

## Article

# Reflections on Distance in Remote Placement Supervision: Bodies, Power, and Negative Education

Ian Munday \*, Manuela Heinz \*  and Brenda Gallagher

School of Education, University of Galway, H91 TK33 Galway, Ireland; brendam.gallagher@universityofgalway.ie

\* Correspondence: ian.munday@universityofgalway.ie (I.M.); manuela.heinz@universityofgalway.ie (M.H.)

**Abstract:** School placement plays a critical and complex role in the professional development of student teachers. When universities and schools shut their doors and moved all teaching activities online in March 2020, initial teacher education (ITE) providers across Ireland had to implement emergency alternative practicum supports in order to ensure that students could complete their ITE programmes. Many initial teacher education providers across Ireland introduced professional online conversations as an alternative approach to professional practice supervision. It is easy to view this response to the COVID-19 crisis in purely deficit terms. For obvious reasons, no sensible teacher educator would advocate for abandoning school visits and replacing them with online professional conversations. Nonetheless, emergency measures arguably brought about affordances to the delivery of teacher education, which are deserving of consideration and may help to inform future practice. In this paper, we draw on our recent experience of ITE emergency practicum supervision to explore assumptions and tensions inherent in traditional teacher education practices. We reflect on how we enacted and experienced professional student–tutor conversations *without* the normally preceding classroom observations and interrogate normalised assumptions about the value and purpose of classroom observation. Our reflections are infused with ideas gleaned from philosophy and sociological theory and are underpinned by a theoretical formulation which we call “negative education”. “Negative education” refers to the learning that takes place as a consequence of deprivation. In these terms, we come to examine the negotiation of power and relationships in different learning environments. We explore the benefits of “zooming out”, to disseminate power, and show how this helps to engage with the broader aspects of teaching which are so easily overlooked by both tutors and students during “normal” school visits.

**Keywords:** teacher education; school placement; power; care; bodies; relationships; philosophical reflection; technology; COVID-19; Ireland



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## 1. Introduction

When universities and schools shut their doors and moved all teaching activities online in March 2020, initial teacher education (ITE) providers across Ireland had to implement emergency alternative practicum supports in order to ensure that students could complete their ITE programmes. While schools reopened in September 2020, teacher educators continued to support new cohorts of student teachers in their academic as well as professional development, including their practical teaching in schools, through online engagement. School visits were impossible for a full academic year due to national and institutional Health and Safety Guidelines. While virtual classroom observation could be arranged with some schools, significant administrative, legal and GDPR challenges necessitated an alternative approach to practicum supervision in order to allow flexible yet consistent support and fair assessment of all student teachers. Professional conversations between students and tutors, focused on placement experiences and learning, were introduced by many ITE providers across Ireland as an alternative to the traditional approach, which had combined classroom observation with feedback discussions. The new approach was supported by

the Teaching Council, which is the regulatory body for the teaching profession that has responsibility for the accreditation of teacher education programmes.

It would have been easy to view this unavoidable emergency response to the crisis in purely deficit terms. For obvious reasons, none of us would, in normal times, have advocated for abandoning school visits and replacing them with online professional conversations. Nonetheless, we endeavoured, from the outset, to fully embrace and carefully develop this alternative approach so that it could meaningfully support student teacher development. During this time of no access to school sites, we spent less time travelling across the country visiting students in their placement sites and more time connecting with each other to share our thoughts and experiences. In regular meetings with faculty and our team of part-time school placement tutors, we developed a commitment to viewing the emergency context “not only as a challenging and unsettling period but also as a moment in which we could look afresh at that to which we had become accustomed” [1] We found ourselves discovering new perspectives on practices which had only recently appeared normal and unremarkable. With a new physical distance between us and our student teachers and the curtains closed on their teaching performances in schools, it seemed that everything we had taken for granted in our placement mentoring work had, at least temporarily, disappeared.

In this paper, we draw on our recent experience of ITE emergency practicum supervision to explore assumptions and tensions inherent in traditional teacher education practices. We reflect on ways in which we have, during the COVID-19 pandemic, built relationships with our students from a distance (on screen) and, in particular, how we enacted and experienced professional student–tutor conversations *without* the normally preceding classroom observations. We considered a range of probing questions that pertain to the development of mentoring relationships and practice learning during the crisis; for example: Can “caring” mentoring relationships be fostered in differently embodied learning environments? How did our teacher educator identities shift as we supported the student teachers’ developing classroom practice *without* classroom observation? How were our professional conversations different in positive terms from our traditional school visits?

