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Double trouble: the legacy of COVID-19 for early-career teachers and their pupils in Wales.

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Abstract

This paper highlights the *double trouble* of early-career teachers, who were negatively impacted by a disrupted ITE and/or induction period, being charged with supporting pupils whose learning was also impacted by COVID-19. Data was collected from interviews (n=40) and an online survey (n=465) with initial teacher education (ITE) stakeholders (school and HEI-based) from across Wales. This illuminated how ITE students' experiences of practice were profoundly impacted as schools responded to the constantly changing learning and teaching context. Concerns articulated portray an uncomfortable picture with extensive and multifaceted inequalities identified in terms of both pupils' and student teachers' experiences.

This paper highlights the likely legacy of the pandemic on the ongoing development of both pupils' and student teachers' (now early-career professionals) and the *double trouble* this presents. We suggest that there is an ongoing need to further support the professional formation of these early-career teachers impacted by the pandemic in a sustained and individually tailored way. This will be particularly important in equipping them to support the complex needs of the multiple COVID-impacted cohorts they will continue to teach.

Keywords: COVID-19; teacher education; early-career teachers; professional formation; inequalities

Introduction

On the 11th March 2020 the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, shifting restrictions and ongoing changes in educational contexts characterised the subsequent period globally (Schleicher 2020). In Wales these also occurred against a backdrop of extensive and fundamental change in terms of educational policy (Welsh Government 2017a).

Drawing upon a study to explore the impact of COVID-19 on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) (Morgan *et al.* 2022) this paper is focused on how the opportunities and experiences of ITE students were impacted. It drew on data from interviews and an online survey with participants from all ITE partnerships across Wales. Recent ITE reform in Wales (Furlong *et al.*

2021), has placed a greater focus on equality and shared responsibility between Higher Education Institution (HEIs) and their partnership schools. Therefore, it was crucial to explore both the HEI and school-based experiences of ITE students and how these informed and supported their readiness to teach, important as both contexts play a significant role in shaping their professional formation and development. We gathered data on stakeholders' perceptions about the nature and impact of these pandemic-changed learning contexts for ITE students in Wales. Given, for these ITE students, the changed nature of learners' experiences was central to their learning contexts this was an essential aspect of data collection.

Professional formation

It has been argued there is a direct relationship between the learning experiences of early-career teachers and their confidence and ability to deliver effective, sustained and high-quality educational experiences for pupils (Waters *et al.* 2018). Early and foundational experiences during ITE and their Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) year can powerfully influence, both positively and/or negatively, teachers' identity, growth and developing expertise as they transition into the day-to-day reality of being a teacher (Hobson and Malderez 2013). The practice teachers develop and observe during their school placements is foundational and likely to have a lasting impact on their ideas of what is normal and expected in terms of pedagogical practice (Morgan *et al.* 2022).

International research suggests that transition from ITE to becoming a competent early-career teacher is a complex endeavour (Hobson *et al.* 2009, Langdon *et al.* 2014) and schools can create highly variable experiences for them (Milton *et al.* 2020). Therefore, it is crucial that ways of working that support meaningful and effective professional learning, rooted in daily classroom practice and focused on interactions with learners such as educative mentoring, are privileged. Without these the role may become overwhelming (Milton *et al.* 2020) and the feeling of being ill-equipped or merely surviving can result in a reluctance to question established practices and/or an unthinking acceptance of and conforming to the 'way we do things round here' (Macbeath 2019, p. 43).

Central to developing professional judgement as a teacher, through honing practice and building confidence in meeting learner needs, is the opportunity to collaboratively engage with other teachers (Wenger 1998) and to question and consider practice in a way that supports early-career teachers' development as 'adaptive experts' (Daly *et al.* 2020, p. 654). During the pandemic providing these opportunities will have inevitably been even more challenging given the shifting restrictions and need to minimise health and safety risks, as staff were encouraged to work remotely and/or in separate spaces.

