

Policing Risky Bodies: The Embodied Work and Experiences of Preservice Teachers During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Research Aim

To capture the impact of pandemic related public health restrictions on preservice teachers' experiences of teaching and learning when schools reopened after prolonged periods of closure, with a particular emphasis on their embodied work and experiences.



1

Data Collection

Surveys and/or Focus Groups
June 2019 and May 2022

2

Participants

246 survey responses
11 focus group interviews

3

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006)
thematic analysis

The Body: The Absent Presence in Education

'It is difficult to think about education and teaching without an image coming to mind, usually of a classroom in which children sit at a desk and a teacher stands in front of them, or at least nearby. Although these standing and sitting embodied figures appear to be self-evident, educational theory and research has paid little attention to the complex combination of embodied practices which constitutes education' (Estola and Elbaz-Luwish, 2003: 697)

'For all the talk of 'enfleshment' or ' postmodern pedagogies of the body', it's rare to find discussions of what concepts of the body actually do within the classroom' (Probyn, 2004: 33)

'The power of our bodies to form and inform self and other(s) continues to be marginalized, perhaps feared.....Our preoccupation with the disconnected has robbed education as bodily, participatory engagement' (Macintyre Latta and Buck, 2021: 324)

The Body: The Absent Absence in Pandemic Times

Bodies have been claimed to be an absent presence in education and bodily touch described as risky. 'However, we have now seen how bodies have become an absent absence, and touch forbidden and unthinkable in...pandemic times' (Varea and González-Calvo, 2020: 831)



Public Health Advice

Wash your hands

Practice good cough & sneeze etiquette

Stay 2m away from others

Avoid crowds

Know the symptoms



It is a matter of **personal responsibility** that we **limit** our social interactions, continue to be **constantly aware of risks, avoid complacency, and take care** when meeting people.



Face-coverings will be mandatory on public transport, and should also be worn in shops and any indoor places where social distancing is difficult.



Reopening businesses must take necessary measures to keep their customers safe.

Businesses must adhere strictly to the Return to Work Safely Protocol.

Continue to work from home as much as possible.

Restricted movement and social distancing in schools and classrooms, are at odds with a growing pedagogical emphasis on peer collaboration and active learning. In initial teacher education programmes, preservice teachers learn that pedagogical good practice focuses on discovery, enquiry and mobility. However, during this period, these approaches were considerably diluted by Covid modified practices that had developed as a result of public health measures, many of which were underscored by caution, suspicion, restriction and frustration.

*Some of the classrooms I was in had these huge Perspex screens up and it is scary to see that. So I felt like the **lack of spontaneity** was really tricky. There was just no room really for spontaneity... there are certain policies and procedures you have to follow. I think for me as well it is the lack of spontaneity was hard and **having to clean everything** before end of the class. They would have to spray again and again and clean them down with loo roll. And even that, that is taking time off your class and not everybody is willing to what I asked them to.*

*This meant that classroom **games and activities were limited**, or individualised. This made some classes, where **energy** needed to be **raised or burnt off**, quite difficult as they would have benefitted from an element of movement. I incorporated these as soon as I could.*

*Students who find it hard to sit still for a full hour had **no choice but to stay at their desks**.*

*I was in an all-boys school and I am sure it is the same across the board, I got the sense that they just **felt extremely trapped** and they needed to just **let out some energy**. And even one day they were coming up for an **air break** and I just made them run a lap of the field and I was timing them and they did that for just ten minutes and they came back in and they were like a different group. I think that they really felt that because they had no training, they had no football, they had no days, no activities going on at school. It was.... **military just go to class, clean your desk, clean your desk again, go to another class, wear a mask, keep your distance**. It was every day the same thing going on and I think that they are teenagers, they are doing it but in their minds they are like, oh is it really a big deal, does it really matter? And at the end there was a little bit of 'oh do I really have to clean this desk again?'*

In these circumstances, 'the risky mobile body' became apparent (Holwitt, 2021) and every encounter became a potential threat. An acute awareness of the ability of viruses to travel within and through other beings unsettled a fundamental assumption about bodies as individuated and identity bound that is so characteristic of the modern era (Holwitt, 2021). We explore the experiences of preservice teachers in policing risky bodies and the power struggles and frustrations this gave rise to, particularly when there appeared to be a lack of logic and consistency in how rules were applied.

*I think part of them thought it **slightly contradictory** because in **class they were one metre apart and in the yard it was a free for all**, you had your mask off eating your lunch, you are not keeping your one metre. Then they would come inside going, we were just outside with this group of people as well. So you kind of always have to be dealing with those questions. And I know you have to pick your battles but when John is sitting down the back of the class and you are like, '**John put your mask on, John put your mask on, John put your mask on**'. They are also getting very **frustrated** as well because they are not used to it and it is **uncomfortable** and there was a lack of students being students, they couldn't whisper to each other, you know, sometimes they are whispering but you couldn't do that because you would nearly have to shout at the person next to you to have that conversation. So I think they did lose a bit of that as well, **they were very quiet but it was a negative quiet. I know you want a quiet class but this was like you were trying to wake the dead sometimes.***

*Students were very **frustrated** how some of the **rules didn't make sense** so masks on so long as you were in class, they would look outside, see a friend with the mask off, why don't they have it on? Or even just things like the pods and who they were allowed to interact with but when they leave school they are all together. It led to a lot of frustrations.*

The physical body became a symbol of risk, contamination and disease during the pandemic (Rodrigues, Body and Carel, 2023). Children's bodies and their contribution to the spread of virus emerged as a particular topic of debate however, since infected children were thought to have a higher viral burden than adults (Albers, 2023). In some schools, the threat of 'risky bodies', was used to intentionally blur the lines between health/safety and discipline.

