Placement During a Pandemic? Exploring the Experiences and Perspectives of Students Completing Educational Placement during COVID-19.

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Abstract.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt on a global scale in nearly every aspect of life, but disruption was particularly observable within the sphere of education. Students engaged in initial teacher education at this time commonly experienced major upheavals within both their academic studies and their practical teaching placements in schools at the community level. This paper presents data collected from a small-scale study conducted at a higher education institution in Ireland and provides insights regarding students' experiences of completing educational placement requirements in early childhood and primary school settings during the pandemic. A total of 204 participants took part in the study by responding to an online questionnaire. Findings revealed both the challenges and opportunities they faced in their own academic learning, the impact of public health regulations on their teaching practice and performance, and the challenges of work-life imbalance. These insights are examined considering previous research, and the paper concludes with suggestions for future practice.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education; Educational Placement; Higher Education; Initial Teacher Education; Pandemic.

1.   Introduction.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought "critical disruptions to education systems" (OECD, 2021, p. 175), and in response to emergency public health measures, the early childhood education (ECE) and primary sectors in Ireland were closed in March 2020. This move would ultimately result in some of the longest school closures witnessed in Europe (OECD, 2021). The public health guidelines also extended to the Irish higher education sector, where institutions were forced "to make an urgent transition to emergency distance learning" (OECD, 2021, p. 188)

to support the safety of staff and students.

For some academic modules, the move to remote/online teaching was achieved without major disruption to learning objectives, while for others, such as professional placement and practical skills modules, certain elements of teaching and learning were more difficult to replicate in the virtual world. This was particularly true of onsite supervised educational placements which use a combination of "teaching and non-teaching activities" with the aim of allowing students to fully participate in the educational setting (Teaching Council of Ireland, 2020, p. 5). These placements ultimately presented the complex challenge of meeting on-site learning requirements, all while working within the public health restrictions and sector closures. Because of these issues, some students involved in initial teacher education (ITE) (i.e. student-teachers) were not afforded the opportunity to experience a placement, while others had to adapt their practice to accommodate virtual and hybrid settings, which often required the use of new and innovative teaching and learning strategies they may have been unfamiliar with.

This small-scale research study sought to explore these experiences and challenges with undergraduate and postgraduate education students as they completed their placements in early childhood and primary school settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research examines the impact of completing placement during a pandemic on students' learning and professional development, as well as their wellbeing and work-life balance, and explores the potential implications for teacher-education and future practice stemming from this unique time in education history.

1.1 The Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education.

The global pandemic held far reaching educational consequences (Baxter et al., 2021) as all sectors were impacted by physical closures and pivots to remote learning (Connor, Mueller, Mann, & Andrew, 2021; Zegwaard, Pretti, & Rowe, 2020). According to Hodges and Martin (2020), within higher education, the pandemic created a context where students and staff alike were forced to quickly develop transferrable skills overnight, such as behavioural adaptability, flexibility, resilience and digital literacies (Connor et al. 2021; Hodges & Martin, 2020). In many cases, lecturers in higher education institutions (HEIs) were learning these skills alongside their students, while still aiming to meet learning outcomes and deliver meaningful content and experiences (Goldman & Stirling, 2020; Hoskyn et al., 2020). Some researchers have termed this quick pivot to remote learning as 'panic-gogy' (Hodges & Martin, 2020;

Zegwaard et al., 2020), acknowledging the significant challenges presented by the emergency nature of this switch in modality, particularly for programmes not originally designed for digital delivery.

In this context, technology played a key role in the provision of teaching and learning during the pandemic. With the near universal lockdown of HEIs, emergency remote learning and the use of technology became central to students' educational experiences. In a paradoxical shift, for some students, technology enabled the continuation of their education at several points throughout the global pandemic, while for others, particularly those who did not have access to technology or usable infrastructure, the shift to online and remote teaching functioned as a "disabler" of their learning (Hodges & Martin, 2020), thus likely worsening the digital divide that has affected education in the last few decades.

While most students pivoted to distance learning at some point during the pandemic, the implications of this move may have been greater for students completing degree programmes with substantial practical elements, such as those training in all sectors of ITE. While one might assume that a sudden shift to online provision would negatively impact students' overall learning outcomes, research by Brown (2014) suggests that student-teachers achieve similar outcomes whether they complete ITE through online or on-site modalities. However, it is important to consider that the online programmes included in Brown's (2014) study were likely purpose built for delivery through technological and virtual means, whereas during the pandemic, many onsite programmes which were not originally designed for online delivery were forced to quickly change their modality. As such, more research is required in this area.