There is an established awareness of the need to provide rich contextualised professional learning opportunities for early-career teachers (OECD 2011) and evidence that these might ameliorate the recruitment challenges experienced internationally (Sutcher *et al.* 2016). It is also known that feelings of being overwhelmed particularly for early-career teachers negatively impacts teacher retention (Burrow *et al.* 2020). Consequently, the extreme demands placed on all teachers during and post-pandemic is likely to make early-career teachers feel overburdened and overwhelmed. For this reason, the importance and necessity

of high-quality, sustained, individually-tailored and context-specific professional learning opportunities cannot be underestimated (Milton *et al.* 2020).

Impact of COVID-19 on education in schools

The impact of COVID-19 was dramatic - from 2020 learners worldwide faced the reality that schools and universities were closed for in-person teaching and their learning was severely disrupted (OECD 2021, Betthäuser *et al.* 2023). This disruption impacted on all learners' experiences, augmenting inequalities further for the most vulnerable learners (Reay 2020, EEF 2022). Established weak-points in terms of educational inequalities, such as, access to IT equipment, connectivity in the home and parental support for learning (particularly for pupils from working-class and Black Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds) were further deepened by the pandemic (Reay 2020).

A UK-wide rapid review into the impact of school closures for pupils from Reception to Year 11 highlighted the challenges of estimating the long-term impact on children's attainment. It identified how for some children less time learning at home as compared to at school, lower quality of work completed at home and little or no access to technology meant that their experiences of learning during this time were impoverished (Moss *et al.* 2021). Findings based on attainment measures shared by the DFE also suggested that COVID-19 related disruption impacted negatively on all pupils and that this has been more intense for younger pupils and for those in areas of high deprivation across a range of domains (EEF 2022).

Whilst data based on attainment measures is not currently available for the Welsh context WG reports are clear that all learners have been impacted in some way (Waters *et al.* 2021) and that experienced practitioners reported feeling overwhelmed and fragile during the pandemic (French *et al.* 2021). Specifically in terms of teacher education la Velle *et al.* (2022, p. 387) has highlighted the "profound effect [of the pandemic] on pupils, teachers, student teachers and teacher educators ... worldwide".

Welsh Context

In Wales the pandemic was experienced at a time of significant flux in terms of the implementation of a wide-range of new educational policies, catalysed by the publication of Education in Wales: Our National Mission (Welsh Government 2017a). Alongside this the Furlong (2015) review of teacher education had informed a distinct new model of ITE with a greater emphasis on partnership working, research and enquiry (BERA/RSA 2014) within all aspects of design and delivery. The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted and disrupted the development and embedding of shared understandings around many of these policies. Significantly from September 2019, ITE Partnerships in Wales were navigating the delivery of these newly accredited programmes and the associated new standards for teachers and leaders (Welsh Government 2017b) – consequently these were profoundly impacted as the onset of the pandemic coincided with their first year of operation.

Methods

The mixed-method design (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004) comprised of semi-structured interviews and an online survey. Phase one (July 2020-February 2021) involved interviews with key stakeholders from two Welsh ITE partnerships. Phase two (November 2020-April

2021) built on the themes from the interviews to inform a national, pan-Wales online survey for ITE students and staff both in schools and HEI institutions. Ethical approval was granted in line with BERA ethical guidelines (BERA 2018) and institutional requirements.

The interviews drew on a purposive sample which included student teachers from both the 2020/21 cohort and those who qualified in Summer 2020 and were working as NQTs, HEI and school-based teacher educators and headteachers. The sample comprised,

“a balanced cross-section of participants (headteachers; subject/phase leads; ITE coordinators/mentors/research champions and their equivalent; current ITE students and Newly Qualified Teachers and ITE HEI programme staff) from nursery, primary, secondary and special settings; geographical locations in relation local authorities and consortia; urban/rural schools; national categorisation status; language medium (Welsh/English/Bilingual) and faith schools.”

