them, especially in the first year as novice teachers. Usually, I just observe their performances at the end of the month or listen to feedback (comments) from the PIC who guide them. If there is guidance that is not effective due to the generation gap (age difference), then I will ask them to get some advices from teachers who are more or less has the same age to guide them' (PS2).

'To me the head of the committee and the senior teachers are the ones who are suitable to guide the novice teachers. They are more senior and experienced. We highly relied to them in providing guidance to novice teachers...' (PS3).

The views of two primary principals were supported by two other principals who agreed with the mentoring method in mentoring novice teachers in their schools.

'We need to provide mentoring to novice teachers. They are willing to be mentored. In school, a senior teacher in the committee will be placed to act as a mentor. They will guide novice teachers in many things. For example, school programmes, PdPc and others. Thus, their problems encountered can be

overcome tolerantly. For example, this senior teacher as ‘sister’ or ‘brother’ who teaches his younger brother (junior teacher). In fact, it can strengthen the relationship among each other...’ (PS8).

4.2.2 Professional learning community

Apart from the mentoring method, the Professional Learning Community (PLC) method is another method used to guide novice teachers. Through the PLC method, novice teachers acquired the latest knowledge and skills as shared by senior teachers in their respective fields.

‘Yes, PLC also helps us. Through the PLC platform, we share our problems in teaching and senior teachers also shared their opinions in overcoming our problems related to teaching’ (GN8).

‘The PLC really helps me to improve my instructional knowledge and skills on how to teach more effectively than before. In fact, experienced teachers share their knowledge and skills for our own benefits’ (GN16).

The views of the novice teachers were supported by their principals, who emphasised the importance and benefits of the PLC programme to improve novice teacher skills in teaching. Through PLC, a lot of new and up-to-date knowledge on instructional elements can be shared.

‘Apart from that, PLC is very beneficial that each committee group can give their opinions (change their minds) to improve their knowledge’ (PS6).

4.2.3 Online learning support programme

During the COVID-19 pandemic, all teachers, including novice teachers, were asked to conduct classes online. For novice teachers, they were given a few ‘in-house’ classes and courses to strengthen their online teaching and learning skills.

‘The school has provided courses on online learning for us to practice although we have some exposure at university. It’s just that we have to perform in real situations while at school’ (GN6).

A primary principal also shared that the school supported novice teachers with internal courses such as online learning courses to improve their skills.

‘.... we will try to arrange (hold) the online learning course because there are many new teachers who have just entered our school this year’ (PS10).

In COVID-19, principals were also concerned about the development of novice teachers. An online seminar was conducted with all teachers, including novice teachers.

‘During this MCO, an online seminar will also be held to explain the management flow chart and the scope of work in the school. A group discussion session is also held every 2 weeks to find out the current status or problems faced by novice teachers’ (PS7).

4.2.4 Creating a sharing platform for novice teachers

From the interviews, a principal mentioned that he has created a platform for novice teachers to share their opinions, problems and experience and even exchange appropriate strategies.

‘I also create a community between our school novice teachers and other school novice teachers to help each other in terms of teaching techniques or knowledge in the classroom. This community allows novice teachers to adapt to the field of teaching more effectively without constraints’ (PS6).

‘... a community at the district level for novice teachers should be created, e.g., *Telegram* group, *Facebook* to share knowledge or experience and encourage each other’ (PS9).

4.2.5 Other relevant strategies in supporting novice teachers

Other methods mentioned by principals are how to channel novice teachers’ responsibilities to their interest. They will be given the opportunity to enhance their skills and knowledge while they are still new at school. This is because the school believed that novice teachers should be channelled to the interests, knowledge and skills they would like to acquire. This method will build novice teachers’ confidence level.

‘First of all, we need to give them the opportunity to prove their potential. We need to ask, see what will happen next. As principal, we should guide novice teachers to get this school’s culture. For example, if they are admitted to School B, they need to know what School B is like. What is the will and potential...? I will know the potential of each of my teacher. Because humans are not the same. Maybe teacher A is very good at PDPC implementation, and maybe the other half are good in sports, another half are good at ICT. Therefore, we must channel these teachers according to their potential’ (PS5).

In addition, principals frequently interact and approach novice teachers who are still new and ask about their problems.

‘Usually, I will try to interact with them to tell about our school work culture, introduce them to their colleagues or other teachers who can help them if facing any problems’ (PS8).

4.3 Challenges and obstacles in the school-based support programmes

Although novice teachers, as well as principals, did mention the preparation of relevant programmes for novice teachers, novice teachers experienced issues, especially in the COVID-19 pandemic. Four themes emerged that mentioned issues and barriers in novice teachers’ support programmes: difficulty for novice teachers to adapt, busy schedules of mentors and mentees, postponing or cancelling planned activities and restricted activities due to COVID-19.