1.2 Educational Placements during the Pandemic.

Teaching and supervision are integral components in the formation of student-teachers, and during placement they typically receive onsite mentoring from co-operating teachers, along with assessed visits conducted by supervisors from their higher education institution (HEI). Within the Irish context, such placements confer numerous benefits to all participants and stakeholders: student-teachers are afforded the opportunity to observe and learn from experienced teachers while developing their own knowledge and skills, the wider school community benefits from interacting with student-teachers and the HEI, and pupils benefit from the enriched learning experiences that emerge from the cooperation of student and mentor teachers (Teaching Council of Ireland, 2021, p. 7). However, fulfilling these educational placement

requirements during the pandemic was significantly challenging, as practical and onsite learning outcomes were nearly impossible to complete while educational sectors were fully locked down.

When schools and centres resumed onsite provision in the spring of 2021, they were not required to offer educational placements, and indeed, on public health grounds, some chose not to facilitate student-teachers during the initial phase of reopening. When centers did offer placements, they typically took one of the following formats: online simulations where students observe and reflect upon live or recorded classes, remote "e-internships" where students taught completely online for their settings (Pretti, Etmanski, & Durston, 2020), and hybrid placements where students taught online and in-person. A very limited number of venues offered fully onsite placements to student-teachers.

The reopening of schools and early childhood settings also came with new policies and protocols for protecting and promoting public health and safety. Restrictions implemented in primary schools included hand hygiene and physical distancing measures, and interaction among pupils was discouraged (Department of Education, 2021). Similar restrictions were also implemented within early childhood settings where children were organised into small groups/play-pods, and new social distancing, handwashing, coughing etiquette, and cleaning regimens were enforced (TUSLA, 2020). Restrictions on visitors, including parents and placement supervisors, were also enforced (Early Childhood Ireland, 2020; Government of Ireland, 2020).

Supervision and assessment of practice during the pandemic commonly took place online to reduce the number of visitors in schools and ECE settings, and some assessors utilised "virtual observation" wherein they observed classes in live time through online streaming. Ó Grádaigh and colleagues (2021, p. 308) examined this practice of emergency virtual observation (EVO) among ITE students and concluded that, despite some initial technological challenges and apprehensions, virtual observation provided "an authentic insight into classroom teaching" and can be used effectively to assess student-teachers and their classroom practice.

Additionally, some HEIs utilised "alternative assessments" to evaluate student learning and professional practice, especially in cases where students were unable to obtain a placement given the limited availability of opportunities, or when centres prohibited the virtual or on-site assessment of student-teachers (Quality & Qualifications Ireland, 2020). Alternative assessments assumed various formats for students in ITE including classroom simulations, virtual

case studies, and scrutinising real scenarios through analysis of short films (Bandaranaike, Orozco Quijano, & Navarrete-Baez, 2020; Trede & Flowers, 2020; Wood, Zegwaard, & Fox-Turnbull, 2020). However, the rapid creation of these assessments presented numerous challenges to HEI providers, such as how to design alternatives that correctly assessed learning outcomes while maintaining academic integrity, and how to ensure that students were not disadvantaged by these assessments (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2020, p. 7). Research suggests that students had mixed feelings about the use of these assessments. Some preferred the alternatives and felt the completion of assignments was less stressful than taking exams, while others felt they would have performed better on the original assessments and may have been disadvantaged by the alternatives (Quality & Qualifications Ireland, 2020, p. 4).

1.3 Benefits and Drawbacks of Online and Virtual Placements.

Research has identified several benefits associated with undertaking placement in online and virtual modalities. For example, the use of simulations can provide student-teachers with an opportunity to experience the realities of classroom life, including behaviour management, in a controlled and structured environment (McGarr, 2021). Placements that include synchronous live online teaching appear to foster increased learning among student-teachers, expand their willingness to utilize new software and tools, and support greater levels of experimentation with novel teaching methods that more actively engage learners (Sepulveda-Escobar, & Morrison, 2020). Additionally, online teaching and learning may help student-teachers to become more aware of the digital divide between socio-economic groups amongst their pupils, while increasing critical reflection on the socio-cultural context of their students' familial and home situations (Sepulveda-Escobar, & Morrison, 2020). However, for students to benefit from the remote learning context, their 'work set up' must have the appropriate equipment and furniture, and communication with supervisors and personnel in their HEI and placement settings must be of high quality (Pretti et al, .2020).

