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Published online: 23 May 2021.

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Preservice teachers' experiences of pandemic related school closures: anti-structure, liminality and communitas

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Initial Teacher Education (ITE) can be viewed as a formative space in professional teacher identity development. Practice plays a key role in shaping teacher identity, providing a window into the reality of school life, as well as nurturing professional autonomy. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, school life shifted suddenly and unrecognisably in March 2020. This paper focuses on the experiences of preservice teachers on an ITE programme (post-primary) in one Irish University during the period of sudden school closures. The data show the transition to be problematic, underscored by a chaotic pivot to virtual communication and a destabilising of the structures that normally provide consistency. Yet it also presented opportunities and responsibilities. We explore Victor Turner's work to consider school placement as an 'in between' space for preservice teachers and to examine the extent to which sudden school closures heightened this sense of 'in betweenness'. We argue that the pandemic and its lifting out of pervasive and predictable social structures, gave rise to a period of 'anti-structure'. We view school closures as an example of anti-structure, which challenged preservice teachers' identity formation yet also gave rise to 'communitas' through experimentation with different modes of being and doing.

Keywords: Covid-19; Preservice Teachers; Anti-structure; Liminality; Communitas

Research background and rationale

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) has been described as a 'rite of passage' (Cook-Sather 2006; McCaw 2020) that marks a shift in status of individuals from student to teacher. During ITE preservice teachers' professional identity is shaped by a myriad of experiences that impact their short and long term engagement in the practice of teaching (Murray et al. 2020). Practice is central to ITE and the integrity of ITE programmes depends on graduates ability to effectively demonstrate classroom readiness, to lead student learning and to respond to realities (Moyo 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic requires teacher educators to consider how effectively ITE programmes prepare teachers for the 'dynamic and challenging new society which is emerging' (Kalloo,

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Mitchell, and Kamalodeen 2020, 8). An increasing volume of literature calls for the immediate need to discuss how preservice teachers responded to pandemic related school closures and for an examination of the indelible impact school closures had on preservice teachers' professional identity formation. It is likely the pandemic has affected two aspects of preservice teachers' development; social development due to physical detachment from colleagues and the wider school community and personal development because of the complexity of managing feelings associated with becoming a teacher in such unprecedented times (Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison 2020). Dvir and Schatz-Oppenheimer (2020) draw on Vonk's (1995) assertion that the challenges facing novice teachers' professional development can be divided into personal-emotional, pedagogical-didactic and ecological-systemic-organisational domains but they add 'technological knowledge' as a fourth professional path difficulty which was heightened by technological-pedagogical challenges during school closures. As well as grappling with the technology, they suggest that the blurring of personal and professional boundaries, being at home with families, while simultaneously engaging with learners on meeting platforms, potentially caused an emotional overload amongst novice teachers (ibid). Gauging preservice teachers' socio-emotional capacity to respond to volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), particularly when faced with a 'black swan' such as Covid-19, warrants immediate investigation and prioritisation (Hadar 2020).

This paper speaks to the call for enhanced understanding of preservice teachers' response to realities by exploring how preservice teachers on a postgraduate ITE programme in one Irish University transitioned from face-to-face teaching and learning to an online environment. Drawing on Turner's concepts of anti-structure, liminality and communitas, this study sought to understand how preservice teachers' sense of their professional identity evolved amid a period of unprecedented and prolonged school closures.

Methodology and theoretical perspective

This paper draws on empirical data that emerged as part of a larger study of an ITE postgraduate programme. The research was conducted by the authors who are teacher educators and course leaders of the programme. Preservice teachers from this programme were invited to participate in surveys and/or focus groups to discuss their views on ITE, their placement in Irish post-primary schools and career choice. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the university research ethics committee prior to the commencement of the research. The findings examined in this paper are drawn from 49 survey responses and 3 focus group interviews undertaken in June 2020. Participation in the research was voluntary. Participants were informed of what participation would involve and made aware that their participation in the research was entirely voluntary and that no negative consequences would arise from non-participation or withdrawal. Given that the authors were course leaders it was important that participants were assured that participation in the research study would in no way affect their assessment or their progression on the programme. Surveys were anonymous and focus group participants were assured that all identity markers would be removed and the data would be anonymised. The research is inductive in nature framed around broad research questions that sought to

capture the participants' experiences of school placement. Data analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. This involved reading the dataset multiple times before coding the data. A list of initial codes emerged from this process and were grouped into emerging themes. We use the concepts of anti-structure, liminality and communitas to provide a framework for understanding these themes. The discussion begins by delving into the meaning of liminal space.