Ultimately, we come to frame these questions in relation to what we have called “negative education”, an education born out of deprivation and absence. We come to argue that this education takes two forms. The first form involves coming to a richer understanding of the value of what we were able to do prior to the restrictions brought on by COVID-19. The second relates to understanding the affordances of those restrictions, affordances which helped us to critically engage with our former practices.

## 2. Context—Teaching and Teacher Education in Ireland

In Ireland, 554,788 children between the ages of 4 and 12 attended 3239 primary schools and 391,698 students between the ages of 12 and 18 attended second-level schools in the 2021/22 academic year. In total, the Department of Education employed 40,351 primary and 32,145 s-level teachers [2]. As in other jurisdictions, teacher shortages have been causing difficulties for schools for quite some time and this situation was severely exacerbated during the COVID-19 crisis which saw the number of teacher absences skyrocket as a result of the spread of the infection and associated legislation requiring close contacts to self-isolate for up to ten days. Initial teacher education providers and student teachers have been recognised by various education partners as having played a significant part in ensuring the continuation of school education for all children and young people across the country. The Teaching Council and Department of Education held several consultations with higher education institutions to ensure the continuation of initial teacher education and qualification in this context, and teacher education programmes developed various flexible approaches to ITE delivery so as to facilitate the student teachers’ continued development in their programmes while also allowing them to support the education system through emergency substitution. The sharply increasing need for such substitution resulted in very high workloads for many student teachers between 2020 and 2022.

Teachers need to be registered with, and ITE programmes are accredited by, the Irish Teaching Council. Undergraduate ITE programmes are four years, and postgraduate programmes are two years, in duration. Entry to ITE courses is competitive at all levels and demand for programmes has generally been high across the country [3,4]. All programmes incorporate academic, practical and research elements. As part of the accreditation process, ITE providers are required to demonstrate how their programme design facilitates meaningful connection between the various foundation disciplines—Psychology, Philosophy, History and Sociology of Education—and the practical teaching components. These connections are mostly created through reflective practice seminars and the development of teaching portfolios where student teachers explore and reflect on their own backgrounds, ITE experiences and professional learning. The recently updated Standards for Initial Teacher Education Programmes—Céim—specify “reflective, research-informed teaching and learning that links sites of practice (HEI and school)” as a “key principle of teacher education programme design” [5]. The same document specifies seven additional core elements: inclusive education, global citizenship education, professional relationships and working with parents, professional identity and agency, creativity and reflective practice, literacy and numeracy and digital skills.

According to Céim, “school placement is the fulcrum of teacher education” [5]. Student teachers spend forty percent of their programme duration on placement engaging in a variety of teaching-related and wider school activities, including classroom observation, team teaching, independent teaching and participating in extracurricular activities. Every student teacher works with at least two different university tutors during their school placement periods. Tutors usually conduct a minimum of three school visits for each student per academic year, combining classroom observation with feedback discussions. As far as possible, tutors also engage with teachers and school leaders to discuss the students’ progress. At our university, school placement learning outcomes and assessment criteria are specified within the following thematic areas: (1) professional dispositions, conduct and practice; (2) planning and preparation of teaching, learning and assessment; (3) demonstration of subject knowledge and selection of teaching aids; (4) management of teaching and learning environment; (5) teaching, learning and assessment strategies; (6) critical thinking, problem solving and reflection skills.

