

EDUCATION

Student teachers learn new resilience

Maureen Robinson 3 Oct 2020

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Every year thousands of student teachers descend on schools for a few weeks of practical exposure to the classroom. They observe, prepare and teach lessons, and are mentored by teachers. This period is a highlight of their degree, as they find themselves experiencing firsthand the fulfilment and challenges of being a member of the profession.

But what if the school is closed? And what if there are no teachers in front of learners? This is the conundrum that faced many student teachers earlier this year, because the Covid-19 pandemic led to many months of schools being closed.

In a twist of irony, these aspirant teachers moved from nervousness and anxiety about standing in front of a class to nervousness and anxiety about not standing in front of a class.

Some months into the pandemic, schools started to open gradually, and student teachers were permitted to enter schools. But now the context for teaching and learning barely resembles the circumstances for which their university lectures had prepared them.

Theories of teaching and learning had to take on a new shape and new questions challenged the **student teachers**. For example, collaborative learning was not easy to arrange under conditions of social distancing, concerns about classroom disruptions were minimised in a masked situation, and learners' excitement for learning could not be relied on in an atmosphere of anxiety.

To quote two student teachers: "Being a student teacher during the Covid-19 period has been interesting. One cannot expect to have had a legitimate experience of school life as school life is completely different to what it was before;" and "Being a student teacher during this time is like experiencing the definition of adaptability and not necessarily experiencing the assumption of what we are taught in theory."

Over and above the challenges of classroom teaching, student teachers had to face the reality that teachers did not have time to give them much advice. One student teacher reported how school meetings are minimal and even staffrooms are empty because of the limited numbers of people that can gather in any given space. Another noted how teachers were working hard to complete the curriculum as well as provide learners with support for well-being and mental health.

Nevertheless, the students were thankful for the assistance the teachers were able to provide under difficult conditions. As one put it: "I cannot say with confidence that I would be able to recognise most of the people I had the pleasure of encountering during my time as a student teacher, but I am extremely grateful that they accommodated me nonetheless, knowing that circumstances were beyond their control."

Teacher educators from universities too had to suddenly re-think the support they could provide to the student teachers. Used to being on the road, visiting new neighbourhoods, sitting in crowded classrooms and having conversation with teachers, the teacher educators now found themselves largely isolated behind their computer screens.

In record time they needed to develop revised activities that would live up to the required academic and professional integrity of teacher education.

Those who had resisted the use of technology were thrust into acknowledging the usefulness of these tools, as videos of lessons replaced face-to-face teaching, WhatsApp groups replaced class discussions and online quizzes replaced sit-down tests.

Covid-19 has affected the lives of thousands of people. Yet there have been unanticipated **learning experiences** for many student teachers. They may not have observed much classroom teaching but they have confronted key educational considerations that they might have glossed over in the past.

This includes addressing the realities of the digital divide among learners and acknowledging the intertwined effect of home and school life on learner achievement.

Assignments during this time have expected of student teachers to provide well thought through motivations for how they plan their lessons, drawing on research, theory and professional conversations. In this way, rather than getting lost in the overwhelming demands of classroom management, there has been time for a considered and reflective approach to lesson construction.

A further development has been the rapid adaptation of student teachers to potential scenarios for education in the future.

Commentators on the **fourth industrial revolution** have warned about the delivery of education becoming the preserve of machines and the resultant disappearance of the human teacher.

But this period has shown that it is the teacher behind the machines that ensures effective processes of learning, because it is the teacher who has to make the crucial pedagogical decisions about what to teach, how to teach and why to teach in particular ways.

Student teachers have recognised their place in education for the future. As one put it: "Experienced teachers themselves are learning to adapt to the new normal and system of

education. However, in these trying times we are also learning valuable skills such as problem-solving, communication, innovative thinking — thus 21st century skills.”

World Teachers Day on 5 October reminds us each year that the work of teaching demands competencies of creativity, resilience and flexibility. During the Covid-19 period, these competencies have stood the teaching profession in good stead. Amid stress and disruption, the pandemic has, ironically, introduced new thinking to the work of teaching and teacher education.

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