Derived from the Latin *limen* meaning 'threshold', the term liminal was originally used in anthropology by van Gennep (1909) to describe the middle or transition phase of rites of passage rituals that marked a shift in social status of an individual or social group. Turner (1969, 1974) adapted the term liminal to describe periods of transition and states of in-betweenness that involve a change in power structures or hierarchy where participants are outside their 'everyday structural positions' (1974, 24) as they hover on the threshold between one state or space and another. For Turner liminality refers simultaneously to 'the place within which that transition takes place, and the state of being experienced by the person making the transition' (Cook-Sather 2006, 110). The idea of preservice teachers as liminal beings on the threshold of professional status has been taken up by a number of authors (White 1989; Eisenhart, Behm, and Romagnano 1991; Head 1992; McNamara et al. 2002; Cook-Sather 2006; Pierce 2007; Cook-Sather and Baker-Doyle 2017; McCaw 2020). In an Irish context, Hall et al. (2012) use the term 'peripherality' to describe preservice teachers' experiences of school placement. They argue that for preservice teachers, participation in teaching is limited or 'less than full'. However, they also view peripherality as enabling or legitimate on the journey towards central participation in teaching. We describe the school placement element of ITE as peripheral or liminal – a site of embodied transition for preservice teachers. In this space, preservice teachers undergo a period of transformation and identity formation as they navigate between the dual identities of student and teacher in what McCaw (2020, 2) describes as 'a delicate dance'. They are what Turner (1969, 95) calls 'liminal entities' – 'neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial'.

The Covid-19 pandemic led to heightened liminality for preservice teachers and for society at large. For Turner, liminality is a product of what he terms 'anti-structure', a social condition that is 'disruptive, unstructured, frustrating, ambiguous, fluid and unsettling' (Bamber, Allen-Collinson, and McCormack 2017, 70). Anti-structure symbolises a temporal detachment from normative social systems, which for Turner (1974), is both destabilising and liberating. This could certainly be said of school closures and the largely uncharted move to online teaching and learning. The shutdown presented unprecedented challenges for schools and teachers as they struggled week to week to cope with a rapidly changing situation (Mohan et al. 2020). Across the globe policy makers decided upon trade-offs between maintaining school closures for the betterment of public health and managing the adverse impact of closures on students' safety, well-being and learning (Reimers and Schleicher 2020). Preservice teachers on school placement were not shielded from this liminal situation and we suggest that many of them were at the coalface of it. Normal structures provide consistency, yet for Turner (1974), they are also limiting and restrictive. Similarly, Hall et al. (2012, 105) suggest that student teachers are constrained by structure, 'such that what is doable, sayable and thinkable are mediated by the social order'. Kitching et al. (2015) also highlight how the very embodied habits of

student teachers are scrutinised and constrained by the structuring codes of professional bodies. Structures, therefore, while providing consistency and predictability can also erode responsiveness and responsibility and instead guide preservice teachers towards conformity to school conventions (O'Grady, Guilfoyle, and McGarr 2018). It is against the backdrop of the restrictive nature of structure that Turner identifies the creative potential of anti-structure where liminality presents ambiguity but also has radical and transformative potential (Pöyhönen 2018). Here social arrangements can be suspended (Bamber, Allen-Collinson, and McCormack 2017) and the status quo transcended allowing new allegiances and capacities to emerge. This, less explored, aspect of Turner's anti-structure is called 'communitas' (Turner 1969).

Communitas provides a framework through which the positive experiences, opportunities and solidarity that arise from anti-structure can be understood. Edith Turner (2012) affirms that spontaneous communitas often arises in times of stress and disasters, when people come together for a common purpose free of boundaries and structures. The common quest to provide a meaningful educational experience for students during school closures undoubtedly sparked creativity, community and commonality. In spite of notable divergence in school responses in Ireland, in general 'the lockdown period was a time of massive creativity and innovation in schools' (Mohan et al. 2020, 59). In the face of a global pandemic, students, teachers, school managers and policy makers were, in many respects united by their vulnerability, their 'in this togetherness' providing the perfect conditions for the emergence of communitas. Situations underpinned by a higher purpose lead to vital and dynamic learning and become a source of growth and transformation (Buechner, Drikx, and Konvisser 2020). Opening up to new opportunities and ways of being is at the core of communitas and this has long ensured human survival and thriving (Buechner, Drikx, and Konvisser 2020).

