

Time to *really* re-envisage teacher education

Ann MacPhail, Assistant Dean Research, Faculty of Education and Health Sciences, University of Limerick, Ireland

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 has changed our lives in many ways, including how we socialise, how we communicate, how we learn. In each case, we are engaged with trying to determine what is most effective and how we can negotiate what we have done in the past with what makes sense for the future. How we position ourselves in this endeavour has implications for our development and growth as a society as well as within our own professional undertakings – in our case, teaching and teacher education.

The 'formal' teacher education response to dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic has focused on the logistics of initial teacher education (ITE) such as managing ITE courses, making recommendations for qualified teacher status, managing the delivery of different routes, and guidance on recruitment and selection for the next academic year (DfE 2020; Welsh Government 2020). Few instances, to date, have shared the realities of teacher educators dealing with the ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic. Instances include a short report describing the adaptations

made to one ITE course at a Hong Kong university designed for face-to-face instruction yet delivered exclusively online (Moorhouse 2020), and a blog that reports how a teacher education programme delivered online before the pandemic was still deeply affected by the pandemic (Banegas 2020). While both reference points share pedagogical changes in response to the pandemic, the urgency for such changes has, perhaps understandably, been pursued without due consideration of what educators uphold as meaningful and socially just teacher education. That is, to what extent can we (and should we) continue to uphold our respective teacher education philosophies and aligned practices without considering the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic? It is a well-established expectation that teachers and teacher educators, as lifelong learners, frequently consider and question their philosophies to identify those aspects worth maintaining and those worth adapting, while recognising the need to find new ways that have not previously been considered. Such expectations are captured in conversations interrogating how

professional capital can improve the profession of teaching (Hargreaves & Fullan 2015). I suggest the pandemic could profoundly change teacher education for the better, supporting the notion that 'necessity really is the mother of invention' (Baker 2020).

I compiled this contribution nine weeks after my university closed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This crisis has serious implications for all education systems and requires critical engagement from teachers and teacher educators. I have chosen the opportunity afforded to me through this guest editor invitation to share with the reader the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic has already reinforced or challenged, and continues to do so, my notion of what it means to be an effective initial teacher educator.

In doing this, I revisit my teacher education philosophy statement and consider the extent to which three elements of the statement (acknowledging that more elements will be challenged as I move forward) need to be reconsidered given the unprecedented times in which we find

ourselves. I work through each of these elements in turn, sharing the aligned section of my philosophy statement first (in italics) before reflecting on the extent to which each element is reinforced or challenged given the Covid-19 pandemic. In doing so, I acknowledge that the changes educators make now in response to the pandemic are not only for the immediate future but for the long-term future of the teacher education continuum, i.e. ITE, induction and in-service/continuing professional development. It is more than likely that society and many aspects of our lives will not be making a return to the way they operated before Covid-19 (e.g. large group gatherings).

TEACHER EDUCATION AS AN APPRENTICESHIP

I experience my involvement in teacher education as an apprentice, learning from experience and pre-service teachers (PSTs) on what it means to be an effective and informed (physical education) teacher educator. I believe teaching is primarily about understanding what helps people learn in different ways and that learning is about appreciating preparation for life. Effective teaching requires one to be continually disciplined to engage with an understanding of subject matter, an appreciation of the particular group you are working with (pedagogical content and learner knowledge), knowledge of student development, knowledge about learning, an appreciation of teaching strategies and reflecting on practice. Learning is encouraged by sharing on every meeting with PSTs the learning intentions and the criteria that are likely to result in them achieving the learning intentions successfully. Learning is defined by the context in which it takes place, and within physical education we are concerned with working towards producing the 'physically educated student' who would learn, amongst other things, to develop their competence and confidence to perform a variety of physical activities, to work as individuals, with partners, in groups and

as part of a team, in both competitive and non-competitive situations and gain an appreciation of physical activities and promoted positive attitude towards establishing and sustaining an active and healthy lifestyle.