The challenges associated with virtual placements in teacher education typically relate to a lack of direct contact with children, difficult working relations with cooperating teachers and less experience of behaviour management within educational settings (Brown, 2014). According to research by Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020), lack of connection with pupils can result in poor and ineffective planning, as student-teachers may fail to understand the specific needs of their pupils because of reduced contact. This in turn, can lower student-teachers'

motivation for planning overall. Similar conclusions have been reached by Tang and Biggs (2007, p. 37) who argue that authentic learning opportunities motivate the creation of meaningful and relevant learning and assessment for pupils. As such, there may be difficulties associated with creating valuable and authentic learning experiences in the online environment. Additionally, Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020) observed that during their online placements, student-teachers often felt they lacked safe spaces to experience empathy, practice creativity and find meaning in their teaching. As a result, virtual educational placements often became focused on "idealized" as opposed to "real" practice, which led some students to devalue the overall learning of their placement experience.

2.   Methodology.

In this study, data were collected via an anonymous online questionnaire hosted on Microsoft Forms which contained a total of 21 questions (11 close-ended and 10 open-ended). Areas of exploration included pre-placement expectations, the impact of COVID-19 on placement experiences, ability to manage and achieve work-life balance, health and safety concerns, and overall achievement of programme learning outcomes.

The online questionnaire was chosen as the preferred method of data collection due to the practical benefits it conferred, such as time and cost effectiveness, and reaching large numbers of participants quickly and without geographic constraint (Regmi, Waithaka, Paudyal,Simkhada, & van Teijlingen, 2016). This method also facilitated the safe conduct of research without breaching social distancing and travel restrictions during the pandemic. To enhance the validity of findings, all participants were guaranteed anonymity (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 158). The research was ethically approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the participating HEI.

A convenience sample was utilized of students currently completing one of the following 3 programmes of study at the HEI where this research was conducted. These programmes were targeted because they include a mandatory practical placement requirement, which typically occurs on-site in local community education settings.

Table 1: Programme descriptions and number of participants.

Programme and level of study	Description	Number of participants
Bachelor in Education (Primary).	A four-year undergraduate initial teacher education programme which prepares students to teach in the primary sector. Placement is completed in primary school settings.	n = 138, 67.6%
Bachelor in science (Early Childhood Education).	A four-year undergraduate programme which prepares students to work and lead in Early Childhood education. Placement is completed in early childhood settings.	n = 39, 19.1%
Professional Master in Education (Primary).	A two-year postgraduate initial teacher education programme which prepares students to teach in the primary sector. Placement is completed in primary school settings.	n = 27, 13.2%
Participant total		204

All students enrolled on these programmes were informed about this study via an invitation email sent to their institutional account. This email contained the study information sheet and an electronic URL to the questionnaire. Upon clicking on the URL, participants were asked to tick their consent to participate, and then were directed to the questionnaire. This study received ethical approval from the participating HEI prior to engaging students in the research.

Two-hundred and four undergraduate and postgraduate students took part in this study. Twenty-nine percent (n=57) of participants were in their fourth year of undergraduate study, 27% (n=54) were in third year, 24% (n=48) were in second year, and 7% (n=14) were in first year of undergraduate. Eleven percent (n=21) of participants were in their second and final year of postgraduate study, while 2% (n=5) were in their first year.

Questionnaire data were analysed using both descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Quantitative data were examined for statistical points of interest, considering both majority and minority views to increase the transparency and validity of the findings. Qualitative data contained in the questionnaire were analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. Each member of the research team familiarized themselves with the data set, and then coded the qualitative comments line by line. These initial codes were organized

into categories along with relevant sub-properties, which were then represented in visual mind maps. The research team met as a group to discuss their findings, and key categories were agreed on and cross-checked to ensure sufficient internal homogeneity within, and external heterogeneity between the categories. The final agreed categories were written up and are now explored in the following section. Where applicable, contrary cases are also reported to increase the overall validity of the findings.