### **3. School Placement: A Key Element of Teacher Education and Responses during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

School placement holds immense importance in teacher education as it offers student teachers a platform to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings. Some of the core objectives associated with school placements focus on opportunities for student teachers to “practice, experiment and develop teaching and learning approaches and classroom management skills as well as their understanding of schools as complex and collaborative ecosystems supporting students’ academic and professional development” [6]. Moreover, Caires et al. [7] propose that, during school placement, student teachers should be adequately supported and challenged to cultivate a sense of efficacy, flexibility and spontaneity in their performance and interactions. However, school placement can also pose challenges and induce stress for student teachers due to various internal and external factors, as emphasized by Hall et al. [8] and Keane et al. [9]. Consequently, it is crucial for teacher educators to provide comprehensive support and guidance to student teachers throughout their school placement, ensuring that they can achieve the core objectives while effectively managing the associated stressors and difficulties. The university tutors’ primary responsibility lies in supporting student teachers during their placement, providing feedback on their classroom practice and professional development, facilitating the student teachers’ reflective practices, setting goals for development and, ultimately, assessing their teaching performance. Effective supervision during school placement is crucial to ensure appropriate support and challenge for student teachers in developing their competencies, teacher identity and self-efficacy.

Challenges identified during the COVID-19 pandemic include technological issues for both mentor teachers and students, including the need to rapidly upskill, but also related to more practical issues like poor internet connectivity and/or limited access to technology [10–12]. The disruption to “normal” teaching and learning activities made it difficult for student teachers to gain practical experience in many basic teaching skills, especially related to student–teacher interaction, classroom management and collaborative teaching and learning approaches. The feeling that they could not put into practice what they had learnt and were missing out on getting to know their students and/or working closely with their mentor teachers was frustrating for many students [13,14]. The reduced access to classroom settings and interactions with students and teachers therefore resulted in some student teachers and mentors feeling that the students’ professional development was hampered due to the lack of opportunities for classroom observation. Especially in the initial weeks and months, the significant changes and uncertainty, combined with the added pressure experienced by many due to full-time caring responsibilities in their own homes, resulted in high workload and stress levels for both students and university tutors [1]. In addition, the lack of face-to-face interactions between students, teachers and mentors was considered a barrier to the development of supportive and trusting relationships which, in turn, had an impact on the student teachers’ sense of belonging towards their programme and, indeed, the profession.

Nevertheless, some studies also identified benefits of students’ and teachers’ experiences during these challenging times. De Coito and Estaiteyeh [15] reported that the experience of school closures and online teaching pushed teachers to develop their digital literacy and pedagogical skills and encouraged creativity which, in turn, positively impacted their students’ motivation. A number of studies discussed opportunities for students and teachers to develop more authentic and collaborative relationships during this time when everyone was learning together [1,16]. Practical advantages included more flexibility in scheduling and reduced costs for travelling. In terms of the student teachers’ experience and learning, Varela and Desiderio [14] found that the transition to distance and online teaching enhanced the student teachers’ appreciation and understanding of inequities in student cohorts.

#### 4. Methodology—Phenomenological Reflection and “Negative Education”

In this paper, we, three teacher educators, draw on our recent experience of ITE emergency practicum supervision to explore assumptions and tensions inherent in traditional teacher education practices. We reflect on ways in which we have, during the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, built relationships with our students from a distance (on screen) and, in particular, how we enacted and experienced professional student–tutor conversations *without* the normally preceding classroom observations.

We each have more than fifteen years of experience in teacher education as course leaders and module coordinators. Our specific teaching areas include Professional Practice, Curriculum Studies, Philosophy of Education, Research Methods, English, Geography and Modern Languages Teaching Methodologies. We each supervise eight student teachers in school placement per year. Overall, our department supported over 400 student teachers during placement in second-level schools across Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the preparation for this reflective paper, we considered a range of probing questions that pertain to the development of mentoring relationships and practice learning during the crisis, including:

- How did we enact and experience online professional conversations with our student teachers?
- What were we concerned about and why?
- How did our teacher educator identities shift as we supported the student teachers’ developing classroom practice *without* classroom observation?
- How were our professional conversations different from our traditional school visits?
- What did we gain from the experience that can inform our future practice?

In exploring these questions, we draw on our individual and shared reflections, as well as on notes from informal discussions and ongoing meetings we held with different groups of school placement tutors throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our approach to exploring the experience of conducting professional conversations embodied the spirit of philosophical work in phenomenology. As Moran notes, philosophers associated with phenomenology are distrustful of systematic ways of thinking and their first step is “to seek to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance, whether these are drawn from religious or cultural traditions, from everyday common sense, or, indeed, from science itself” [17]. The point is to try and understand experience in as direct a manner as possible. From this perspective, the imposition of theoretical systems or fixed methodological approaches can obscure the phenomena that are being examined and explored and present a blockage to encounters with what is being researched.