(Morgan *et al.* 2022, p. 20)

The online interviews were conducted with 40 participants, in their preferred language lasting between 45-60mins. The interviews were translated (where needed) and transcribed verbatim. A team-based approach was taken to thematic analysis with systematic reading and rereading of the transcripts to identify themes in relation to the ITE students learning experiences. The qualitative analysis aligned with the constant comparison approach of grounded theory (Thomas and James 2006). The online survey was developed based upon an initial analysis of the interview data and was distributed across Wales via all ITE partnerships and social media. A total of 465 responses included; the 20/21 cohort of students (n=232), NQTs from the 19/20 student cohort (n=27), HEI teacher educators (n=34) and school-based teacher educators (n=172). This paper draws only on qualitative data from the survey and interviews.

Below we present an outline of the complex and clearly differentiated phases of response to the pandemic which teacher educators and student teachers articulated in the data. We present these phases chronologically to frame the evidence that illustrates the *double trouble* arising from the simultaneous impact of COVID-19 both on pupils and student (now early-career) teachers.

Pandemic-changed practice

The data from participants illuminated how in Wales the pandemic was itself punctuated by phases of response which in turn disrupted and impacted practice in schools and ITE institutions in complex and varied ways. These phases have been identified as being:

- 1) *Lockdown 1 (March-July 2020)*
- 2) *Partial return to school (September – mid-December 2020)*
- 3) *Lockdown 2 (mid-December 2020 – mid-March 2021)*
- 4) *Full return with ongoing disruption (mid-March 2021 – July 2022)*

In each phase outlined below participants perceptions are presented which detail pupils' and student teachers' experiences over this time.

1) Lockdown 1 (March-July 2020)

At the start of the pandemic Wales, like much of the UK, saw schools closed to all but children of a limited group of key-workers. Most schools at this time were not readily equipped to pivot all learning opportunities online. This was complicated and complex. It depended on resources, equipment both in school and in pupils' homes, and the competence and confidence of staff and parents to be able to teach and support their children. Throughout this period the day-to-day nature and process of learning, teaching and assessment drastically changed, with a consensus that the priority for teachers needed to be keeping in contact, supporting the wellbeing of pupils and their families and getting them online:

'during the spring...(and) the summer term [2020]...it was very much on supporting pupil and parent wellbeing.'

Headteacher, Primary

Consequently, from the 23rd March 2020, all ITE school placements ceased, and students in this cohort gained no further in-school experience and in most instances no online experiences at this time either. For student teachers this meant an abrupt end to school-placement experiences and many felt that on qualifying they would be unprepared for experiences they had missed out on.

'I mean the big thing I missed out on was going into exam season...you know the run up to exams and like preparing for that, I feel like I missed out on that...I'm going to have to wing it a bit!'

NQT & 2019/20 Student Teacher, Secondary

This also meant that in-school assessment of student teachers was not able to take place. Therefore, PGCE and final year BA Education with QTS students were assessed on a nationally agreed trajectory to pass, a variation of other 'no detriment' adjustments commonly adopted at this time in education (la Velle *et al.* 2020, p.599).

'those that were on that trajectory to pass, rather than having met the standards, were passed.'

Initial Teacher Education Lead

This was described as difficult in terms of making accurate judgements on the basis of written responses to the respective standards rather than observations of practice, as outlined by the teacher educators below,

'And in truth it [the student file] didn't show what I wanted it to show. So, that was awkward in a way because I didn't feel that we had enough evidence to say – "Yes it's fine to award her a pass". But neither did we have enough evidence to say that she wasn't good enough to pass. I just felt we didn't have enough information about her...'

School-based Teacher Educator, Secondary

'There's a concern...I asked the question with our university tutor the other day, about what if we don't have the evidence for them by...the time they finish...what

do we do then? And the answer...came back that, well, it's not their fault, you know, they're in a situation...they can't necessarily fail because of, they haven't been given the opportunity to do it, you know?...it's such a tricky one, a minefield, isn't it? You know, really complicated...and as you say, next year, they're potentially your NQTs and... and will adjustment be made there?'

School-based Teacher Educator, Secondary

There was a brief period for school age children in July 2020 of returning to school ahead of the summer holidays and this was reported to be highly variable both in terms of the duration in school and purpose. Student teachers were not typically involved in this as they had completed their programmes and even where they had secured jobs for the following September schools were reluctant to further complicate health and safety protocols by having non-essential staff on site.