IMPLICATIONS

The current situation reinforces my reliance on the concept of experiencing my involvement in teacher education as an apprentice (MacPhail 2017). The rapid shift to a reliance on online teaching and learning for ITE has heightened my sensitivity to how best to create a responsive teaching and learning environment, very much revisiting the notion that an element of apprenticeship is present in all that we strive to do. While not everyone perhaps acknowledges and engages with apprenticeship as professional learning and learning about oneself (MacPhail 2017), Covid-19 presents a challenge to me to participate in a wide range of different teaching and learning opportunities that will allow not only me, but also PSTs, to progress within and beyond their workplace (Fuller & Unwin 2003). As a teacher educator, I would suggest that we need to share our apprenticeship experiences with PSTs so that they too can be nurtured through an apprenticeship model if they are to be future contributors and leaders in the virtual teaching and learning space. Indeed, to some extent, the apprenticeship role is likely to be flipped, in that, as a teacher educator, I will be reliant on learning from the PSTs on how they respond to and engage with online teaching and learning.

The premise that teaching is primarily about understanding what helps people learn in different ways is again heightened. There is no denying that the shift, in the first instance, to remote learning has resulted in teacher educators considering the most effective way in which to maximise PST learning without a reliance on the face-to-face interactions central to many ITE programmes. I am suggesting we currently find ourselves

in a remote teaching and learning environment (somewhat of a 'surviving' response to Covid-19) and will be required to quickly shift to more online teaching and learning (and potentially a blended learning environment) as we prepare for the beginning of the next academic year. We will be prompted to revisit crucial questions related to PST learning that we may not have revisited for many years, e.g. How do we most effectively plan for PST learning? How do we check for PST understanding?

Perhaps the biggest challenge, given that my discipline area is physical education, is what does an online presence in our respective discipline areas look like? For example, in physical education, we need to rethink how to engage PSTs in embodied learning in an online environment. How do we re-shift a reliance on 'in' movement to 'through' and 'about' movement (Arnold 1979)? While online physical education school programmes are evident in some countries, the prevalence of online physical education teacher education programmes is less evident. Regardless of the availability of the latter, there is a philosophy within communities of physical education teacher educators as regards the appropriateness of physical education being delivered online when the subject is primarily about developing competence and confidence to perform a variety of physical activities. This is further complicated by the popular notion that such competence and confidence is nurtured through working face-to-face with partners, in groups and as part of a team, in both competitive and non-competitive situations. The feasibility of exploring equivalent experiences in 'chat rooms' afforded by some platforms is a territory new to many teacher educators, regardless of discipline area.

THE REQUIREMENT OF FLEXIBILITY AND CREATIVITY

My goal as a teacher educator is to ensure that PSTs learn to use curricula to

promote student learning. Appreciating that students learn in many different ways and many different contexts, a certain level of flexibility and creativity is required when encouraging PSTs to develop both conceptual tools (that inform and guide PSTs' decisions about teaching and learning, e.g. value orientations) and practical tools (that allow PSTs to accommodate the interests and needs of students while challenging them, e.g. instructional strategies). I am also keen that PSTs appreciate the role that individuals, schools, agencies and society play in influencing school curricula and subsequently the potential teaching and learning experiences that arise from this. That is, PSTs need themselves to be flexible and creative in acknowledging the differing interconnections of context and content in learning to teach. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to convey the generalisable effects of teaching without acknowledging the contextual, local and situated nature of teaching and learning. I would encourage PSTs to examine their own biases and beliefs (which to some extent inform their level of flexibility and creativity as a teacher) and the relationship between these and teaching methods.

IMPLICATIONS

Again, we are prompted to revisit crucial questions related to PST learning. Having invested in ensuring that PSTs learn to use curricula to promote student learning, and reinforcing that students learn in many different ways and in many different contexts, the challenge is now how we ensure this is effectively translated (where relevant) to contexts where the PSTs are not in front of teacher educators on a daily or weekly basis. Considering how best to be creative in addressing this does prompt consideration of the extent to which we reflect on the human element before the technological possibilities or vice versa. For example, social networking (face-to-face and online) as a form of professional support for teachers has gained popularity, acknowledging the

continued prevalence of networked social platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Skype and Twitter. Practice and research have already been captured with respect to the extension of such social networks to PSTs in some ITE programmes.

The crisis heightens the need to acknowledge the contextual, local and situated nature of teaching and learning, least of all the realities for teacher educators and PSTs. The notion of a 'collective action strategy' (MacPhail & Lawson 2020) would encourage teacher educators (who may have already completed initial groundwork) and PSTs (as well as school students) to plan and learn together on how to most effectively address the different teaching and learning contexts in which they may find themselves. This is likely to be further complicated by the uncertainties around schools hosting PST school placements in the future. There is a clear interest in the way critical social factors are likely to be affected by the crisis, including sex/gender, age, social origin, disability, ethnicity and migration. Indeed, there is support for the suggestion that the crisis has exacerbated inequalities related to these social factors, e.g. online learning advantages those who have access to Wi-Fi coverage, an electronic form of communication and a space in which they can engage without disruption. In this instance, Covid-19 has highlighted the already existing, and heightened, 'digital divide' (and its relationship to social class). This further encourages teacher education to consider the centrality of social justice now and in the future.