Whilst our approach was obviously neither naïve nor innocent, it was, intentionally, not reliant on, or shaped by, a pre-prescribed methodological system. Though we drew on philosophies sometimes grouped together under the banner of phenomenology to make our argument, we did not introduce these ideas in a forced or systematic fashion. Rather, the writings of Heidegger and Levinas, amongst others, came to illuminate the specifics of a form of practice we were trying to simultaneously inhabit and examine. This was due to the fact that they explore something absolutely germane to our project, namely the nature of embodied experience. When we strove to understand the affordances and problematic aspects of professional conversations, the role and importance of the body came to the fore. More specifically, we came to see how deprivation, in regard to various possibilities for using our bodies whilst teaching, taught us something about our practice. In our critical reflection we explore how this deprivation both heightened our sense of what was lost when communicating in online environments but also what can be gained. This experience led us to an original conceptual formulation that we call “negative education”—a form of education that comes about as a consequence of what one is “not” able to do.

## 5. What Is Lost, What Is Gained? Critical Reflections on Embodiment, Power and Performance

### 5.1. *Missing Bodies and Scepticism towards Students’ Accounts of Their Teaching*

A core theme emerging from our concerns and conversations regarding the prospect of professional conversations *without* classroom observations related to the rise of a certain scepticism regarding the students’ accounts of their classroom practice. We debated whether and/or in what ways we could or should believe what our students told us about their teaching given that we had not witnessed it for ourselves? Considering the role and validity of assessment we feared that, for all we knew, students could be making it up. During our reflective exploration of the consequences of the new situation, and our new “blindness” to practice, we also delved into each other’s assumptions regarding why we felt we needed to see classroom practice for ourselves. This new question, in turn, offered new insights into our perspectives regarding reflective practice, a teacher education methodology whose rationale we had rarely taken the time to debate during “normal times”.

What does it mean to give an accurate account of one’s teaching, given “accounts” were all that we could now be privy to. There is a sense, is there not, that no account can ever do justice to the experience of teaching as teaching is through and through an embodied activity. So much depends on the channelling of energies, rhythm, pace, negotiations of power which may be invisible but are felt when present within a room. Think of those occasions when student teachers seem to get smaller, less present as though they were almost disappearing into the wall (Teacher Educator Reflection).

If we could not be present and not just see but experience such things through our bodies, then, we wondered, how could we possibly engage with what our students were “doing” (as opposed to hear them talk about what they “did”) and evaluate their progress?



Indeed, one might say that our concerns in this regard engendered a third form of scepticism regarding the adequacy, or perhaps inadequacy, of “reflection” to account for an activity such as teaching and the void between describing something and doing it.

Our experiences and concerns prompted us to think more deeply about the role of bodies in teaching and teacher education. Drawing on the work of Green [18], Green and Hopwood [19] and Van Manen [20], Godhe and Brante [21] note:

To engage in a particular social practice, such as teaching, bodies need to learn ‘to be’ in certain ways. Interacting with students in their professional practices, involves both speech and bodily aspects. . . The physical body is therefore an integrated part of professional practices even though it may not consciously be thought of as such. [21]

Roughly a hundred years ago, in his most famous work *Being and Time* [22], the philosopher Martin Heidegger tried to alert us to the ways in which experience is embodied. Against philosophy’s Cartesian assumptions of a gap between mind and world, and between thought and action, Heidegger directs us towards how our everyday coping in the world is embodied in ways which we are not fully conscious or aware of and argues that so much of our experience is “ready-to-hand”—when I switch the light on, it is not “usually” something I am consciously doing. Indeed, it is only when the bulb dies, or a fuse goes, that the experience of turning the light on becomes “present-at-hand” and the object of consciously directed experience. Given this sense of ready-to-handedness of our coping in the world, there is a sense in which the clear division between humans and their equipment begins to dissolve—when the expert carpenter hammers without consciously directing himself towards the nail, the hammer becomes part of what he is, not just an object that he uses. To allude to Heidegger’s contemporary Gabriel Marcel [23], it becomes part of his “being”, i.e., something he “is” not something he has. We talk about guitarists not guitar players, because the guitar has, in some sense, become part of the guitarist.