Findings and results

The findings highlight how the move to distance learning impacted these preservice teachers' experiences of school placement and their formation of teacher identities. The findings demonstrate how school closures shifted preservice teachers' responsibilities and tested relationships of trust but also created new meaningful connections. In the data presented here, 'S' indicates a survey response, while 'FG' indicates a focus group response.

Roles and responsibilities

Preservice teachers participating in this study undertake year long placements in host schools. This affords them the opportunity to become immersed in the school community and plays a key role in teacher identity formation. Over the course of the academic year, preservice teachers experience a growth in professional autonomy and agency as they take on various roles and responsibilities. For some participants however, school closures marked the removal of all responsibility as schools physically shut down and mentor teachers took charge of online learning. Others continued to engage with their classes but experienced a diminishment of responsibilities as one participant commented – 'Any work I wanted them to complete had to be sent through my co-operating teacher' (S). Another participant suggested that her status as a preservice teacher led to feelings of disempowerment and uncertainty:

> I found it really weird, it was really strange. I think if I was in a school where I wasn't on placement that I was just a member of staff, I would have maybe taken the initiative a little bit more, but I felt I had to do what I was told. (S)

The removal or diminishment of responsibility amongst some, was in contrast with the increased responsibility experienced by others, who continued to teach in the virtual environment while managing multiple unfolding obligations. Some discussed the challenges of teaching online, while homeschooling their own young children (S). One participant detailed the stresses of other commitments:

> I was working in a high stress medical environment during a pandemic, whilst also trying to give students work, correct it and attend online college lectures. This was incredibly stressful. (S)

Preservice teachers clearly experienced changes to their previously held roles and were required to adjust to evolving responsibilities arising from the impact of the pandemic on their personal and professional lives.

Transition and trust

Responding to changing roles and responsibilities was further complicated by the lack of human contact with students and school support networks. Being suddenly and unexpectedly cut off from the familiar structures, supports and symbols of school life left some participants feeling robbed of the 'normal' school placement experience and of the rituals that normally punctuate it such as 'sports days, school musicals and end of year events'(S). Many respondents spoke of missing their students and described how transitioning to the virtual space left them yearning for the physical school environment (S). Some saw the online environment as detached, giving rise to a sense of isolation and disconnection, as captured in the comments of the following three participants:

> I do think the online teaching was very isolating and I really missed the students and staff, especially my support network. (S)

> It was not as easy to ask people for help as they were not physically there. (S)

> I did learn a lot from teaching online but it doesn't replace the real classroom experience. I missed the human interaction and classroom environment that is such a key element in learning. (S)

Others struggled as they felt inadequately prepared to use the required technology:

> I was unfamiliar with the technology used or what was available to us. I had no example. I did not know what was expected of me. (S)

Preservice teachers' experiences of the transition to an online learning environment often depended on the extent to which schools were already established as IT schools. For example, some were in ipad schools while others were in schools described as 'frantically scrambling to set up email addresses for students the day before schools closed'. (FG)

There was uncertainty around students' ability to access or engage with online learning. Preservice teachers reported that while some students did not have devices/Internet connectivity, others did, but chose not to attend live lessons or engage with asynchronous learning. Even in instances where students logged in to lessons, preservice teachers found it difficult to determine the level of engagement or indeed presence. The experience of teaching to 'cameras switched off' and 'blank screens' was described as disconcerting by many participants, as they were unable to read facial cues and reactions (S). Low or indiscernible student engagement caused participants to question their professional identity. One participant commented that 'low levels of engagement made me feel very disparaged as a trainee teacher' (S). Issues of trust also arose as students tested the boundaries of a new learning environment. For example, one preservice teacher (FG) shared her experience of asking students to submit a recording of themselves playing the tin whistle. One student submitted a recording taken from YouTube and presented it as their own work. The preservice teacher indicated that this would not have been possible in school and that this incident indicated that students felt removed from the reality of the school environment and at liberty to behave in ways they would not conceive of in a face to face context.