4.3.1 Difficulty for novice teachers to adapt

Among the challenges shared by principals are those related to the negative attitudes of novice teachers who are not ready to adapt to the school’s culture.

‘... The challenge is not as big as the experienced teachers who have taught for many years with these teachers. But, it is often encountered that novice teachers are not ready to accept ‘adopt’ with positive things from the school for their own development’ (PS6).

4.3.2 *Busy schedules of mentors and mentees*

Another challenge shared by novice teachers and in line with the views given by principals is the heavy workloads of both parties, namely their mentors (senior teachers) with mentees (novice teachers). As a result, both mentors and mentees sometimes find it difficult to do discussion sessions as well as problem-solving because they want to complete the assignments given by the school immediately.

‘Sometimes, I can’t meet with my mentors because they are busy completing their assignments. sometimes, it lasts up to a week’ (GN18).

‘Yes, busy, many tasks as a teacher have hindered the mentoring program. The mentors that were given to us were busy teachers and holding high positions in the school. So, they really lacked of time to guide us. Sometimes, we have to ask our friends at other schools because we don’t want to disturb senior teachers’ (GN16).

As for a novice teacher, she believed that she has limited time to meet her mentor who is also busy conducting classes through PDPR (online teaching) because of the pandemic.

‘I have busy timetable when we were asked to conduct classes online due to the pandemic issue. I can’t contact her. She is also busy with her online classes. In fact, all of us are busy’ (GN20).

The views below given by school leaders were found to be in line with the reasons given by novice teachers related to the challenges and obstacles of the internal programmes operated by the school in guiding novice teachers.

‘I think the commitment of the mentor...it is because the mentor is busy with their work, they don’t have time to guide novice teachers, especially during the ‘peak’ (examination period). Therefore, I sometimes find it difficult to monitor (monitor) the status of the mentee if the mentor is busy. And now that everything is online, many new courses should be introduced on how to teach online, previous teaching courses are no more applicable and relevant’ (PS5).

4.3.4 *Postponing or cancelling planned activities*

Owing to the pandemic, all schools were asked to close by the ministry to avoid new COVID-19 clusters. Owing to the school closure, all planned activities were postponed or cancelled.

‘Because of students are having their learning online due to COVID-19. All activities, including our CPD programmes, are cancelled or postponed. Nevertheless, the principal continues the session through online mode. However, internet and connectivity is another issue that we have to face’ (GN9).

4.3.5 *Restricted activities due to COVID-19*

Another issue mentioned by novice teachers are restricted activities among mentors and mentees due to COVID-19. Many activities which were planned earlier were asked to be cancelled or postponed because all teachers need to adhere to the Ministry of Education’s Standard Operation Procedure (SOP).

‘Owing to the pandemic, many programmes are conducted online. The problem of a line that is not so good is a big issue for me’ (GN13).

‘Since the pandemic, we don’t have any mentoring session because we can’t meet each other face-to-face. Thus, we need to restrict our interactions. When I have problems, I have to call her’ (GN14).

‘We can’t meet each other because of the pandemic. We are facing difficulties in meeting our mentors and the school administrators’ (GN15).

‘The school is closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a difficult situation to us’ (GN17).

5 Discussion

This article presents findings related to novice teachers’ challenges as newcomers, the support programmes they provided, and issues within the school-based support programmes. Like previous studies, primary novice teachers face many challenges within their inception years as educators (Van den Borre et al., 2021; Nemaston, 2020; Al-Hadi et al., 2020). Issues and challenges such as lack of knowledge in students’ assessment, too many administrative responsibilities, lack of administrative skills, issues in handling online classes, classroom management challenges, lack of confidence, personal issues and communication barriers are seven emerging themes highlighted by novice teachers and primary principals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During interview sessions, primary novice teachers admitted being given various administrative responsibilities and positions although they are considered newcomers. Novice teachers articulated that they have many tasks to complete, were unsure about their work quality and being appointed as a subject’s chair and asked to handle important meetings. They also disclosed that they lack skills attracting students to communicate and change ideas during the PDPR (online) sessions. Nevertheless, due to COVID-19, all teacher developmental programmes were postponed or conducted online. Novices’ knowledge and skills when studying at universities face problems conducting online classes using gadgets. They are unsure whether the PDPR (online) sessions were organised based on the procedures. This finding is supported by previous findings concerning problems in technical ICT issues (Ahmad et al., 2020; Aytac, 2021), difficulties in conducting online learning because lack of technical skills (Spencer et al. 2018), and limited connectivity and experience to conduct online learning (Izhar et al., 2021).