The sort of understanding which emerges through Heidegger and Marcel’s writing forms the basis for Practice Theory. Here is Reckwitz:

Practices are routinized bodily activities; as interconnected complexes of behavioural acts they are movements of the body. A social practice is the product of training the body in a certain way: when we learn a practice, we learn to be bodies in a certain way (and this means more than to ‘use our bodies’). A practice can be understood as the regular, skilful ‘performance’ of (human) bodies. This holds for modes of handling certain objects as well as for ‘intellectual’ activities such as talking, reading or writing. The body is thus not a mere ‘instrument’ which ‘the agent’ must ‘use’ in order to ‘act’, but the routinized actions are themselves bodily performances (which does not mean that a practice consists only of these movements and of nothing more, of course). These bodily activities then include also routinized mental and emotional activities which are—on a certain level—bodily, as well. The conclusion: if practices are the site of the social, then routinized bodily performances are the site of the social and—so to speak—of ‘social order’. They give the world of humans its visible orderliness [24].

Our experience of professional conversations without classroom observation prompted us to explore and interrogate our normalised observation and feedback practices. What is it that we had gotten used to observing and were now missing? One of the necessarily common experiences for teacher educators is to witness the variety of ways in which the embodied practice of teaching has yet to become ready-to-hand for our students and is still developing as a routinized bodily activity. Students are in the process (hopefully?) of developing the “regular, skilful performance” of teaching. Equipment has, at this stage, not been absorbed into the teacher’s identity, into their being so to speak. Being able to see these things and talk about them with students is something so central to the practice of being a teacher educator that we often do not think about it.

### 5.2. Differently Embodied Teacher Education Practices and the Absence of Visible Orderliness

Becoming alert to what we lose in being unable to see and experience our students develop in these ways is perhaps one of the positive consequences of COVID-19. To use Heideggerian terminology, the extent to which teaching is an embodied practice became present-at-hand and might therefore be thought of as a form of negative education afforded by the deprivations of COVID-19. By “negative education”, we mean the ways in which the absence of something can itself be educative—one comes to a fuller understanding of a phenomena or practice as a consequence of being deprived of access to it.

What applies in regard to what we learnt from the situation in which we could not see our students, and our thinking about what “their” classroom teaching involves, also applies to our own practices and ways of giving feedback. A very interesting study by Godhe and Brante [21] highlights this form of negative education experienced by teacher educators during a move to emergency teaching. Godhe and Brante [21] interviewed 16 teacher educators in their own institution about their experiences of teaching online during COVID-19. They were surprised to discover that rather than complaining about technological difficulties, their colleagues were mainly concerned about the deprivations brought on by the move away from face-to-face teaching. They came to appreciate the importance of the physical aspects of modelling teaching to their students, the importance of physical proximity in the development of relationships, the losses incurred when one is unable to maintain eye contact with students and the difficulties of interrupting students whilst on zoom to challenge a point. All these losses alerted these teachers to the ways in which “their routinized mental and emotional activities [ . . . ] are—on a certain level—bodily, as well” [24].

We shared the concerns of the teachers in Godhe and Brante’s [21] study and came to feel that the inability to do certain things expanded and enriched our understanding of what we “did” and now do again in “more” normal times. However, we also came to feel that there are dangers here, which are perhaps nicely encapsulated by the English expression “absence makes the heart grow fonder”. This expression, which we imagine must have its counterpart in other languages, captures the notion that our relationships with loved ones or particular places we have left behind might (a) not have been as perfect as they come to seem when we are away from them and (b) that absence can produce nostalgia (it is worth noting that, in its original meaning, “nostalgia” was a malady, a form of madness). In this sense, absence can be maleducative—just as it, absence, might enrich or deepen our understanding of something it can also produce an unhealthy fetishization of to how things “were”. Consider the last part of the quotation from Reckwitz included above where he writes: “The conclusion: if practices are the site of the social, then routinized bodily performances are the site of the social and—so to speak—of “social order”. They give the world of humans its visible orderliness [24]. Perhaps the deepening understanding helps conserve teaching “as it was” in its visible orderliness without considering the ways in which certain embodied practices may have questionable or undesirable aspects. This serves to suture up the wound through which what teaching might become could bleed out.