Care and connection

Not all preservice teachers' found the 'new normal' that arose from school closures unsettling or disconcerting and even those who did recognised the affirmative aspects of a nebulous situation. Participants acknowledged that despite uncertainty, they managed to find stability by 'settling into a routine' and 'finding an appropriate balance' (S). They also observed students' need for routine and appropriate balance to preserve and promote wellbeing. One participant commented that:

> It was important to keep stress levels down as some students get into unhealthy work patterns - emailing at 2am for example. I tried to encourage them to mind themselves and get out in the garden when possible and to not stress about the work assigned. (S)

This participant highlights the caring and emotional labour undertaken by preservice teachers during school closures. Preservice teachers' and students' shared experience of the 'new unfamiliar' strengthened empathy and awakened a sense of affinity. One participated noted:

> After Easter it was challenging to stay motivated and this made me really empathise with the students as it must have been even harder for them to be motivated to do the work. (S)

Preservice teachers' relationships with students and colleagues shifted during school closures and alternative ways of being and doing emerged. Some participants practiced new ways of connecting with students living in direct provision and disadvantaged settings. They worked with Home School Community Liaison Officers and colleagues from Special Educational Needs departments to organise a 'prepare, print, drop and collect' system that allowed students in these settings to receive and return course work (FG). Positive feedback from students broughted renewed energy and dynamism. One preservice teacher stated:

> I experimented with different ways of sending work and got some lovely feedback from students which motivated me to try new things. (FG)

Experimenting with new approaches was viewed as a positive aspect of distance learning and a number of preservice teachers indicated they would continue with some practices on returning to face to face learning. One participant (FG) cited video demonstrations of the teacher solving a mathematics problem as an effective resource that she had developed as part of her delivery of asynchronous lessons and which she believed would improve her practice and enhance her students' learning in the future. She observed that this approach was well received by students who reported that they found it easier to complete their homework as they could watch the video back and then try it out themselves. These findings indicate preservice teachers' transforming professional identities as they grew in confidence in their pedagogical beliefs and skills and in their willingness to make creative and autonomous decisions.

Discussion and conclusion

We view school placement as a liminal space where preservice teachers experience a state of being 'betwixt and between' roles; as they navigate the identity challenge of being no longer students and not yet teachers. This process occurs in the school setting, a site that is itself at once familiar and unfamiliar. In Spring 2020, preservice teachers' identity formation was lifted out of the physical school setting; lifted out of a pervasive and predictable structure. We conceive of this as 'anti-structure' – a social condition that emerges in liminal times where 'assumptions about the world are challenged' (Ennis and Tonkin 2018, 344). School closures resulted in some preservice teachers being stripped of their teacher identity, with classes they had taught for the previous six months being fully or partially removed from them, clearly indicating their 'not yet' status. While some were left to grapple with the sudden removal of responsibility, others were overwhelmed with responsibility and alone in dealing with it. Feelings of isolation and detachment experienced by participants as a result of the removal of human contact and support plunged participants into a state of heightened liminality. We contend that preservice teachers' socio-emotional reserves were challenged by the disembedding of trust – in their students, in school structures and in the wider social order. Thus, in some respects, distance learning was disconcerting and disempowering. In other respects it provided a space for possibilities, a site to embrace increased responsibility and a situation that allowed for 'new ways of being and doing' (Ennis and Tonkin 2018, 344). Many preservice teachers displayed socio-emotional readiness in their empathetic responses to students' needs. The liminal space inspired creativity as they began to see emerging possibilities in their new world reality and used it as 'a fertile environment for the enactment of pastoral care' (Lorenzi and White 2019, 195). It is clear that some preservice teachers first tolerated liminality but later came to embrace it as a way of being (Buechner, Drikx, and Konvisser 2020). They moved from focusing on the uncertainty and intolerability of their situation to an 'opening up' and 'coming together' to fully witness the individual possibilities and collective opportunities arising from school closures. This is what Turner identifies as communitas – the creative potential of anti-structure where liminality represents ambiguity but also ingenuity. Therefore, we suggest that while school closures challenged preservice teachers' identity formation, it also created moments of communitas that allowed them to experiment with professional modes of being and prompted the

development of thoughts, actions and practices that made identity transformation and agency possible.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought and obtained for this study. All participants were furnished with Plain Language Statements detailing what involvement in the study entailed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. This study was deemed 'low risk' as it involved consenting non-vulnerable adults who voluntarily participated in this research and were free to withdraw at any stage.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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