This initial period of lockdown was characterised by panic, shock, and angst as this was a time of intense uncertainty (la Velle *et al.* 2020). The primary concern of all educational establishments was to support the wellbeing and virtual access of their learners – whether statutory school age or studying in higher education. Without a doubt all educational contexts were trying to do their best during this unprecedented time, despite this it is clear that for ITE students their school experiences and therefore preparation for their roles as NQTs was cut short (la Velle *et al.* 2020).

2) Partial return (September – mid-December 2020)

From September through to mid-December the majority of children returned to school full-time, with significant and multiple adaptations to the school day to accommodate safety concerns in relation to COVID-19. The numerous reported adaptations varied from school-to-school but dramatically altered the learning context for student teachers and took the form of:

- grouping pupils into bubbles for all activities,
- wearing masks (all staff and secondary pupils),
- teaching behind the line or at the front,
- shorter school days,
- staggered start and finish times,
- pupils (typically) taught in the same classroom and movement around school was minimised,
- curriculum restrictions due to no sharing of equipment (e.g. PE, art, science etc.),
- adjustments to lunch times and playtimes,
- one-way systems for moving around school sites,
- regular handwashing,
- no after-school or extra-curricular activities,
- no school assemblies,
- no personal equipment allowed (e.g. bags, reading books, pencils etc.), and
- an extended two week 'fire-break' half term with all-Wales lockdown restrictions reintroduced.

Striking in the detailed reporting of these adjustments was the way in which they had shaped the pedagogical practices and experiences of 'normal' day-to-day practices for pupils', all teachers and student teachers.

'We have not experienced 'normal' school life. Even the construction of the classroom environment has been hindered by children having to keep a distance, hand washing etc. Our entire experience has been 'tainted' and when/if things do go back to normal we will have little experience of what that 'normal' was.'

PGCE Student Teacher 20/21, Primary

This period of time was characterised by a concerted effort to understand where pupils were and to ascertain the extent of what had been 'missed' or 'lost' in terms of learning during the first lockdown period. This phenomenon was reported in both primary and secondary schools and focused on 'catching up' pupils. In addition, it was consistently highlighted that some aspects of practice were not shared with student teachers as there was an anxiety about how to get GCSE and A-level students through their programmes of study in an uncertain and highly changeable context. Teachers' concerns for their pupils were also exacerbated by the rapidly changing decisions regarding what was expected for external exams and/ teacher assessment. The notion that informal assessment might be used to inform grades for external qualifications made day-to-day assessment activity both more prevalent and high-stakes and this inevitability negatively impacted student teachers' involvement in these processes and pupils' well-being.

'Particularly with our Key Stage 4...and Key Stage 5, I don't think (ITE students) had hardly any experience really there...staff have been very reluctant, cautious...to just hand over those classes, because they're desperately trying to get...content finished, So, I think...(student teachers) have missed out big time.'

School-based Teacher Educator, Secondary

'...our teachers and our curriculum leaders are so conscious that...they cancelled exams, had you known that was coming and you had a crystal ball, what would you have wanted to have done and put in place in order to arrive confidently at those robust centre-awarded grades?...you have got to have really robust systems to assess and keep assessing and keep track of it all. But equally we've got our pastoral team saying, "Do you realise how stressed these kids are?" ...you're assessing the way they walk down the corridor almost. It's kind of almost got to that point.'

School-based Teacher Educator, Secondary

For 2020/21 student teachers, their experience was predominantly university based until mid/late November. This was because schools were concerned that placements presented an additional risk and complexity as they were implementing new and rapidly changing health and safety policies to keep school communities safe. This meant student teachers typically had very limited placement experiences prior the next national lockdown which commenced in mid-December 2020.

'we went into school in the middle of November...we were in for two days on the first week and then I unfortunately caught Covid in class. So I was straight off for two

weeks...and then after Christmas...we were meant to be going back but then obviously they closed the schools [schools were closed again mid-December] and so we ended up doing a lot online.'