We want to insist that we are not accusing the teacher educators in Godhe and Brante’s [21] study of full-blown nostalgia. We think their ways of thinking about teaching as an embodied practice are very rich. Moreover, in a short section of their piece there is evidence of the sort of bleeding out discussed above. For example, the teacher educators acknowledge that the fact that it is difficult to interrupt one another in the online setting has some affordances. Such difficulties promote a situation in which everyone gets to have their say [21].

### 5.3. Interrogating the Power of Embodied Education and Appreciating “Otherness”

So far, we have described what we are calling negative education. This form of education involves coming to appreciate the embodied complexity of classroom teaching for both teachers and student educators through “not” being physically present. We argued that this has a dangerous dimension as it may invoke nostalgia for what we had. But there is

a second form of negative education in which physical absence itself produced affordances. To try and account for what is at stake here we move from reflecting on what is lost to what is gained from what we did (and indeed what our students did) in a situation marked by deprivation and absence. The affordances here principally involved becoming more au fait with the operations of power present in relationships between teacher educators and student teachers. Let us set this out in terms of some broad areas.

We started to think about the sorts of things we did in feedback sessions prior to COVID-19 in regard to embodied practices of modelling. Such sessions would often take place in empty classrooms and would, for example, include modelling where to stand in the classroom to speak to the group, how to stand/crouch when talking to students so that one could see the whole group, and writing on the board whilst simultaneously keeping an eye on the students. These are precisely the sort of embodied practices that become second nature to so many teachers. Because we could not “do” these things during professional conversations, we found ourselves talking about them with students. This led to interesting discussions around the nature of power and how it manifests itself in classrooms through numerous almost invisible embodied practices. We would consider how the techniques related to how and where one stands are all techniques of power and think through the ways in which putting them into practice embodied a lack of trust in children. This would lead on to conversations about trying to find a balance between trust and naivety in our dealings with children.

We are not saying that these discussions showed us, and indeed our students, “the light”. Quite the opposite, they revealed the murkiness of embodied professional practice and the multiple micro-ethical issues surrounding power negotiations within teaching. Our conversations helped us to delve deeper than previously into the topics of power, relationships and trust and resulted in us taking more time to think through these concerns.

As mentioned earlier, one of our chief anxieties regarding not being able to see our students teach related to our abilities to trust that their accounts were accurate. Whilst we have already touched on concerns that any account can do justice to embodied experience, something quite interesting happened during these conversations. With little or no prompting students would often set the scene in a much more detailed way than would normally be the case. They would almost simulate what we could not see in rich and detailed ways so that we could discuss it. What this affords, which is difficult in discussions following observations, is a fuller sense of how “they” [student teachers] saw things. If you like, we had no choice but to accept the veracity of our students’ accounts and indeed to trust what they said. If you like, the circumstances which disallowed one form of seeing and experiencing things opened up other possibilities which allowed us to engage with *otherness*. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas [25] talks about the ethical importance of preserving the other’s otherness. We wondered how often our pre-COVID meetings with students had involved imposing our own ways of experiencing and appreciating their practice without properly attending to the ways in which they saw things. Interestingly, the difficulties of interrupting students whilst on zoom facilitated a greater exposure to how our students saw things. We started to wonder if the irritability we felt when struggling to interrupt our students during their accounts said less about concerns with the unnaturalness of zoom talk, and more about our desire to impose our own ways of seeing on to the situation.

#### 5.4. Long-Distance Caring Relationships and the Role of Alterity

The teacher educators interviewed in Godhe and Brante’s study [21] felt that the absence of physical proximity meant that it was difficult to build caring relationships with students. We felt this too. School placement during COVID-19 was often stressful for our students. Our lack of experience in teaching in similar emergency school contexts combined with our concerns regarding the impact of physical distance on our relationships with students prompted us to think more deeply about how we could care for them in these unprecedented circumstances. How could we best empathise with what our students were grappling with and assume a nurturing role? We were drawn into thinking



