

‘Becoming and Transforming’ through Maynooth University’s Turn to Teaching Project

The role of critical and diverse communities of practice in challenging and transforming teacher education



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Maynooth University’s Turn to Teaching is a widening participation project that promotes diversity in the teaching profession. Funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), it is embedded within, and supported by, a community of practice of school, further education, community, and university partners. In this article we highlight the role the project is playing in generating discussion in and across the teaching profession on the systemic change required to realise a truly representative and inclusive profession.

In response to the under-representation of certain groups in teaching, and mirroring the international context, diversifying access to and participation in the teaching profession in Ireland has become a priority in education policy in recent years.



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In 2016, the Department of Education and Skills launched the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 1, which provided funding for projects related to diversifying initial teacher education (ITE) for target groups in the National Access Plan 2015–2019 (HEA, 2015). The target groups specified in the PATH 1 initiative were: entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education, mature students, Irish Travellers, students with disabilities, part-time and flexible learners, and further education award holders.



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This article tells the story of Maynooth University’s Turn to Teaching (TtT), a PATH 1 project that promotes diversity in the teaching profession through a series of social-justice-orientated widening participation initiatives. Established in 2017, TtT adopts a lifelong, continuum approach, supporting students from diverse and under-represented groups into ITE (via its Foundation Certificate and outreach work), through ITE (via undergraduate and postgraduate routes), and beyond ITE (early career); see Figure 1.

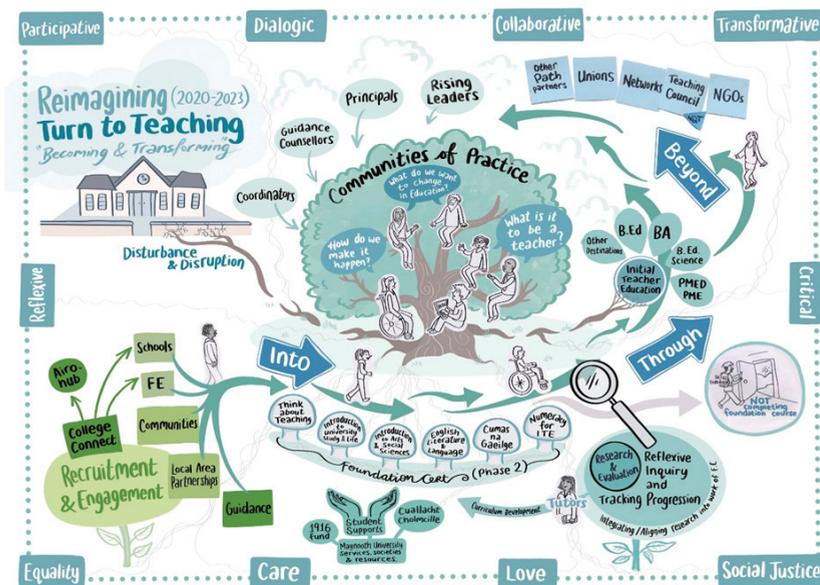


Figure 1: Turn to Teaching's vision

At the heart of the work, a level 6 programme, the Think about Teaching Foundation Certificate, was developed with the aim of providing a critically reflexive space for a diverse student group to contemplate, identify, and embark on meaningful and defined pathways towards careers as teachers in a range of educational sectors: early childhood, primary, second-level, and further education.

This work has been supported by a rich and diverse community of practice made up of teacher mentors (Rising Leaders), school staff and communities, further education partners, ITE providers, access offices, Local Area Partnerships, and other PATH 1 projects. Indeed, this article reflects that sense of community and partnership, as it is authored by a coalition of project partners (represented by Lesley Byrne) and project staff (Gareth Burns and Jerry O'Neill).

Fundamental and guiding concepts of becoming and transforming

A solid critical theoretical foundation is identified by McDaid et al. (2023) as crucial to maximising the transformative potential of teacher diversity projects. Despite its complexity, TtT is guided by two fundamental concepts: becoming and transforming. These twin objectives acknowledge the significant developmental processes that enable educational, professional, and occupational growth by participants across the various areas and stages of the project.