*In my school I would sort of feel that Covid and masks have almost been used as **an excuse to crack down on discipline**, if that makes sense. In a school that was already quite discipline obsessed already and a principal who is very much, it is my way or the highway rules wise, I think definitely Covid has been used and the mask wearing has been used and the rules about not being able to mix has definitely been... **They have overstepped the mark in a lot of areas in terms of using it to control students and using it as a means of making sure that the behaviour is the way the school wants it and making sure that the clothes are the way that we want it.** That almost any sense of that student voice or that individuality has really been sort of stamped out this year, from my experience. I am sure that is not everywhere, but my school wouldn't be looking at restorative approaches at all. We are still the, yank the kid out and scream at him until he gives in, kind of school. But that definitely I think has got worse with Covid.*

*It is a **health and safety issue** and it is an important issue but it is **being treated like a behaviour issue**...We want to use restorative approaches but there are still some teachers who are adamant about pulling up kids on the most ridiculous things or even escalating a situation instead of just addressing a behaviour and just changing that. I think particularly with all the mask stuff, it is a health and safety thing but it is being treated as 'you have to look out for that, you have to stop that'. **The kid went to talk to a friend at the end of the day, that was their crime.***

Caught in the midst of this adherence and defiance, the preservice teachers who participated in this study described discomfort around taking on 'sergeant major' roles, particularly when this did not align with their intuitive style, professional identity or embodied values.

*I felt like sergeant major with the public health guidelines. There were classes where I was shouting at them to keep the masks on where there was just complete breakdown. And when there is a breakdown in class I found this year the **boys** would pull down their masks to throw at their friend on the other side of the room. It was ridiculous, even for 1st years. And I had to bring in rules where if you were pulling down your masks and doing this I'd give you extra homework or it would be an automatic lunch time detention. **Just going softly, softly and you know better than that, stop that, just didn't work.** You had to bring in this tangible threat really just to hammer it home. It would probably be different with girls I feel but with boys you had to keep it pretty clear and simple and no messing about it. **I wouldn't normally be like that but with the public health guidelines you just had to be so strict.***

*One thing as teachers we found incredibly frustrating this year was like the principal banned football and basketball because of them all touching the balls so it meant you had all these **teenage lads, particularly, who want to go outside run around, let off steam**, who weren't allowed to do anything. They were allowed to walk around the field, that was all they were allowed to do. And I think it created this situation where, particularly with the lads I noticed more than anything, if you teach them after lunch **they are wound up ready to explode.** And then they come in and they are having to sit regimentally in desks, there is no group work, you are not allowed to go anywhere near them. **So it kind of reinforced this whole thing of I am a big powerful teacher, you much sit and shut up.** And it is that thing of them not being able to let off steam, you **not being able to forge these relationships that would calm them down.** You still are able to but it is **not the same as if you were able to walk around the classroom freely and just chat to them and just find out how their days are. It is just that side has been really difficult.***

Drawing on embodied pedagogy as 'pedagogy as relational' (Dixon and Senior, 2011), we highlight the physical, mental and emotional work of relational bodies during the Covid-19 pandemic, and in doing so affirm teaching and learning as an experience located within and between lived bodies and embodied subjectivities.

*Even the interaction with the students, **if you were trying to help someone you are conscious of leaning in over them. Some were very conscious of you as well so it just felt weird.***

***I thought that I was mammy**, mammy just reminding you to pull up your masks, sanitise as you come in, wipe your desks, take your homework out.*

More tired voice from shouting daily.

*I found in the beginning it was **very hard... to project your voice through and I would find by lunchtime or break time my voice would be gone.***

*Keeping the **windows open all through winter was tough going.** Both students and teachers were **completely frozen** and had to wear our hats, coats and gloves all day. They were not ideal working conditions.*

Closing Comments

The reopening of schools was contingent on the implementation of a raft of measures outlined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to curtail the spread of the coronavirus and save lives. Measures such as mask wearing, physical distancing, avoiding crowds, cleaning hands, sanitising surfaces and keeping indoor spaces well-ventilated had already impacted every facet of life, and their presence in schools undoubtedly transformed the school environment for all members of the school community. This research examines the impact of Covid-19 public health restrictions on preservice teachers' experiences of school placement and their daily interactions with students. As well as navigating the apprenticeship of 'teacher', they had the additional responsibility of implementing public health restrictions and policing their own bodies and those of others. New rituals, such as sanitising hands and surfaces disrupted a 'falling into trust' (Macintyre Latta and Buck, 2021) and taken for granted, classroom habits, highlighting Shilling's (2008) description of the delicate relationship between embodied people and their material surroundings and how this relationship is continually impacted by changes in circumstances.



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