

Reflections on Learning to Teach during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The centrality of schools and schooling to Irish society became even more apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic. Whole school communities were unceremoniously ushered into a new, unstable reality characterized by closures/re-openings, online teaching/assessment while, at the same time, negotiating complex health and safety rules and protocols designed to protect staff and students alike. As a PME student at the School of Education, UCD, I drew inspiration from the staff of my local secondary school, Drumshanbo Vocational School, who had not only instilled in me a passion for learning, but had also encouraged me to realize my full potential and continue to third-level education. As a student teacher, I came to understand that being able to help a student discover their passion for a subject and to recognize their own potential for learning is both powerful and rewarding. My engagement with the study of education during the pandemic and my experiences since graduation have re-affirmed my commitment to my students, my new school and my academic subjects. This commitment is one which will, I hope, sustain me in my future career as a teacher.

Becoming a teacher has never been an easy undertaking. Indeed, research has consistently pointed out that teaching in the modern classroom can be challenging and requires a complex skill set, unique personal qualities and an in-depth subject knowledge/understanding (Devine, Fahie and McGillicuddy 2013, for example). Since 2013, it has been a requirement for most second-level teachers in Ireland to hold a Level 9 qualification (usually in the form of the *Professional Masters of Education* or PME) or an equivalent concurrent degree to qualify. In this context, the affording of a master's status to the teaching profession for the first time is reflective of a new recognition of the status of the profession.

In 2019, I began my PME in University College Dublin having just graduated there with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and History. One of enormous benefits of conducting my PME in UCD was the quality of the initial teacher education provided by the School of Education there (and I acknowledge the high quality of initial teacher education in other institutions also!). PME programmes across the country endeavor to bridge the gap that often exists in the field of education between theory and practice, in a way that thoroughly prepares the novice educator for the realities of teaching in Ireland. Being a PME student is not just about becoming a teacher. In many ways, a PME student represents a merging



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of multiple roles and identities. Like a superhero(!), by day we are student teachers, teaching classes every day, but over several evenings a week we morphed back into college students, with all of the responsibilities and demands of college life such as assignments and lectures. Due to the high cost of the PME, many of us (including myself) were forced to engage in part-time work across a variety of settings, working outside of college and school to fund our own education. I was fortunate that the PME at UCD allowed students to conduct their school placements over the course of a full-school year. Not only did this approach make us extremely popular with school principals (who didn't have the headache of trying to accommodate us in schools for irregular blocks of school placement), it also allowed facilitated a full engagement in the life of the school, taking on our own classes (with in-school support) and overseeing student progress over the course of a full year.

I began my first school placement in September 2019. This was a time before COVID-19, which was fortunate for me as it afforded me the opportunity to teach face-to-face and participate in a school environment that was devoid of any restrictions. I conducted my first school placement in St Joseph's Secondary school (Stanhope Street Girls) and it is a truly fantastic school, where I was given a great introduction to the world of teaching from all of the wonderful staff and students there. Teaching in St Joseph's provided me with insight into the challenges associated with delivering equality of opportunity in schools (DEIS) for students from lower-socio economic backgrounds and really showcased how such challenges can be addressed in practice. With a large multi-ethnic student population, teaching in St Joseph's also provided me with a great understanding of how diverse Irish classrooms have become in the 21st century. Interestingly, while in St. Joseph's I also witnessing how a modern secondary school with a strong Roman Catholic ethos can be truly inclusive for students of different cultures and religions.

It was in March of my first school placement that the COVID-19 virus emerged, and this national public health emergency created some unique challenges that student teachers had never previously faced. During the subsequent lockdown, third-level institutions such as UCD were closed for face-to-face lectures in the interest of public safety and this, of course, created new challenges for those completing the PME during the pandemic. These included the difficulty of negotiating remote virtual learning, learning new online methodologies and completing virtual placement assessments. At the same time, we had to continue with our academic responsibilities in college. Of course, while huge support was given to us by staff in the School of Education, no accommodations or dilution of standards were accepted by UCD in terms of the quality of our academic work. As a result, there was no diminution in the caliber or quality of our degree and, consequently, I would argue that all students who conducted their PME during COVID-19 have acquired additional skills from the experience of learning how to teaching during the pandemic. Over the course of the pandemic, PME's showcased qualities such as resourcefulness, flexibility, openness, innovation, and a willingness to take on responsibility and collaborate with others. We also gained enormous digital and interpersonal skills from the experience of teaching in a digitally transformed educational environment

In an interesting turn of fate, PME students quickly became highly prized members of the school communities during the pandemic. With the shift to remote online learning, student teachers found themselves in the rather bizarre position of working in a school environment where they were seen to have access to professional knowledge/competencies, particularly in terms of online teaching methodologies, that were central to the new national teaching environment. There were, of course, challenges involved in the abrupt shift to remote online learning, but the experience also gifted PME's the opportunity to really contribute to schools through rich collaborative engagement with fellow professionals. While other college placements were cancelled, ours continued and, in many ways, positioned student teachers on the front line during the pandemic. Notwithstanding some very genuine fears around personal health, PME students who braved the experience were "rewarded" with a unique opportunity to participate positively and constructively in our national response to the pandemic. In fact, during the subsequent teacher shortages that occurred the pandemic, it has been recognized that it was the contribution of student teachers that helped to keep schools open.

As PME's we also had a unique insight into the world of teaching during the pandemic in multiple school contexts. I conducted my second-year school placement in Stepside Educate Together which, once again, is a truly wonderful school. Stepside ETSS represents an excellent example of the *Educate Together* model and ethos in practice and I found teaching in the school during the pandemic to be an extremely rewarding experience. One of the unique experiences of being a PME in 2021 was teaching in an elastic space where schools demonstrated high degrees of flexibility, reacting at very short notice to an ever-changing landscape. As a result, during this period, PME's not only demonstrated an unprecedented level of adaptability and innovation but were also able to collaborate closely with all students, parents and colleges to provide teaching in an educational environment that was constantly in flux. Student teachers across the country, at both primary and second level, actively contributed to their wider school communities during the pandemic, despite the challenges that COVID-19 posed to social interactions. (For example, I was fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to establish a debating society in Stepside ETSS during this time and had the privilege of bringing the debating team progress to a national final). Critically, my experience mirrors that of the countless initiatives undertaken by student teachers as they work diligently to "do their bit" to support their placement schools and school communities during the pandemic.

Learning how to teach during the COVID-19 pandemic had some unique and unprecedented challenges that did make qualifying as a teacher more difficult. However, with adversity also came new opportunities. To quote the great educationalist theorist Paulo Freire "*Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other*" (Freire, 1974, p.58.) and this statement is true for the experience of being a PME student during the time of COVID-19. Over the course of the pandemic, PME's had to continually innovate and learn how to teach in an unprecedented and rapidly changing educational environment. This experience has given a generation of teachers, a unique set of skills and personal qualities that will distinguish us in the post-covid classroom. This

experience will stand to us, I believe, throughout our professional career and propel us to continue being innovative educators in a continually changing and rapidly digitalizing Irish educational landscape.

REFERENCES

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