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“Masks Up, Desks Apart!”:

Distance and Disjuncture in COVID-19 Restricted Classrooms

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Aim of Study

To investigate the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on preservice teachers' experience of school placement and their daily interactions with students.

Core Questions:

1. How did pandemic related public health restrictions impact on preservice teachers' experience of school placement?
2. How did restrictions affect their interaction with students?



Research Background and Rationale

- 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)
- This research explored how Covid-19 public health restrictions impacted preservice teachers experience of school placement on a postgraduate ITE programme in DCU.
- This paper draws on Jarvis' (2006) concept of 'disjuncture', a state which emerges due to uncertainty and questioning brought about by unanticipated change. Jarvis' framework - 'The Transformation of the Person through Learning' (2006) - provides a lens for understanding how preservice teachers and students responded to the disjuncture associated with COVID-19 public health restrictions in the classroom. We argue that disjuncture initiates new learning, which is illustrated by participants in this research through modified pedagogies and emergent classroom behaviours.



1

Data Collection

Surveys and/or Focus Groups
June 2021 and May 2022

2

Participants

107 survey responses
5 focus group interviews
25% Response Rate

3

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006)
thematic analysis

Encountering Disjuncture

The data reveal that preservice teachers experienced disjuncture on a range of levels - pedagogical, social and personal.

- Physical restrictions in the classroom impacted the type of teaching and learning strategies preservice teachers were able to implement.
- Particular difficulty emerged in relation to group work, active methods, the distribution of materials and catering for students in satellite classes.
- Caused participants to question their professional identity.
- Caused participants to engage in 'sense making' as they tried to understand, make sense of and resolve these new situations.



Key Findings: Communication and Relationships

Mask wearing



A barrier to communication

- *Difficulty hearing and being heard by students. Harder to read expressions.*
- *I found that some students, particularly junior students, were very soft spoken and masks made it **difficult to hear them.***
- *Found it really **difficult to project my voice** through the masks and it was difficult to hear the students answers through them.. Also not being able to see a student or staff member smiling definitely affected morale.*

Hindered the development of classroom relationships

- *It also made it a little **harder to build a relationship with the students** as we could only see each other's eyes. Facial expressions often alert a teacher of a students is confused etc, so this was also hindered by mask wearing.*
- *It was harder to learn students names as it was more **difficult to recognise students** with face masks, this **hindered building relationships** with students.*

A welcome shield

- *I feel safer wearing a mask*
- *I somewhat liked wearing a mask as I felt it acted as a barrier, students could not see your facial expression.*

Key Findings: Teaching and Learning

Mask wearing



Disorienting

- *Not knowing who is talking because you can't see their mouths move.*
- *Made teaching much more of an effort and created a barrier between us*

Music and Languages particularly challenging

- *We couldn't sing in class which was very difficult when teaching music and choir modules.*
- *Teaching music was greatly affected as we weren't allowed to sing or play certain instruments. I had to teach 3 months of a well-being/choir class without singing.*
- *Teaching languages wearing masks was quite a challenge as they couldn't see my lips and I struggled to understand them at times. It was very difficult, esp. for 1st years who picked up a new language and were reliant on seeing my lips/mouth moving.*

Key Findings: Communication and Relationships

Physical-distancing



Hindered relationship building

- Again, felt like a barrier to getting to know students and staff
- Students experience a sense of disconnect have to sit at single desks making it difficult to bond with classmates particularly upon entry into 1st year

Concern for impact on student development and wellbeing

- *Affected social skills. Less group work activities and therefore students did a lot of individual work and did not benefit from the challenges of group work and working and communicating with others*
- *This impacted my ability to work 1:1 with students who need extra support as I could not work closely with them or collect their work to correct it and make notes for them.*
- *Distancing lead to isolation for some or less closer relationships, especially for those who just started post-primary school*
- *Segregating the students on yard and not being allowed to mix affected the students, especially the first years making the transition from Primary level.*
- *Not being able to pick up copies and write feedback. Manly relied on verbal or online comments.*
- *I think that staggered breaks were not helpful for the students' development. Students should be among different age groups (maturity)*

Key Findings: Teaching and Learning

Physical-distancing



Limited range of methods and activities

- *This really impacted my teaching methodologies. Group work wasn't allowed and it was much more difficult to employ active learning strategies.*
- *Prevented one-to-one learning, and group activities. Work became more individual, preventing peer-to-peer knowledge share.*
- *It really limited the type of activities and inhibited peer learning and made the lessons quite monotone as it was difficult to change up exercises as the options were limited.*

A sense of loss

- *All classroom group work and close pair work was removed. Experiments in the lab were reduced. After school activities which hugely help with relationships removed*