2.1 The impact of health restrictions on teaching performance.

Participants generally had positive expectations for their placement experiences and the learning they would acquire. Forty-four percent (n=51) were looking forward to interacting with pupils, 21.55% (n=25) were eager for the opportunity to apply their knowledge to a practical setting, and 21.55% (n=25) were ready to encounter new experiences within their venues.

Following the implementation of public health regulations, many participants were highly concerned that social distancing measures would limit their ability to interact and engage with students in their setting. As one participant observed, "*We did not get to interact with the children in-person as much*" and similarly, another found that interactions with pupils "changed to accommodate distancing".

The majority of participants also reported that public health restrictions, such as social distancing and hygiene measures, were either "extremely influential" (16.07%, n=18) or "very influential" (39.9%, n=44) on their preparation for teaching. For example, one student reported they had less "freedom with lessons", while another recalled that it was, "hard to know which lessons were suitable, and which weren't". Participants also commonly felt the restrictions prevented them from fully applying the methodologies and learning they had acquired within their academic programmes, and this was especially true when it came to utilising group and interactive methods, which they believed were largely prohibited by the health guidelines. As one student observed, "…*group and active work was really difficult to achieve safely*", while another commented, "*I felt I had to keep a distance [from pupils] due to guidelines and at times this interfered with my teaching*". However, when asked to how well they managed navigating these restrictions within their placement settings, 50.6% (n=38) of participants ranked themselves as "average", while 34.6% (n=26) felt they performed "above average", and 14.6% (n=11) rated themselves as "excellent". Interestingly, no participants reported feeling "below

average" or "very poor" in their abilities within this area.

Although in the minority, some participants were clearly concerned about the ultimate impact that completing placement in a pandemic would have on their future outcomes as teachers. As one student explained, "*I was worried that I was not going to get adequate…real-life classroom experience, including classroom management and time keeping*". Such sub-par teaching and learning experiences in the placement setting were clearly of great concern for these education students, who were also faced with the task of completing assessed visits during this time. These visits typically examine students' ability to plan, teach, and manage the classroom setting, and naturally, student-teachers often experience high levels of anxiety with these on-site assessments. However, due to the health restrictions, supervised visits were often impossible to conduct in the traditional format, and as a result, alternative assessments were typically employed using virtual live observations and approximations of practice (see Howell & Mikeska, 2021. Numerous participants reported favourable outcomes resulting from the cessation of traditional on-site teaching assessments, such as a perceived increase in their teaching autonomy, additional freedom in the classroom, and the ability to be more responsive to children's needs. Some also believed they encountered a more 'real-life' experience of teaching during this time. For one student, the lack of classroom assessments "…*allowed much more freedom to try and do some 'real teaching' rather than [following] a rigid day by day structure*". Similarly, another student explained:

> '*'I was able to fully experience life as a teacher, where if a lesson was not going well, I could stop mid-lesson and adapt to the needs of the children without worrying about finishing the lesson per the plan, which would be expected in an inspection.*''

The majority of participants felt they achieved the learning outcomes of their programme to an "excellent" standard (11.1%, n=8) or "very well" (51.3%, n=37). When asked to define the key learnings acquired from placement, participants typically commented on outcomes such as, "*what it is actually like to teach in a class*", "*dealing with children who try to challenge you*", "*being able to adapt to different situations*", and "*that lessons don't always go to plan and that is OK*!" In a moving statement, one participant summarised their key takeaway as:

> "*I learned that the pupils I am teaching are what is important. I was so focused on the negatives that I forgot the most important positive: the children were happy, they were learning and they were participating.*"

Given that many of these participants were prohibited from fully engaging in the use of active learning methodologies due to pandemic health restrictions, the findings above raise questions regarding whether they are fully prepared to implement the modern Irish early childhood and primary curriculums which embed active learning as a core principle (NCCA, 2020, 2009). Because these student-teachers were often not afforded a full level of opportunity to engage in classroom practice during the pandemic, *Droichead* (a period of induction for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in Ireland) may be the time when these student-teachers, and others like them, can work on addressing gaps in their professional development that may have resulted from completing placement during the pandemic. The purpose of Droichead is to "*support the professional learning of the NQTs during the induction phase*" (Teaching Council of Ireland, 2017, p. 3). As such, participating mentor teachers may need to ensure that NQTs are provided with opportunities to successfully transfer their academic and professional learning into active teaching within the classroom, while also placing greater focus on this area within their professional conversations and reflections.