THE REQUIREMENT OF (INNER) STRENGTH

My inner strength to grow as a teacher is demonstrated through my involvement in having peers and PSTs evaluate my teaching. I am also interested in examining the effectiveness of the programme, particularly with respect to any gap between the programme rhetoric and reality. That is, providing evidence of the way in which learning

opportunities within the programme are transferable to, and continued in, practice in schools. My desire to grow, and subsequently increase my strength as an effective teacher educator, has led to me becoming involved in self-study, where I reflect on questioning what I am doing and examining how this questioning may enhance my own, and PSTs', professional practice. I am happy to publicly share my reflections and would encourage PSTs to do the same, demonstrating an ability to articulate and reason on decisions that one has made.

IMPLICATIONS

Central to many ITE programmes is the premise that programmes ensure that future teachers are competent to meet the challenges they will face. This puts the onus on ITE programmes to make sure that PSTs are exposed to learning opportunities that are transferable to practice in schools. Given the ramifications the crisis has had on ITE institutes, programmes and schools, there is a real challenge for initial teacher educators to ensure that the predominantly digital technology learning experiences they instil in PSTs will be suitable, feasible and meaningful to students in schools. This, one suspects, will entail ITE programmes revisiting the underpinning philosophy of their programmes and considering alternative paradigms of teacher education (Zeichner 1983). In doing so, programmes will identify a specific thread that runs throughout their programme (e.g. social justice) and is aligned to their aspiration that PSTs are prepared to deal with future challenges they will face as a teacher.

The current crisis provides numerous lines of enquiry for examining how the education context has changed our practices as initial teacher educators which, in turn, encourages us to question the extent to which this has enhanced our own, PSTs' and teachers' professional practice. Adopting self-study as an integral part of our own professional practice as we negotiate and navigate the rapidly

changing context (e.g. implications of online teaching, learning and assessment) is one way of alleviating the concern that online teaching is pursued at the expense of research-related activity. Such studies are also a means of educating others about teacher educators' professional practices in dealing with the crisis, as well as advocating for a way in which we can educate each other through a self-study research platform. Indeed, collective self-studies with teacher education colleagues across different departments or research groups (and where possible, teachers) provide an opportunity to work collectively as communities of learners in researching teacher education programme practices and designing more globally integrated teacher education programmes (Apple 2011).

FINAL COMMENTS

I have recently completed a co-edited book (MacPhail & Lawson 2020) that explores 'grand challenges' as catalysts for the collaborative redesign of school physical education and teacher education. While the focus of the book is on the discipline area of physical education, the premise of the argument, that equitable

opportunities and outcomes for all manner of children and youths remain elusive, is a concern for all involved in teaching and teacher education. The Covid-19 pandemic has ensured that we can no longer assume that today's school programmes, teacher education programmes and higher education institutions will be the same tomorrow. Indeed, Covid-19 is a 'grand challenge', with the presumption that Covid-19-related challenges confronting education are manifest in some form in nearly every nation. Indeed, 'Despite our individual circumstances, teacher education programmes have been affected by a global problem which ... ha[s] made inequity in terms of distribution of resources more visible than ever' (Banegas 2020).

Covid-19 is an opportunity for teacher education to gain acknowledgement and recognition for its importance in the sustainability of qualified teachers who are ready to work with young people in preparing them for the realities of lifelong learning in whatever space is deemed safe and appropriate as a consequence of the pandemic. To mobilise teacher

education, we need to rapidly respond to the consequences of Covid-19. Revisiting our respective teacher education philosophies, and considering the extent to which these need to be reconsidered given the likely need to strengthen online learning options in a bid to reimagine teaching and learning for all of our students, is a collective action to achieve a collective impact. We are being afforded the opportunity as teacher educators to consider blended teaching models to maintain 'full student experience'. We also have the responsibility to re-envisage what constitutes a 'full PST experience' not only through engagement in ITE programmes but also through engagement with teachers in schools. In closing, I would like to reiterate that changes we make now in response to the pandemic are not only for the immediate future but for the long-term future of teacher education. It really is timely for us to rethink, reconceptualise and consider alternative approaches to the (uncertain) future of effective teacher education. In doing so, we can inform the necessary teacher educator competencies required to address the characteristics of future teacher education provision. ■

May 2021 Postscript

Just as the reality of the Covid-19 pandemic was reaching Europe, for my guest author contribution I decided to consider the potential impact the pandemic might have on teacher educators and teacher education. As a teacher educator who continues to champion that the central premise to enacting effective initial teacher education resides with teacher educators working as communities of learners, I share two aligned instances that have arisen since May 2020 throughout the pandemic.