PGCE Student Teacher 20/21, Primary

In addition, it was reported that during this time both teachers and student teachers were also needing to continually adjust provision to address and meet the needs of pupils who were isolating due to 'bubbles' of pupils being sent home – often whole classes or year groups. In practice, particularly in secondary schools, it was reported this meant teachers were teaching simultaneously in-school and remotely and that this hybrid way of working was very challenging for both staff and their pupils. This left school-based teacher educators with even less capacity to support their student teachers.

This period of time following the return to school was typically one which was constantly changing which led to uncertainty and extreme disruption for all learners and staff in schools, including student teachers. The extent of the change and disruption to practice in schools meant that teacher educators had no choice but to adopt a reactive and dynamic approach to supporting ITE students (Burn *et al.* 2022) but as reported the data student teachers were often not high up on the list of priorities.

3) Lockdown 2 (mid-December 2020 – mid-March 2021)

There was a further extended period of national lockdown from mid-December with a staggered return to school dependent on the age/stage of pupils. Schools re-opened for 3-7yr old pupils in late-February, 7-11yr old pupils in mid-March and 11+ pupils from mid-April 2021. At this time, it was reported that staff were more equipped and confident in supporting their pupils remotely, although the nature of the provision was again highly variable. The extent and quality of pupil engagement was highlighted as being unknown in some instances, often because of limitations or restrictions due to digital access or safeguarding concerns which impacted on the quality and visibility of teacher-pupil interaction e.g. pupil cameras and mics off and restriction to chat use.

'You don't actually know if they've done it...you think, well, Mum and Dad might have done that...there were a whole void of children that did nothing. And they're the children that concern me the most.'

Headteacher, Primary

'The truth is that children in secondary schools do not to speak or communicate much when on-line!'

School-based Teacher Educator, Secondary

Despite the considerable efforts reported as being made by ITE partnerships, for student teachers the lockdown meant that their experiences were limited to virtual placements or face-to-face experiences in hub schools (whose main function was to provide care for key-worker children). Across all stakeholder groups involved in this study there was an acceptance that although these alternative or virtual placements gave students good online experiences, they were not the same as the face-to-face school placements they missed out on. Student teachers highlighted how their experiences of whole class teaching were

reduced and key features of practice compromised. Many concerns were expressed in relation to behaviour management given the lack of opportunities to observe or undertake whole class teaching. There were also concerns highlighted that during this lockdown period that student teachers did not gain essential first-hand and/or observational experience, in their specialist subject particularly in terms of practical aspects of the curriculum e.g. Drama, Science, PE, DT. Consequentially they also missed out on opportunities to understand how to manage subject-specific behaviour related situations, in subjects like: chemistry, technology and PE.

‘The main thing missing has genuinely been the face-to-face in-person teaching techniques. Classroom management, behaviour management, how to move and position yourself around the classroom...none of this can be taught virtually.’

PGCE Student Teacher 20/21, Secondary

‘I only taught three full lessons to a full class. Three, that’s it...then I was teaching six to eight people, which is very different...I feel okay at putting together a lesson. But...delivering it to 30 people...and managing...not necessarily behaviour but like noise. Just all the things that come with all the people.’

PGCE Student Teacher 20/21, Primary

‘Several students are very worried about their ability to manage behaviour in a classroom setting as they have little experience of this outside of the ‘Teams’ environment.

HEI Teacher Educator

‘I teach a practical subject and the absence of teaching practice with the practical elements has left me unprepared and without confidence to teach those elements...in order to effectively and safely teach.’

PGCE Student Teacher 20/21, Secondary

‘She’s never actually taught in the gym. I don’t think she’ll ever get through gymnastics...because you’ve got to be in there doing it and lots of the sports, really, from a safety aspect. Technology...she’s not really learning how to use the machines...’

School-based Teacher Educator, Secondary

In relation to assessment particularly apparent was the extent to which participation in routine formative and summative assessment activities were reported to be significantly depleted. This included, observing and questioning, providing oral feedback to pupils and on pupil work, delivering routine class tests, engaging in parents’ evenings, report writing, activities designed to prepare for external exams and running national tests/exams.

‘They have missed out on key experiences such as behaviour management, quality observations and questioning that they would have experienced in face-to-face teaching. I think that this will have an impact on their confidence in their ability...this is the foundation of teaching.’