Something gained

- *Went outside with students which was a great experience to try to incorporate group work in the lessons and a bit of movement.*



Disjuncture beyond the Classroom

Physical, social and emotional challenges experienced on placement:

A sense of isolation and disconnection

- *Getting to know colleagues was difficult as the PME's had their own staffroom ... I rarely got to see my cooperating teachers and it really impaired my insight as to what it's like to be part of the school staff.*
- *Constant student absences due to isolating*

Lack of social interaction

- *Not being able to socialise after work with colleagues. Very stressing.*

Stressful environment

- *Overall increase in stress for some, due to risk for those at home, and due to a plethora of rules regarding sanitising, sharing objects*
- *Substitution hours and pressure massively increased !*

Physical environment

- *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.*
- *Overflow areas were created and students had to be sent out of the class if there was not enough seats in the room. One of my placement rooms was in a make shift room that used to be a corridor where the lockers were.*

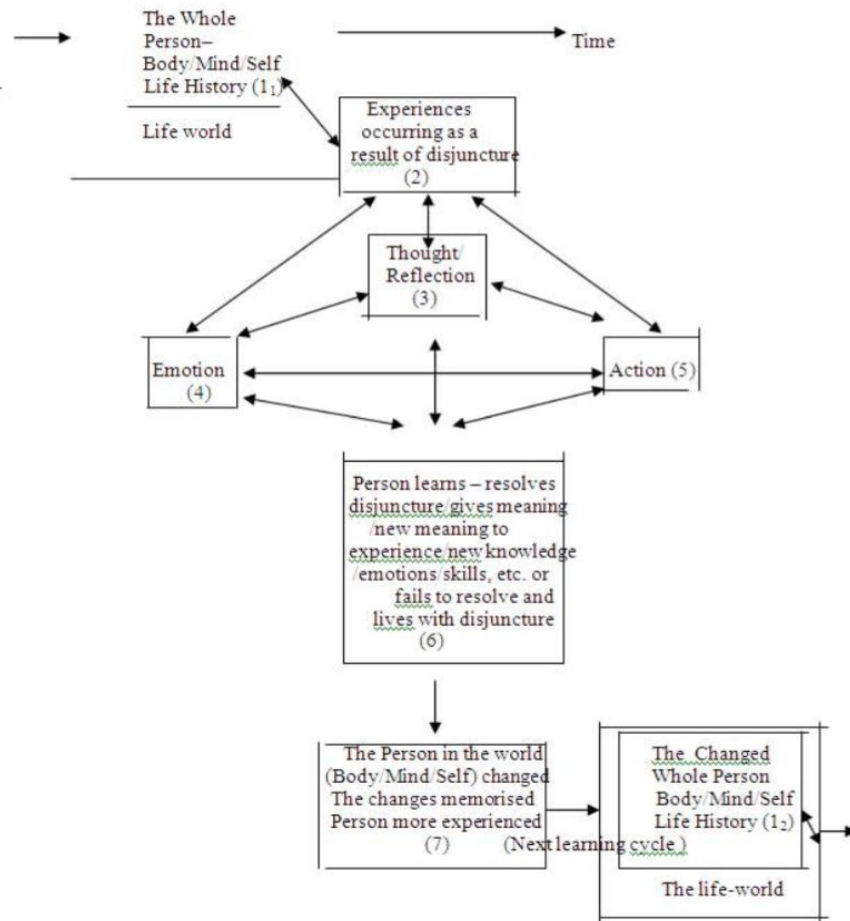



Figure 3: The Transformation of the Person through Learning



‘Problem-solving...occurs when we try to respond to disjuncture by seeking to find out the causes of a phenomenon or experience that we do not understand. It can result in self-directed learning but is also typifies Schön’s (1983) *reflective practitioner*.’ (Jarvis, 2012: 15)

‘Although the current pandemic (as disjuncture) may potentially initiate major learning processes in the human collective, we should remember that disjuncture is often theorised within neutral, or even positive, contexts. In a context of fear, however, learning may result in a narrowing of mindsets and a rejection of collective efforts and solidarity between generations. In terms of the types of learning triggered by the current pandemic (as disjuncture), one problem is non-reflective learning, which primarily occurs on a behavioural level. We need to recognise this and engage in reflective learning if we are to make the choices that will lead to a society that is worth living in for all generations. Our goal must be to learn to be a person in a post-pandemic society.’ (Bjursell, 2020: 673)



Conclusion

- While the preservice teachers maintained a strong commitment to continuing their professional journey, learning to be a teacher in COVID-19 restricted school environments undoubtedly posed unprecedented moments of disjuncture in shaping that learning journey.



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