I noted that there was already support for the suggestion that the crisis had exacerbated inequalities in society (and specifically the 'digital divide') which encourages teacher education to consider the centrality of social justice now and in the future. The prevalence of this has since resulted in a group of five teacher education colleagues and I meeting every second week to share, discuss and reflect on how best we can enact and support social justice within our two initial teacher education programmes. We had discussed the necessity for such a group

many times before and it appears the injustices heightened by the pandemic provided the impetus for us to finally create this space.

I noted that collective (self) studies with teacher education colleagues would provide an opportunity to work collectively as communities of learners in researching teacher education programme practices that we consider as we deal with the realities of 'doing' teacher education during a pandemic. I have formed a group with three other colleagues to explore teacher educators' realities of digital pedagogies across different teacher education programmes. We facilitate bi-weekly meetings with ten colleagues who have consistently reported pandemic-related issues related to planning, implementation, disengagement, leadership and infrastructure. The palpable discourse around each is explained by colleagues as reflecting the extent to which these issues have always been present, and that the pandemic has heightened the seriousness of each. The group consistently enforce the invaluable

space that has been created for them to share and discuss how these realities do not dissuade them from offering the most effective experience they can for pre-service teachers.

Reflecting on the enthusiasm I shared on the pandemic being an opportunity for us to 'really' re-envisage teacher education in May 2020, that enthusiasm was challenged when it was clear that colleagues in teacher education were dealing with the reality of remote learning, isolation and an increased workload. However, my support for the potential of communities of learners was further heightened throughout the pandemic as a means of facing, and in some instances, combating challenges. This further emphasises the importance of working together as teacher educators for a meaningful, relevant and worthwhile teacher education experience for ourselves as teacher educators and pre-service teachers, "If unity is strength ... then a lack of unity (social fragmentation, isolation, anomie) is conducive to powerlessness" (Locke, 2017, p. 192). ■

REFERENCES

- Apple, M. W. (2011) 'Global crises, social justice, and teacher education'. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 62(2), 222–34.
- Arnold, P. J. (1979) *Meaning in movement, sport and physical education*. London: Heinemann.
- Baker, K. (2020) 'Covid-19 is changing education for the better'. *Financial Times* (18 May) <https://www.ft.com/content/51496fde-98e7-11ea-871b-edeb99a20c6e>
- Banegas, D. L. (2020) 'Online teacher education in times of Covid-19'. *British Educational Research Association*. Online: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/online-teacher-education-in-times-of-covid-19>
- Department for Education (DfE) (2020) 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): Initial teacher training (ITT)'.
- Fuller, A. & Unwin, L. (2003) 'Fostering workplace learning: looking through the lens of apprenticeship'. *European Educational Research Journal*, 2(1), 41–55.
- Hargreaves, A. & Fullan, M. (2015) *Professional capital: transforming teaching in every school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Locke T (2017) 'Community partnerships creating spaces for democratising enterprise'. In: McNae, R. and Cowie, B. (eds) *Realising Innovative Partnerships in Educational Research*. (pp. 191-196) Rotterdam: Sense.
- MacPhail, A. (2017) "'Physical education and sport pedagogy" and the three "A"s: apprenticeship, academia and administration'. *Sport, Education and Society*, 22(5), 669–83.
- MacPhail, A. & Lawson, H. (eds.) (2020) *School physical education and teacher education: collaborative redesign for the 21st century*. London: Routledge.
- Moorhouse, B. L. (2020) 'Adaptations to a face-to-face initial teacher education course "forced" online due to the COVID-19 pandemic'. *Journal of Education for Teaching*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1755205>
- Welsh Government (2020) 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): Temporary guidance for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) partnerships'. gov.wales/coronavirus-covid-19-temporary-guidance
- Zeichner, K. M. (1983) 'Alternative paradigms of teacher education'. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 34(3), 3–9.