School-based Teacher Educator, Secondary

Whilst during this second national lockdown general levels of confidence and expertise with online and blended pedagogy improved for both teachers and teacher educators (la Velle *et al.* 2020) it also intensified the concerns of student teachers in relation to aspects of practice that they lacked experience in or were absent/reduced due to the pandemic (Burn *et al.* 2022). Concerns regarding a lack of experience of routine formative assessment activities seemed particularly justified because these are so foundational to supporting and developing pupil learning - enabling teachers to differentiate effectively, understand and accurately make and communicate professional judgements about pupil progress and consequently shape practice (Morgan *et al.* 2022).

4) Full return with ongoing disruption (Mid-March 2021 – July 2022)

Since March 2021, there have not been any further periods of national lockdown although schools continued to experience persistent disruption with both pupils and staff absent from school and isolating up to July 2022. From the 9th May 2022, in Wales the restrictions on how schools operated (e.g. wearing masks) became guidance. During this phase headteachers consistently reported significant and ongoing challenges around engaging supply staff to cover teachers and teaching assistants. For student teachers, whilst in-school placements resumed, some continued to be characterised by limitations such as gaining experience of practical elements and broader aspects of school life – this was reported to be highly variable and dependent on individual school context.

The implications of these cumulative experiences are such that it is impossible to know what any one student teacher experienced or missed out on – as it will have been nuanced, context specific and also dependent on their own individual levels of resilience and capability. The impact of this is likely to have an ongoing legacy in terms of the development of their professional expertise and judgement (Morgan *et al.* 2022).

Inequalities

Unquestionably during these phases of the pandemic, it was reported that all educational stakeholders were negatively impacted in some way - be they pupils, student teachers, teachers, teacher educators or headteachers. However, the nature and extent of this impact seemed to be highly variable and unique to individuals due to the combination of pandemic-related changes to practice, the unpredictable nature of absences due to illness and/or the need to self-isolate. Clear from the data was the perception that both pupils and student teachers who in pre-pandemic times might have been considered vulnerable or in need of additional support were most severely impacted, in this way existing inequalities were further exacerbated (Reay 2020, la Velle *et al.* 2020). In addition, there was a strong narrative which outlined the much wider variation in experiences, knowledge, skills and confidence that existed within classes/cohorts of learners as a result of the pandemic.

There were consistently reported nuances highlighted in the data related to pupil progress, including:

- pupil experiences being so highly individualised that it was difficult to establish a general trend;
- typically advantaged pupils (e.g. gifted and talented students, those with parent support etc.) were not as immune to being negatively impacted as might have been expected;

- pupils in established categories, e.g. Additional Learning Needs, English as an Additional Language, Free School Meals, Looked after Children made highly variable levels of progress or none at all, and
- children of key-workers not having access to home-schooling as they were in hub schools which often took the form of childcare rather than focused learning.

This is significant because at the same time that student teachers were experiencing limited opportunities for face-to-face classroom placements, those contexts themselves were becoming increasingly more complex. This was because of the way the pandemic had impacted upon and dramatically changed and increased the variability within classes/cohorts of pupils – themselves the context for student teachers when learning on placement.

In addition the inequalities for student teachers in relation to time on placement were inextricably linked to each school's specific context, adding further inconsistency to their learning experiences. In Wales, ITE programmes normally require 120 days of school placement prior to qualification. In this study as outlined in the phases above high levels of disruption were consistently reported by all participants with the required placement time being made up of a balance of face-to-face and virtual placements. The nature of this balance for some student teachers was highly skewed towards virtual experiences that allowed students to develop online teaching practices supplemented by in-classroom experience dominated by small-group and 'behind the line' teaching practices. Student teachers reported their experiences of face-to-face classroom teaching was severely impacted.

'So, by the point where schools were shut [December], I'd taught one full lesson, and the second lesson...I did teach two lessons, but the second one they only had about ten pupils in because the rest of the class was self-isolating. So, yeah two lessons I had done from December until this week [April 2021].'