These findings also contain important lessons for providers of ITE regarding the content of teacher education programmes. Previous research suggests that ITE curriculums commonly contain an overemphasis on theory, often to the detriment of other practical skills, such as creativity and critical thinking (Cetken-Aktas & Sevimli-Celik, 2021, p.281). Similar findings were reported within the Irish context in research conducted by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE, 2020), which found that graduates of ITE programmes often criticised their provision for failing to teach them practical skills, and for lacking alignment between academic and placement learning. Although it is o f t e n assumed that placement "*provides cohesion [between] that which is taught in the academic classroom and that which occurs in practice*" (Holman & Richardson, 2021, p.324), if ITE curriculums are failing to equip student-teachers with the practical skills they need for effective teaching and learning in the classroom (perhaps due to the overemphasis of theory), these student-teachers could struggle to transfer their learning to the placement setting. This may explain why some participants in the present study struggled to adapt to virtual and hybrid classroom settings, while grappling to find creative solutions to support active learning within the confines of the public health guidelines. Therefore, it may be the case that HEIs should reconsider the balance of theoretical, practical, creative, and skills-based content in their academic modules, to ensure that student-teachers develop these skills prior to placement, while maintaining an important focus on the role that theory plays in the development of high-quality educators.

The findings from the present study also highlight the need for HEIs to reconsider the traditional use and conduct of supervised assessments in ITE. It is possible that the pandemic circumstances combined with the use of alternative assessments created an opportunity wherein student-teachers felt far greater levels of freedom in their teaching, and thereby developed the confidence to employ autonomy and authenticity in their practice, which might not have been possible under traditional assessment circumstances. Indeed, Choi, Meier and Cushman (2020, p.90) highlight the role of innovative placement experiences in enabling student-teachers to "develop practice *in* practice". As such, HEIs should consider whether any elements of alternative placement assessment should be retained in post-pandemic times. For example, the remote supervision model commonly provided student-teachers with increased opportunities to engage in professional dialogues with their peers and supervisors, and research shows that engaging in professional learning and collaborative discussions during placement is a key tool in building reflective practice (Choi et al., 2020). Virtual observation may also have an important role in future ITE, as it easily overcomes geographical challenges, promotes sustainable environmental practices, and may offer greater flexibility to student-teachers and assessors alike (Ó Grádaigh, Connolly, Mac Mahon, Agnew, & Poole, 2021, p. 308). In summary, the use of alternative and novel classroom teaching assessments may hold great possibilities for ITE in years to come.

2.2 The experience of work-life *im*balance.

Numerous participants described the placement workload as "intense" and many felt this resulted in a work-life imbalance. For example, "*It was almost impossible to manage anything else due to the extreme workload*", and similarly, "…*the workload was overbearing...and ruined any chance of home/work balance*". During this time, many of these participants were unable to pursue other interests outside of ITE, as placement "*consumed*" their available time and energy, and often became their first priority. "*My main focus was placement, it took up my days, evening, and nights*". Additionally, some were forced to reduce the amount of time they spent in paid external employment, while others quit their jobs entirely to focus on placement. As one participant reported, "I didn't work at all during placement as I needed a lot of time to prepare".

Interestingly, other participants reported successful management of their commitments and activities while completing placement during the pandemic. As one commented, "*I felt I managed my planning well and could have managed my part-time job if needed*". Given that many

industries students typically work in were closed during the pandemic, such as service and hospitality, student-teachers who were unemployed due to industry closures may have been best positioned to achieve work-life balance during the placement period, as public health restrictions may have worked in their favour by providing them with additional time for planning and preparation.

Some participants also experienced high levels of stress and anxiety during this time, despite having been provided with pre-placement wellness information and training in the context of their programmes. As one participant stated, "*I find placement to be extremely stressful and [it] has a major impact on overall wellbeing both mental and physical*". Stress, anxiety, and tiredness were commonly linked to the workload and specific activities like lesson planning, for example, "I was constantly tired as I found lesson planning extremely time consuming…I genuinely did not leave the house for the full 3 weeks". One participant even felt that their "…*mental health and anxiety…only worsened during the course of placement given the pressure and stress we were under to complete requirements*".

