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Covid-19 as a catalyst for sustainable change: the rise of democratic pedagogical partnership in initial teacher education in Ireland

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While challenges faced by school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic have been extensively discussed, this article explores ways in which student teachers have demonstrated ‘adaptive expertise’ in response to a changing educational landscape that have enabled them to support schools during this public health emergency. Discerning school leaders have over the past twelve months looked to student teachers on school placement to demonstrate teacher leadership in supporting schools during the COVID-19 education crisis. This qualitative research draws on in-depth interviews with school leaders [10], co-operating teachers [10] and student teachers [10] across ten case study schools on a teacher education programme in Ireland. It highlights the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an impetus for the development of democratic pedagogical partnerships in ITE triggered by a need for collaborative engagement underpinned by responsive pedagogy and digital enhanced learning. The data also supports the view that the expertise that student teachers can offer schools in relation to their digital competence can significantly assist in fostering collaborative and reflective practice and bridge the perennial theory/practice divide.

KEY WORDS: School leader; student teacher; co-operating teacher; initial teacher education; pedagogical partnerships; digital competence; COVID-19

Introduction

In contemporary educational literature, Covid-19 is commonly characterised as a ‘game changer’ (Harris and Jones 2020) and a ‘black swan event’ (Harford 2021); totally disruptive of schooling as we have come to know and recognise putting growing pressure on teachers to be more adept, agile, and adaptive, particularly at integrating new and emerging digital technologies into their pedagogical repertoires (Farrell and Sugrue 2021). While ‘lockdown’ compelled schools to go online, with varying degrees of success, in general, all teachers have had to get to grips with technologies in an unprecedented manner. While scholarship has examined to some degree the myriad of challenges faced by school leaders during the Covid-19 pandemic (Campbell 2020; Fagel 2020; Harris and Jones 2020), there has been a paucity of research on the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an impetus for the development of ‘democratic pedagogical partnerships’

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(Farrell 2020) in ITE triggered by a need for collaborative engagement underpinned by responsive pedagogy and digital enhanced learning.

This pandemic has spawned renewed urgency towards the development of ‘adaptive expertise’ (Timperley, Ell, and Le Fevre 2017) while also extending pedagogical repertoires to embrace the possibilities offered by various digital technologies. While schools are key sites for the building of adaptive competences including the competences to embed digital technology in teaching, learning and assessment (UNESCO 2018), the OECD (2015) cautions that ‘the reality in our schools lags considerably behind the promise of technology’ (13). While there is an expectation that teachers are proficient in the use of digital technology, in teaching, learning and assessment, the reality is that this is not always the case (Tondeur et al. 2017). However, a recent study by Farrell and Marshall (2020) in the context of initial teacher education (ITE) found that some student teachers’ use of technology enhanced learning upended the classic co-operating teacher/student teacher hierarchy, positioning the student teacher as mentor to the co-operating teacher in this regard. In recognition of this, discerning school leaders have looked to student teachers on school placement to demonstrate mentor type leadership (Murphy 2019) in supporting schools managing the swift transition to at-distance learning provoked by the COVID-19 education crisis.

Nevertheless, while student teachers have demonstrated their capacity to take the lead in fostering digital skills during their school placement experience, digital pedagogy should not be cultivated in a content free zone. An important factor in building sustainable student teacher capacity is teacher professional identity and how it is inextricably linked to their chosen disciplines. In building their pedagogical repertoire for twenty-first century education and beyond COVID-19 (Darling-Hammond et al. 2019) student teachers also need to be supported and encouraged into broadening their horizons adequately to combine skill development and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Shulman 2013) in their practice. Therefore, student teachers’ acquisition of ‘professional competence’ (Ramin, Lalor and Lorenzi 2015) requires fine-tuning in collaboration with university lecturers and co-operating teachers to apply meaningfully learned knowledge and skills malleably and creatively across the school-university nexus. The expertise that student teachers can offer schools in relation to their digital competence along with the expertise that co-operating teachers can offer student teachers regarding PCK (Shulman 2013) can be a catalyst for fostering collaborative and reflective practice at a whole school level (Farrell and Marshall 2020) and help bridge the perennial theory/practice divide (Heinz and Fleming 2019; McGarr, O’Grady, and Guilfoyle 2017).