about Martin Buber's discussion of relationships and Nel Noddings' Care Theory. Buber draws a contrast between I-It and I-Thou relationships. The I-It orientation involves a sensibility whereby the "I" (the person or subject) is detached from people and things in the world (a series of "its") [26]. This leads us to see people and things as objects to be analysed and categorized. In contrast, the I-Thou orientation brings about a situation in which the distinction between the individual and others breaks down and we enter the "world of relation, a world characterized by mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity and ineffability" [27]. Noddings' philosophy of Care [28–30] also presents relatedness as involving the *breaking down* of barriers between teacher and student. For Noddings, caring should undergird what teachers do: "When that climate is established and maintained, everything else goes better" [31]. In contrast to Buber, Noddings argues that caring relations are non-reciprocal, and the cared-for's role in proceedings is to show that caring has been received [31]. Whilst neither Noddings nor Buber insist upon physical presence in the development of caring relationships, it is pretty much taken for granted—they were not writing during emergency pandemics.

Whilst we would have loved to think that our pre-COVID relationships exhibited the sort of I-Thou reciprocity discussed by Buber, moving to online professional conversations, as illustrated in the previous sections, made us wonder if our relationships pre-COVID had possessed more of the parental flavour of what Nel Noddings advocates in her account of care theory. Whilst we would not wish to underplay the importance of this, our new situation prompted us to explore certain risks with such an approach. We wondered whether "nurturing" or "caring" (in the sense used by Nel Noddings) may simultaneously be suffocating. Could what may look like empathy to us translate into situations in which we may be too quick to transplant past experiences onto our students' ways of seeing things?

Just as we did when thinking about trust in regard to our students' accounts of their teaching, we, again, turned to the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas whose work has received some attention within the study of Education (see, for example, [32]) but has a marginal status relative to Care Theory. Whereas Noddings' philosophy of Care presents relatedness as involving the breaking down of barriers between self and other through dialogue, for Levinas, the ethical relation is not about merging with the other's feelings and sensibilities. Rather, it "is" about preserving the other's "alterity" (or "otherness") in our encounters. Levinas' most famous way of framing this alterity relates to the experience of encountering the other's face:

Speech addresses itself to a face. Knowledge seizes hold of its object. It possesses it. Possession denies the independence of being, without destroying that being—it denies and maintains. But the face, for its part, is inviolable; those eyes, which are absolutely without protection the most naked part of the human body, none the less offer an absolute resistance to possession, an absolute resistance in which the temptation to murder is inscribed: the temptation of absolute negation. [33].

Levinas is talking about the shocking experience of the other's face when that face resists the violation of the desire to know and possess. Rather than being presented as a gateway to the soul (which I might hope to enter and "know") the eyes offer "absolute resistance to possession". Note—the eyes here are a reflective surface—I am presented back to myself as other to myself. This experience: "has nothing to do with those rare moments when you look into the depths of someone's eyes: it is what you see when you do not notice the colour of a person's eyes" [34]. The other's inviolability here, the reflective nature of her surface, is what makes her vulnerable to "murder". This temptation to violence, to destroy what I cannot assimilate, is overcome when the face "summons me to responsibility before the other and to an obligation that deepens the more I answer to it" [35]. This summons is an invitation to humanity.

Coming back to professional conversations conducted on zoom, it is worth noting that techniques available in situations of close spatial proximity, which may do violence to the other, are denied us here. It is impossible in such meetings to look the other in the

eye. Faces absolute in their vulnerability confront us. Such faces include our own (we should not overlook the vertiginous experience of seeing oneself all the time). This shared vulnerability is perhaps one of the factors that made online professional conversations so rich and served to weaken the power dynamic that can be present in in-person visits. It is worth noting that, in Ireland, tutors are often referred to by students and qualified teachers as “inspectors”. This is partly due to a situation in which visiting tutors from the university have more power regarding grading performance than they do in some other national contexts. This dynamic can make the visit into a fraught experience for students who are waiting to be “judged”. We have always tried to resist this aspect of the culture, the ways in which it imposes a particular identity on the teacher educator, and would argue that online professional conversations, and the shared vulnerability they produce, can help in this cause.

### 5.5. Broadening and Deepening Conversations in the Differently Embodied Third Space

As we engaged with students online and conducted professional conversations which were not preceded by classroom observation, we felt that the nature of student–tutor relationships and engagement changed. We noted our adjustment to a “less directive role” and a more informal type of engagement which was, in some respects, more balanced, honest and exploratory. As tutors we engaged in “much more listening, we needed to hear about school context and classroom experiences from our students to see the invisible through their eyes”. We were reflecting and brainstorming ideas together “in a world that was new to both partners in this mentoring relationship”.