Additionally, 73.2% (n=52) of participants reported that their emotional wellbeing influenced their practice during placement, and some were concerned that stress, anxiety, and worry may have negatively impacted their performance in teaching. As one participant explained, "*I feel at times when I was stressed it reflected on my classroom organisation, as in, I was flustered or forgot parts of my lesson*", while another declared, "*It is hard to give your best self to a classroom when you do not feel like your best self*".

The data in this present study contributes to the ongoing discussion regarding the challenges commonly associated with ITE (see Keane, Heinz & Lynch, 2022; laVelle, Newman, Montgomery & Hyatt, 2020) and teaching placements (see: Hall, Murphy, Rutherford & Ni Aingleis., 2018; Teaching Council of Ireland, 2019). Participants' struggles in maintaining work-life balance align with previous research which confirms that ITE programmes are typically associated with heavy workloads (Smith, 2019; Sprung & Rogers, 2021; Squires, Walker & Spurr, 2022), and this is a key issue which negatively impacts student retention in ITE internationally (Hobson, Giannakaki & Chambers, 2009; Basit et al., 2006).

Although high retention rates are reported in Irish ITE (Keane et al.2022) and entrants are commonly described as "high calibre" (O'Doherty & Harford, 2018, p. 654), this does not negate the importance of giving careful consideration to both the contextual needs of studentteachers, and the development of ITE programmes. The data also highlight the importance

of considering the impact of student-teachers' ITE and placement experiences on their overall sense of wellbeing, especially when placement experiences must be altered due to extenuating circumstances, which can also occur outside of pandemic times.

It is therefore recommended that HEIs consciously approach the ITE curriculum workload to ensure balance and communication between academic and placement requirements. Additionally, student-teachers should be afforded with specific training and supports for maintaining their own mental health and wellbeing that will assist them through the completion of the academic and placement components of ITE, but also throughout their future career as qualified teachers. Such recommendations are also supported by Miller and Flint-Stipp (2019) in their examination of burnout among preservice teachers, as these researchers emphasised the importance of integrating "self-care" activities early and throughout all stages of ITE.

It is also important to consider the role that teacher self-efficacy, defined as teachers' belief in their ability to impact student outcomes and performance through their own "efforts and initiatives" (Menon & Lefteri, 2021, p. 43), may have played in shaping participants' experience of placement during the pandemic. Psychologist Albert Bandura (1977, pp. 193-194) maintained that an individual's level of self-efficacy is directly related to their ability to cope with adversity, as, "[e]*fficacy expectations determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences*". Therefore, within this present study, student-teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy may have coped far better in the face of adversity brought on by the pandemic, whereas those with weaker levels of self-efficacy may have found themselves overwhelmed and "consumed" by self-doubt and feelings of anxiety and stress, which in some cases, may have further impacted their ability to effectively teach and perform in the classroom. This finding illustrates that the development of teacher self-efficacy should be core component of ITE, especially in the early stages of training before student-teachers engage in placement. Such training may hold the potential to positively impact retention in ITE, as well as the longevity of teachers in the profession for years to come.

3. Conclusion.

As this paper has highlighted, becoming a teacher is not only academic exercise, as the professional requirements associated with ITE and educational placement often exert a physical,

mental and emotional toll on participants. Completing placement during the COVID-19 pandemic clearly placed multiple demands on student-teachers while often consuming all their time and energy. In some cases, participants experienced declines in their wellbeing which some believe may have negatively impacted their performance in the classroom, as they struggled with the challenges of completing their academic and placement requirements in virtual and hybrid settings. In light of the findings presented in this paper, it is ultimately recommended that HEIs review existing undergraduate and postgraduate ITE curriculum to ensure a balanced workload, and to increase the level of training and interventions afforded to preservice teachers in the areas of teacher mental health, wellbeing, and self-efficacy. These topics should be deeply embedded into ITE curriculum, thereby equipping preservice teachers with the skills they will need to achieve success, balance and resilience, both now and in the future as qualified educators (Squires et al, .2022).There are numerous opportunities for future research which arise from this present study, such as revising this research topic using a longitudinal methodology with the same, or a similar cohort of participants, to determine what impact they believe completing placement during the pandemic had on their overall professional development and current performance as newly qualified teachers. More broadly, future studies could also consider what lessons and skills were learned from the experience of teaching through the pandemic, and whether any of the emergency measures implemented, such as online and hybrid teaching, remote placements and alternative assessments, should be retained in post-pandemic ITE, and in teaching and learning within the early years and primary sectors.

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