In the interview sessions with principals, primary principals highlighted several issues facing novice teachers, such as their lack of confidence in speaking, not understanding the school’s policies and inability to communicate with other teachers. Moreover, novice teachers articulated their difficulties handling naughty students and disciplinary issues, especially when the MOE announced the reopening of the school. In handling this type of student, novices insisted they be trained to avoid feeling the pressure. Principals also underlined that some novice teachers face personal problems that can disrupt their focus, difficulties adjusting to their new life, first time being away from their families and doing work in isolation. Novice teachers are said to face problems in communicating with senior teachers and even with students. These findings are congruent with previous studies that pointed out the problems, issues and challenges novice teachers face. Novice teachers reported having issues in implementing learning

and classroom management (Yee and Hassan, 2019; Goh and Wong, 2014; Syed Ali et al., 2014; Chaaban and Du, 2017), difficulties adopting and understanding the school's culture (Coker, 2017; Adeogun and Olisaemeka, 2011), lack of skills in the implementation of heavy and challenging tasks and responsibilities (Day et al., 2007), socialisation issues (Joiner and Edwards, 2008) and being challenged implementing 'pedagogy-technology' such as technology platform-based learning (Banerjee and Waxman 2017; Sutton, 2011).

Although all schools experienced closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, novice teachers were given support programmes of mentoring as guidance to novices to enhance their knowledge, skills and understanding. At the same time, novice teachers are being guided by their mentors who are experienced teachers while trying to adapt to the school's culture, policies and procedures. As revealed by novices and principals, mentoring was entitled as the most chosen approach employed by schools as support programmes. Nevertheless, the practice of mentoring involved active and sharing participation between novices and senior teachers. This is because through mentoring, novices and senior teachers will collaborate and cooperate in sharing their knowledge, skills and guiding novice teachers to change their professional identities. Another reason is that the mentoring approach is capable of being practiced without meeting each other, but through the online platform or phone calls. As stressed by many scholars, mentoring is the most significant method to support novice teachers (Angelle, 2010; Coker, 2017; Smith and Ingersoll, 2004; Menon, 2012; Cameron and Grant, 2017; Daly and Milton, 2017; Van den Borre et al., 2021). When provided with easy monitoring from principals, it will enhance novice teachers' positive relationships with other teachers and school administrators. Through mentoring, novice teachers' needs are fulfilled and professional development requirements are developed (Hobson, 2016).

Beside mentoring, participation in the PLC is another suitable approach used by schools to assist novice teachers. In general, PLC is a platform for all teachers, regardless of their trajectories to share experience which aims to improve teachers' instructional practice. PLC also involves research as well as collective partnership in improving the instructional methods and strategies (DuFour et al., 2010). Thus, PLCs are expected to contribute significantly to teacher development, knowledge, skills and professionalism (Huffman et al., 2015; Owen, 2014), particularly for novice teachers. In school, novice teachers are provided with support programmes related to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the compulsory requirement for all teachers to conduct their classes using the internet and ICT. Primary principals also conducted online seminars to explain the management flowchart and the scope of work in the school during the lockdowns and MCOs. Schools also organised an online discussion or forum every two weeks. Other than that, primary principals mention that they create a sharing policy for novice teachers using social media platforms such as *Telegram* and *WhatsApp* for novice teachers to share and help each other in terms of instructional techniques and students' management and provide encouragement to each other. Another notable strategy used is channelling novice teachers' interest and passion into their responsibilities and tasks that they can participate and contribute. This is because novice teachers are given/channelled with tasks that do not interest them, which resulted in dissatisfaction, intense and pressure to novice teachers since they have little interest and lack knowledge related to the given tasks and responsibilities.

COVID-19 has created restrictions for novice teachers' school-based support programmes which were initially prepared and planned. Most of the support programmes

were postponed, cancelled and being conducted through the online platform. In having activities through the online platform, novice teachers felt unsure and uttered that the internet connectivity sometimes suffered problems. Novice teachers stressed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the mentoring sessions which were initially prepared were interrupted or conducted using the online platform or phone calls. Another issue related to the support programmes for novice teachers highlighted by novice teachers was the busy schedules of both novices and mentors. Novice teachers pointed out this issue since they cannot meet their mentors due to their busy schedules and heavy workloads especially if their mentors are holding important administrative positions in school. Both of them seldom meet, which sometimes lasted several weeks. In addition, due to PDPR classes, both teachers are busy with their online classes due to pandemic, which took most of their spare time for a mentoring session. During interviews, principals mentioned that some novice teachers find it difficult to adapt themselves to the school's culture. Principals share their difficulties and hardship in changing the professional attitudes of novice teachers due to their non-positive attitudes, which sometimes created problems for the school leadership personnel.

6 Implications and limitations

This study has contributed new insights and findings related to novice teachers' challenges within the COVID-19 pandemic, school-based support programmes for novice teachers and issues within the school-based support programmes that have hardly been explored. From the findings, several recommendations could benefit the school, novice teachers and even the school principals.