But the aspirations of becoming and transforming apply equally to the broader educational field. They guide the project activity to be always conscious of the work that disorients established attitudes that contribute to reproducing inequality in relation to teacher identity, and that invites new understandings and perceptions of professionalism in education.

The work is orientated in critical educational values and practices that centre on participation, reflexivity, collaboration, love, and care. These values and practices are reflected in the programme's approaches to pedagogy, research, project management, and evaluation.

A transformative learning project

As a transformative learning project, TtT is committed to research-informed practice and project development, a principle that Heinz et al. (2023) name as critical for the development of a diverse, equitable, and inclusive teaching profession. TtT aligns itself with a mixed-method approach to research and evaluation, which attends to tracking quantitative data and the more qualitative, reflexive, and participatory methods that allow the project to develop in ways responsive to the needs and contexts of participants but also to the broader equality and institutional sector and policy contexts.

TtT's impact is immediately evident in recruitment and progression data (Figure 2). Through its innovative Think about Teaching Foundation Certificate for ITE and its two-year school outreach and leadership programme Rising Teachers, Rising Leaders, 130+ participants have successfully completed their programmes.

The Think about Teaching Foundation Certificate has run for four years and has very high retention (86%) and progression rates (83%) into undergraduate and postgraduate ITE programmes and pathways. The

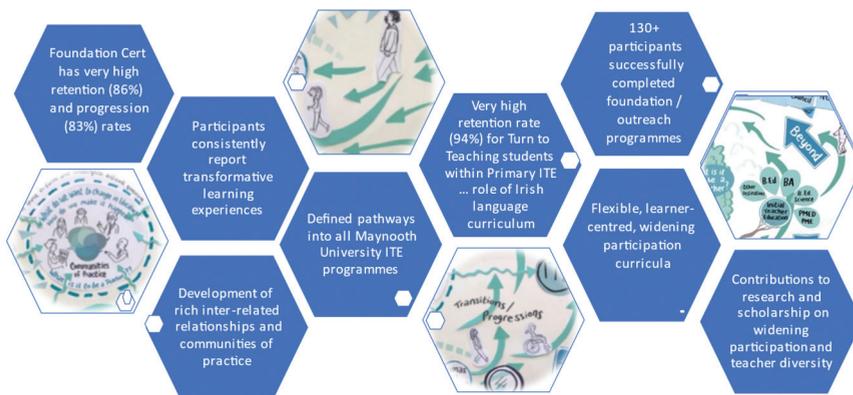


Figure 2: The story of Turn to Teaching so far

direct pathway to primary ITE created by the collaboration between TtT and the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education continues to be particularly successful, and the very high student retention rate (94%) on this pathway speaks to the quality of preparation provided by the Foundation Certificate, particularly in the core competencies for entry to primary ITE, namely Irish, maths, and English.

In particular, the Irish language dimension of the work of TtT has been central to student experience and success on the primary pathway. The Irish language requirement for entry to primary ITE is an acknowledged factor in the homogeneity of the profession (O'Donoghue & Harford, 2011; O'Doherty & Harford, 2018; Keane et al., 2023).

In response, TtT, in partnership with Maynooth University's Lárionad na Gaeilge and Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, developed an alternative Irish language curriculum on the Think about Teaching Foundation Certificate which provides support and equivalence to Leaving Cert Irish, with student competency assessed through the Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge exam framework.

Emerging project research speaks to the transformative impact the programme has on participants' experiences and perceptions of the Irish language. One Foundation Certificate student said:

I think for the Leaving Cert . . . you're taught to pass the exam and give opinions that you might not necessarily have yourself, but that's what's going to help you pass. Whereas this year [on the Foundation Cert], I've been taught how to actually formulate my own opinion using the language.

The numbers tell one side of the success story. But much of TtT's success can be traced to the work done in building trusting relationships with students and being attentive and responsive to their experiences and needs. The vast majority of TtT students have experienced complex, intersectional, and intergenerational levels of education inequality, and the integrated set of personal, financial, social, and academic supports developed by the project are critical to students' experience and success.

The importance of these supports was accentuated in the ever-shifting learning landscape heralded by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the growing recognition of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on already-disadvantaged groups that the programme supports (Aontas, 2020).