PGCE Student Teacher 20/21, Secondary

Striking in the data was a feeling that student teachers had missed out on crucial formative experiences.

'I applied for the course full of enthusiasm but feel totally unexperienced for being left alone in a classroom [April 2021].'

PGCE Student Teacher 20/21, Primary

Teacher educators highlighted the type of experiences such as formative assessment, behaviour management and relationship building they felt student teachers had missed out on.

'Normally as a teacher, you know, you wander around the room...you read the room. You go and stand next to the pupil who is misbehaving, or you go and stand next to the pupil who is really struggling and give them some subtle, surreptitious help if you like. That's really hard to do when you've got to stay in a yellow box at the front of your room. I think that connection, that kind of normal stuff we do without thinking,

I think it does mean that it's more difficult for children to perhaps be picked up and be given help in a timely way.'

Assistant Head, Secondary

For the 20/21 PGCE cohort no student teacher escaped the impact of the pandemic on their in-school ITE experience. All were exposed to a modified form of practice both online and in classrooms and in some way missed out. This will have also continued for two terms in their NQT year (and for the 19/20 cohort for all their NQT year and into their second year as practicing teachers). Despite the significant efforts reported by ITE partnerships (HEIs and schools) working collaboratively to remediate the impact of the pandemic some student teachers still noted that as a consequence of reduced in-school placement experiences they were not confident to apply for teaching roles, despite qualifying, opting instead for teaching assistant work and supply teaching to help them become more familiar with in-school practices. This was despite Welsh Government providing funding to schools for two terms to encourage the recruitment of NQTs for the dual purpose of supporting their ongoing development and providing schools with additional resource in the academic year 21/22.

There was a strong feeling from school and HEI-based teacher educators that the particular experiences of the pandemic cohorts of student teachers needed to be acknowledged and addressed.

'There can't be a blanket thrown over this at the moment...(it's) got to be sort of looked at school level because, you know, a school a few miles down the road might have had...a term that was fine last term, you know?...that's the hard bit with this, this is the hard bit to juggle, isn't it?...they're all going to have different experiences...I think, you know, they're going to have lots of gaps...in their toolkit, if you like because they haven't had the experience.'

School-based Teacher Educator, Secondary

There was evidence that some teacher educators felt that student teachers required more support and experience of face-to-face classroom teaching in order to qualify.

'The experience of students has been very varied...[most] students on the course have had no face-to-face teaching time or have not had the benefit of observing a teacher teach in a classroom. This will have severely limited their ability to develop their own skills.'

School-based Teacher Educator, Primary

'it's, kind of, what do you want them to be? Do you want them to be good online teachers and be a wiz at doing a webinar, or do you want them to be good classroom practitioners? Because they are different things. And it's where do you put your emphasis? I think I would probably argue that the emphasis needs to be on classroom practice because that's probably...that's what they want to be. That's what they're going to do for their career.'

Assistant Headteacher, Secondary

'I feel like what I'm quite lacking...I think a lot of students would think this anyway ...not teaching a full class it is then quite overwhelming when you're presented with 30...if someone put me in foundation phase, I'd have no idea. If I got a job, I wouldn't know how to run class...I've heard it's very different, but I would have no idea and that is a worry...I genuinely would have no idea. And because we haven't got to go into other classes at all.'

PGCE Student Teacher 20/21, Primary

Double trouble - the negative impact on both teachers' and pupils' learning

The findings in this study seem clear that a number of student/ early-career teachers in these cohorts feel they are not as confident, competent or prepared as they might have been without the pandemic. It also identified a pervasive view held by generally HEI teacher educators was that in general the ITE student experience of the pandemic had been 'ok' because whilst they had missed out on in-school placement time these experiences had enabled them to become more resilient and/or develop their IT skills and online pedagogy. This viewpoint feels naive and potentially damaging as it underplays the importance of student teachers needing in-school time to develop their professional practice, teaching craft and understanding of theoretical and research ideas. This view neglects to acknowledge how classroom practice is developed in a sustained and iterative way.