Seminal thinkers like Dewey (1916) and Freire (1970) have long espoused the educational virtues of democracy, pedagogical partnerships and collaboration in education. More than a century ago, Dewey (1916) not only re-conceived the way that learning should happen, but also the roles that both students and teachers should play in the process of learning. Freire (1970), like Dewey, believed that students should play a dynamic role in their own education, instead of being the passive beneficiaries of knowledge. As the gatekeepers of the school-university nexus, school leaders play a significant role in the formation of student teachers while on placement by cultivating the voices of these stakeholders and harnessing their agency to contribute to ‘democratic pedagogical partnerships’ (Farrell 2020) in ITE. Based on

interviews with school leaders, student teachers and co-operating teachers [$n = 30$] involved with an initial teacher education programme in a university in the Republic of Ireland, this article provides a synthesis of this range of stakeholders' perspectives on how the Covid-19 education crisis has acted as a catalyst for the rise of 'democratic pedagogical partnership' in ITE in Ireland and what lessons may be learned for future sustainable change in ITE as a result.

Methodology

Taking cognisance of Aspland's (2013) exhortation that when designing a research project 'there must be an overt ideological commitment to congruence amongst epistemological thinking, theoretical framing and methodological positioning' (20), this small-scale study was conceptualised within the interpretivist tradition using standard qualitative research methods of data gathering and analysis. It consisted of carrying out a series of semi-structured interviews with school leaders [$n=10$], student teachers [$n=10$] and co-operating teachers [$n=10$], across a purposive sample of ten case study schools from the data base [$n=152$] of placement schools involved with an ITE programme in a university in Dublin. A semi-structured interview format was chosen as this research instrument is flexible, open-ended and non-standardised (Corbetta 2003). The interview schedule was informed by national and international literature on school-university co-operation in ITE. The study was guided by the following research questions that were adapted to the sub-groups as appropriate:

- (1) How did the COVID-19 education crisis impact on the school placement experience in your school?
- (2) What impact did the pandemic have on the relationships between student teachers and their co-operating teachers?
- (3) What added value did student teachers bring to the school placement experience?

A range of school types and post-primary curricular subjects were represented in the sample. This included the three main models of post-primary schools in Ireland: Voluntary Secondary Schools (fee paying and non-fee paying), Education and Training Board (ETB) Schools and Community and Comprehensive Schools. Schools in communities of disadvantage referred to as DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools and non- DEIS schools along with co-educational and single gender schools were also represented in the case studies. Interview data was initially coded according to participant and school type (see Tables 2 and 3). For example, when referring to the code CTS1, the first two letters identify the participant as a co-operating teacher [CT] and the subsequent letter and number identifies the school type [S1]. Participant were accorded pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and the dialectical features of the interview data were conserved in line with best practice in reporting qualitative data research (Rapley 2004). While the sample size was small, the analysis gains in significance by providing in-depth scrutiny of a case study, not for the purposes of generalisation, but rather to influence future deliberations on policy and practice in ITE.

Findings

The findings offer a range of stakeholders' (school leaders [$n = 10$], student teachers [$n = 10$] and co-operating teachers [$n = 10$]) views on how the Covid-19 education crisis acted as a catalyst for sustainable change and contributed to the rise of 'democratic pedagogical partnerships' in ITE in Ireland. Using inductive analysis, two main pedagogical themes emerged from the research, (a) the acceleration of technology enhanced learning and its impact on collaboration in ITE and (b) student teachers' capacity for adaptive expertise and role as mentors to co-operating teachers.

The acceleration of technology enhanced learning and its impact on collaboration in ITE

The increased impetus to use digital technology during COVID-19 enabled the development of a school university nexus that went beyond bridging the theory/practice divide to providing a 'third space' (Zeichner 2010) for student teachers and co-operating teachers to connect:

One of the great ironies of COVID-19 is the increased connectivity that at-distance learning forced upon us. In the past I would have left my student teacher much to their own devices, but during COVID-19 remote teaching, we had to collaborate more to plan and support each other in a new environment. (CTS4)

The development of this 'third space' paved the way for student teachers and their co-operating teachers to optimise synergies that enabled innovative practice as evidenced by the following co-operating teacher's comments:

I always wanted to try team teaching with my student teacher but I kept putting it off. When they offered to help me with online classes I was delighted and over time it moved on from technical help to co-teaching which was really rejuvenating and enjoyable as we tried out a lot of new things that I would never have done on my own. (CTS3)

The expertise that student teachers offered schools in relation to their digital competence gave them more confidence to tap into their co-operating teacher's PCK (Shulman 2013):

I felt more at ease asking for subject specific support from my co-operating teacher as I had acquired some useful digital skills that were invaluable when we moved to online teaching. (STS3)

Moreover this sharing of expertise fostered collaborative and reflective practice as evidenced by the comments of this co-operating teacher:

I completed my H. Dip many years ago when there was not much talk about the theories of learning in the online space. I was really interested to learn all of this from my student teacher who pointed out with great conviction the evidence-based arguments for appropriate use of facilitator video during screencasts and recorded lessons. (CTS1)

The tangible benefits emerging from the joined-up thinking across the school-university nexus during this crisis has created a palpable confidence and sense of goodwill

towards the university who at times have been disparaged for being too theoretical and removed from the reality of schools as noted by this school leader.

I know I have criticised university based teacher educators for being removed from schools at times, but when I saw the ideas that the student teachers were picking up from their lecturers who adapted quickly to online teaching on the PME programme, I was very heartened. (SLS10)

Student teachers' capacity for adaptive expertise and role as mentors to co-operating teachers

The COVID-19 education emergency has created a sense of urgency to embrace the potential of digital technology in teaching, learning and assessment. This study found that many student teachers maximised the opportunity to learn new digital skills in the university setting and were willing and able to transfer these skills to good effect on their school placement:

When schools closed due to COVID-19 our PME lectures went online. I actually picked up some really easy and useful ways of how to teach online from my university lecturers and I was delighted to be able to show them to my co-operating teacher: (STS8)

Student teachers who were adept at using digital technology became more visible in the school placement and assumed mentor type leadership roles (Murphy 2019) in supporting schools to maximise the potential of technology enhanced learning as described by this co-operating teacher.

I would see myself as being fairly proficient at the use of technology in my teaching, but COVID-19 brought expectations to a new level. I think I would have struggled with live online classes if not for the help of my student teacher who was well used to them from their PME course. (CTS8)

Discerning school leaders noted of the value added that student teachers could bring to the school placement as noted by this school leader.

Listening to feedback from co-operating teachers on how beneficial it was to have a student teacher this year to help with the transition to online learning I think I need to put more structures in place to harness their potential in school going forward. (SLS6)

School leaders are the gatekeepers of the school-university nexus and as such their recognition of the value of student teachers to the school placement is crucial for the development of 'democratic pedagogical partnerships' in ITE.

Concluding thoughts

While learning in the context of COVID-19 has been perplexing for many involved in education, this time of disruption has generated a chance for rethinking and reinventing (Darling-Hammond and Hyler 2020) the school-university nexus in ITE in Ireland. For far too long there has been an over dependence on 'goodwill and volunteerism' (Ní Áingléis and Looney 2018) and too great a burden placed on an *ad hoc* system of school-university co-operation in ITE (Farrell 2020, 2021). If any lesson is

to be learned from the COVID-19 emergency, it is that things will never be the same again and that all stakeholders in education, including student teachers, are resilient and adaptable to change. Therefore, the progress made regarding mutual learning and stronger partnerships in ITE during this time should be built upon and strengthened in a holistic and systematic way going forward. The introduction of the new *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education* (Teaching Council 2020) is timely given that these standards recognise the complex and critical role that all stakeholders play and that are central to the ongoing development of ITE programmes.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Rachel Farrell is the Director of the Professional Master of Education (PME) programme and a research fellow in the area of school-university partnerships in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in the School of Education in University College Dublin. With a keen interest in partnerships in education, Rachel has led many collaborative initiatives involving a range of education and industry stakeholders including: An Evaluation of digital portfolios in ITE with MS Education Ireland and Girls in DEIS Schools: Changing Attitudes /Impacting Futures in STEM funded by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and supported by the Professional Development Service (PDST) for Teachers. Research interests also include global citizenship education and sustainable pedagogy.

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