The Turn to Teaching community: creating 'messy' but safe spaces for dialogue, debate and disturbance of narratives of deficit

The work of the project has sought to challenge the deficit ideology that often positions students from under-represented groups as requiring 'fixing'. This work has been developed and supported by a diverse community

of practice made up of teacher mentors (Rising Leaders), school staff and communities, further education partners, ITE providers, access offices, Local Area Partnerships, and other PATH 1 projects.

This community of practice, which is committed to equality, diversity, and widening participation in education and teaching, has become a porous and self-sustaining space for critical reflection and dialogue which is orientated on enhancing teacher diversity and professional equity in teaching in general. At the core of our community have been the Rising Leaders, a group of teacher mentors from under-represented groups whose role in the project has grown and evolved as they have moved from being participants in the Rising Teachers, Rising Leaders school outreach and leadership programme to being associate staff in the project who are contributing through mentoring, curriculum development, and lecturing (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Turn to Teaching's community of practice

TtT's community of practice has also been instrumental in creating critically reflexive spaces for telling and retelling narratives emerging from the project's community of learners, educators, and activists (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In a spirit of democratic participation, the rich life experiences that the students, Rising Leaders, and other TtT community members and activists bring with them is the starting point for personal and collective journeying through the process of 'becoming' and 'being' a teacher (Brookfield, 2017). Led by the Rising Leaders, these spaces and stories have also been a catalyst for rich conversations with student teachers across Maynooth University, focused on ways of developing inclusive, critically conscious, and culturally responsive pedagogies and classrooms.

TtT students are motivated to become teachers for different reasons, and they have a strong desire to bring their own experiences into the classroom as a critical and professional resource. Mirroring the motivation of many of the teacher participants (Burns & O'Sullivan, 2023), many student participants have a strong aspiration to be role models for their own future students, who may come from groups currently under-represented in teaching (Burns et al., 2023). This desire is expressed here by a Foundation Certificate student from an Irish Traveller background.

“ An alternative Irish Language curriculum has been developed for the Think about Teaching Foundation Certificate, which provides equivalence to Leaving Cert Irish, with student competency assessed through the Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge exam framework.

I saw it . . . even I just noticed . . . when I was in 4th Class or 5th Class . . . I never had a male teacher, and I never had a black teacher, it was always just, you know, women and white women . . . I don't think there's any Traveller primary teachers . . . I have never seen one . . . and I would kind of like to break the barrier in that way, and you know, show them it can be done.

Although the importance of role models in breaking through professional barriers was clear to many participants, they also nurtured a sense of criticality and a desire to transform education throughout the process. This sentiment is exemplified by another Irish Traveller student participant who clearly articulates the sense of the deeper and longer-term work that needs to be done across all of society:

We cannot expect marginalised people to thrive in mainstream society without supporting those foundations first. Dignity and respect given to these communities, and supports for their own education and self-actualisation, are a step on the way to closing the gaps between marginalised communities and mainstream society. I believe we can occupy the same spaces of education, work, and cultural spaces on the premise of mutual respect.

Conclusion

As we look to the future, the next phase of the work needs to grow in parallel with TtT students' development as they progress through ITE programmes and begin their careers as educators. This has exciting potential as the project's participants move into the teaching profession and, if they so desire, become future educational leaders in schools and other educational spaces.

But this transition from the supportive spaces of the project into a post-qualification world of education work is also an area where we envisage emerging issues of access for teachers from under-represented groups in the teaching profession. This is, in many ways, the unknown of the work, but we have concerns, confirmed in previous research (Marom, 2019; Neary,

2023), about the possibilities of difficult transitions to teaching for students from diverse backgrounds.

The TtT community of practice will be critical to developing supports and processes that will support early career transition as this community matures and becomes more autonomous. Indeed, the dialogical spaces that have flourished across the project, in response to enduring, inclusive, and 'risky' questions such as 'What it is to be a teacher?' and 'What do we want to change in education?', may be useful if sometimes uncomfortable starting points for much-needed discussion within and across the profession on the systemic change required to disrupt the intergenerational, intersectional barriers to teaching that continue to exist for those under-represented groups.

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