First, the interplay roles of novice teachers and principals are vital and seen to influence the effectiveness of the school's support-based programmes. In school, principals must continuously support novice teachers through initial training, exposure and support programmes to enhance novice teachers' confidence, competencies and professionalism. In the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and interactions are regulated to avoid the spread of the virus in schools. Nevertheless, the school leadership needs to provide support to all teachers, which includes novice teachers. This support in a critical situation is critical to alleviate teachers' stress and mental well-being, including novice teachers. Without any support from their schools, there will be attrition issues, especially for novice teachers who are undecided to stay or leave the teaching profession (Sozen, 2018).

As for novice teachers, they also need to develop their self-growth and resilience to adapt their attitudes and identities with the school's culture. This is vital to enhance novice teachers' personal and professional capabilities although school-based support programmes are supporting them. In this sense, novice teachers must also learn to be independent individuals, resilient and adopting themselves to the teaching profession. Thus, novice teachers should not rely too much on the school-based support programmes prepared by their teachers since it is considered optional for principals to organise school-based support programmes. The school-based support programmes are derived from principals' self-initiatives and fulfilling their roles and responsibilities as school leaders. As such, it is believed that enhancing the attributes of being resilient and independent should be inculcated within their pre-service training at teaching colleges and universities. Thus, with independent thinking and resilient attitudes, novice teachers

can survive the challenges with minimal support from experienced teachers, especially during the pandemic or a critical situation that limits and restricts interactions in schools.

Although in a critical situation such as COVID-19, effective school-based support programmes such as mentoring and PLC need to be executed to continually support novice teachers' deficient attributes. Failure in school-based support programmes organised by principals will cause novice teachers to experience stress and intense pressure, which later affects their well-being and creates mental health. As a result, they will have second thoughts whether to remain in the teaching profession. Owing to difficulties in conducting programmes, principals are required to transform and suggest innovative support programmes from face-to-face to online version participation. Although there are issues associated with teachers who lack skills in conducting programmes online, schools and their principals need to provide initial knowledge and skills on how to use or conduct courses or programmes online version and provide knowledge on using education technology platforms.

There is a need for school leaders to accommodate and minimise novice teachers' administrative workloads although they are considered newcomers in school. Principals need to provide motivation and support for novices to remain in the profession when novice teachers felt that they are inspired and motivated (Gu and Day, 2013). If this issue is solved, it will slow the execution or implementation of the school-based support programmes (Burger et al., 2021). As a result, from the school-based support programmes, novice teachers will experience guidance and smooth entry towards the teaching profession (Chaaban and Du, 2017). Nevertheless, effective assessment and support programmes need to be implemented (Chaaban and Du, 2017). Although there are issues related to the support programmes, novice and experienced teachers need continuous support to overcome their pressure and intense situations, especially during critical situations. Support programmes are professional development for growth and contributed to novice teachers' retention in the profession.

Richter et al. (2013) mentioned that valid information should be obtained from novice teachers who experienced school-based support programmes, especially related to mentoring. This qualitative study has its limitations based on the interview transcripts from novice teachers themselves and primary principals who being participants in this study. The aim of this study is not to generalise the findings but to highlight issues with support programmes. In terms of support programmes, few studies evaluated and assessed the effectiveness of the support programmes for novice teachers. Thus, we recommend conducting research on school-based support programmes for novice teachers.

Additionally, although this study examined school-based support programmes, few studies examined the psychological aspects of novice teachers related to school-based support. Future studies should examine novice teachers' psychology. The missing psychological aspects of novice teachers based on their views towards the school-based support programmes were stressed by Burger et al. (2021) in examining the effects of the school-based support programmes.

7 Conclusions

This study contributes to the school-based support programmes. In this study, we obtained a clear understanding of novice teachers' challenges, especially within the

COVID-19 pandemic. The study was conducted within the COVID-19 pandemic to provide evidence whether the schools continuously support teachers. We concluded that teachers in primary schools are continuously supported by their school leadership who need to think of innovative ways to transform the support programmes from normal interactions into online-based programmes. The main findings revealed that primary novice teachers still faced challenges such as lack of confidence, heavy administrative workloads, communication barriers and effective and continuous support programmes to enhance their potential and similar competencies with other teachers. In addition, mentoring was named the most employed school-based support programme in primary schools in Malaysia. In addition, participation in PLC activities and other innovative strategies are employed by their schools. Notable issues which affected the school-based support programmes, such as restrictions in practising the support programmes include the busy schedules of mentors and mentees. Thus, as practical implications, a few recommendations were suggested to overcome the existing issues in school-based support programmes and continuously support teachers during a critical situation such as COVID-19, which enhances novice teachers' mental health and well-being.

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