Similarly, the notion of these student teachers having increased resilience is a perplexing one as simply *going through* a difficult experience doesn't necessarily make you more resilient and could potentially make things feel worse (Kassis *et al.* 2018). What seems crucial is the response and learning that results from this experience and it is likely that these will have been highly varied and not responded to in the same way by individual student teachers. Some student teachers clearly articulated their worry and a sense of being overwhelmed rather than feeling more resilient, as a consequence of their experience.

It was apparent that the pandemic impacted simultaneously and deleteriously on both student teachers and pupils. Notwithstanding the significant efforts made by ITE partnerships across Wales to support their students the precarious nature of the legacy of this situation is likely to be ongoing. This study and wider literature (la Velle *et al.* 2020; Moorhouse 2021) suggest that student teachers had impoverished experiences as a result of the pandemic and many of them found themselves qualified and teaching pupils from September 2021, who had also missed out on educational experiences (Betthäuser *et al.* 2023). Intensive levels of disruption continued for the entire academic year (2021/2022) and although beyond the remit of this study will have inevitably caused significant disruption for both these inextricably linked groups. The complex nature of learning to teach (Feiman-Nemser 2003) means it is impossible to know the full impact of the pandemic for each and every teacher. However, it is reasonable to assume, given the variability of experiences, that some student teachers will have been minimally impacted whilst others will have been more severely impacted with a continuum in-between. This variation will also be true for pupils. Therefore, going forward in all schools in Wales it is likely that the reality is that early-career teachers whose training was impacted by the pandemic are now entrusted with the day-to-day of pupils who have similarly impacted – this is the *double trouble*. Where the most severely impacted teachers may end up teaching in school contexts that have a high

proportion of the most severely impacted pupils – this particularly intense version of the *double trouble* could result in a ‘perfect storm’ for our most vulnerable learners. In this more extreme *double trouble* scenario, learners may never recalibrate back to pre-pandemic expectations and early-career teachers may falter, fail and ultimately leave the profession.

Given this, everyone involved in education in Wales needs to have a deep and nuanced understanding of the complexity and legacy of the issues that impacted all student teachers and pupils during the pandemic. Early experiences of learning to teach are fundamental and lasting in terms of the development of an individual’s identity and resilience as a teacher (Pearce and Morrison 2011). Teachers, from these impacted cohorts, will carry their COVID-19 experiences with them and may see themselves as being not ‘properly’ qualified or fully equipped, which could result in them holding onto notions of feeling inadequate for the job in hand. Unfortunately, these feelings may persist unless proactively countered by colleagues, mentors, broader support and sustained, tailored professional learning opportunities that can begin to compensate and help change their internal narratives. Only then will these early-career teachers be equipped and confident to meet the complex needs of their own learners and begin to tackle the significant expectations on teachers of new and aspirational Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government 2015) – a further pressure which may exacerbate the situation further.

Conclusion

The limitations of this study which only ran from September 2020 to April 2021, are acknowledged and the need for further research into the ongoing impact and experiences of the 2018/19 through to the 2021/22 cohorts of qualifying teachers is highlighted. This study illuminates the unique and unprecedented situation caused by the pandemic in schools in Wales and the implications of these changed learning contexts for student teachers. Given the global nature of the pandemic it is likely that these findings may also resonate more broadly. In Wales the government responded to the emerging situation with initiatives that aimed to support student teachers (Welsh Government 2020b) and newly qualified teachers (Welsh Government 2020a) however, the problem was so multifaceted, complex and context specific we assert it cannot simply be addressed wholesale with government intervention – *everyone* in education needs to do their bit, take responsibility for the whole profession and our pupils. We suggest this means that the early-career teachers impacted by the pandemic will now need additional support and consideration from all members of the education profession in Wales - to be nurtured in the settings in which they now find themselves as qualified teachers. As we move forward and the intensity and memories of the pandemic fade these early-career teachers who were understandably often not the priority for schools now need to be supported, in safe and secure environments to grow and develop their practice. The phrase ‘it takes a school to grow a teacher’ (Milton *et al.* 2020, p.12) seems more important than ever. Without understanding and working to mitigate the unique experiences of early-career teachers impacted by the pandemic we fail in our duty to them, their pupils and society more broadly.

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