

BERA Conference
14 September 2021

From Classroom to Zoom Room:

Placement Related Challenges and
Opportunities for Preservice Teachers

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Aim of Study

To gather experiences of preservice teachers during the period of sudden school closures

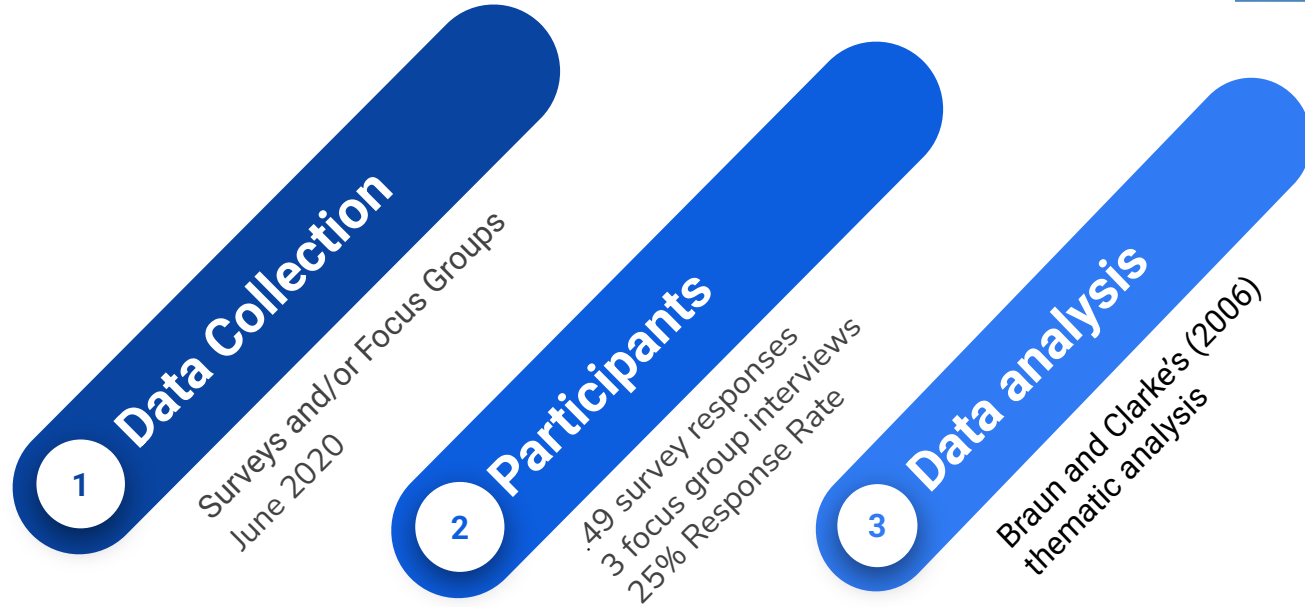
Core Questions:

1. How did preservice teachers respond to pandemic related school closures?
2. How did school closures impact preservice teachers' professional identity formation?



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 preservice teachers on a postgraduate ITE programme in DCU transitioned from on site school placement to online school placement.
- 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.





Key Findings: Roles and Responsibilities

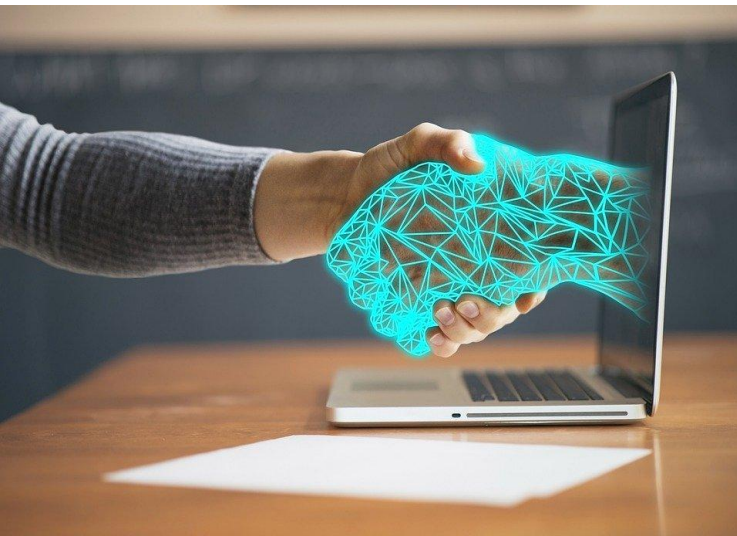
- For some participants school closures marked the removal of all responsibility as mentor teachers took charge of online learning.
- Others experienced a diminishment of responsibilities
 - *'Any work I wanted them to complete had to be sent through my cooperating teacher' (S).*
- Status as a preservice 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)*
- Increased responsibility experienced by others managing multiple unfolding obligations:
 - Teaching online (S)
 - Homeschooling their own young children (S)
 - *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)*

Key Findings: Transition and Trust



- Lack of human contact with students and school support networks.
- Some participants felt 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 the physical school environment (S).
- Some saw the online environment as detached, giving rise to a sense of isolation and disconnection:
 - *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)*

Key Findings: Transition and Trust



- Others 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)*
- *Uncertainty around students' ability to access or engage with online learning.*
 - *Some students did not have devices/ Internet connectivity, others chose not to attend live lessons or engage with asynchronous learning. (S)*
- *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 reaction (S).*
- *Low or indiscernible student engagement caused participants to question their professional identity.*
 - *'low levels of engagement made me feel very disparaged as a trainee teacher' (S).*
- *Students tested the boundaries of a new learning environment.*
 - *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.*



Key Findings: Care and Connection

- Participants acknowledged that despite uncertainty, they managed to find stability by 'settling into a routine' and 'finding an appropriate balance' (S).
- They observed students' need for routine and appropriate balance to preserve and promote wellbeing.
 - *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)*
- Preservice teachers' and students' shared experience of the 'new unfamiliar' strengthened empathy and awakened a sense of affinity.
 - *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)*





Key Findings: Care and Connection

- 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.
- Preservice teachers' relationships with students and colleagues shifted during school closures and alternative ways of being and doing emerged.





Conclusion

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)

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.

For other the liminal space inspired creativity as they began to see emerging possibilities in their new world reality. 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.



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