Tutors also shared their experiences of being more intentionally and explicitly “human” with many meetings “naturally starting with a check in to see how students were coping with everything and this support was often appreciated by students and, sometimes, led them to open up about difficult situations they were facing in their personal lives”.

Over time we noticed that the conversations that developed as we engaged with student teachers in a new, differently embodied *third* space—not in school and not in college—were more relaxed and exploratory. In part, we felt that this was due to us mostly being situated in a calmer environment, away from the business and the pressure to perform in the school environment. Our engagement became much more informal than our ‘normal’ interactions between student teachers and tutors in schools “as we were in our kitchens or bedrooms after the day in school, often in much more comfortable clothes than we would be wearing in the formal school or university environment”.

The ‘hysteria’ sometimes observed in schools around an observation (perpetuated by teachers who had themselves experienced the ‘inspection model’) was reduced. I felt that there was greater honesty and openness on the part of the student teachers. This may have been, at least in part, due to the form of questions asked but also the absence of physical proximity and, hence, a reduced need to provide a perceived ‘correct answer’ (Teacher Educator Reflection).

This, again, illustrates what we discussed earlier in regard to a form of *negative education* freed from nostalgia. We came to see the downsides (as well as the upsides) to being in a shared physical space and, indeed, the particular problems with that shared physical space within the school context. Indeed, it has now become commonplace, when possible, for colleagues to arrange some meetings with students outside the school context to discuss their placement experiences and professional learning. We now value opportunities to meet them away from the hysteria-inducing, stultifying aspects of the physical school environment where we once, unthinkingly, hosted nearly all of our placement supervision discussions.

The challenging and uncertain context also prompted us to explore our student teachers’ individual experiences, perspectives and learning in greater depths. Our conversations felt more flexible, less competency-based or prescribed; our focus was much broader, reaching far beyond what we would have addressed when discussing an observed lesson. We pre-planned our meetings to include reflections on issues such as teacher professional

identity and agency, and the value and meaning of education, topics which we would not normally address in post-observation conversations.

Even with the best intentions, one can easily [during a classroom visit] focus too strongly on specific factors within the lesson and miss broader and deeper dimensions of the student's overall development as a teacher. I found that the professional conversations allowed for far reaching explorations around the purposes of education, deeper engagement with what "inclusive" teaching might look like, and more meaningful probing into richer ways of incorporating literacy and numeracy into lessons. In short, these conversations allowed me to navigate those aspects of the course from which the students sometimes feel their teaching is at a "remove". For example, I felt that the professional conversations helped students to see the ways in which teaching is inextricably bound to concerns germane to the educational sciences. One might say—well you could do this in live visits couldn't you? Perhaps, but it's difficult. Adrenaline levels are high and students are hungry to discover how "this" particular lesson went. It is hard for both tutors and student teachers to pull away from such a tight focus (Teacher Educator Reflection).

## 6. Conclusions: "Zoom Out", Disseminate Power and Deepen Reflection

We want to insist that we are *not* saying that we want to maintain professional conversations at the expense of seeing our students in the flesh and in real classrooms. Teaching is "obviously" an embodied act. If one is unable to see and/or feel the dynamics of a classroom and indeed get a sense of how students conduct the various energies and intensities within the room, then one is missing a lot. The student teachers' and tutors' shared presence in a real classroom brings an immediacy to the feedback conversation, allowing teacher educators to home in on specifics in a concentrated and focused way. Exploring how specific situations and actions, there and then experienced by both tutor and student, might be refined and improved is an important part of teacher education and should *not* be replaced by professional conversations.

However, with all that in mind, there are limitations imposed by the live in-person visit and the subsequent feedback sessions. Our experience of conducting professional conversations in the online space *without* classroom observations during the COVID-19 pandemic helped us to recognize and interrogate these. The disruption of our "normal" supervision practices triggered new conversations and thinking about teaching and supervision as "bodily performances" as well as about power dynamics and the nature of caring in teacher education. We discussed whether what is "nurturing" or "caring" (in the sense used by Nel Noddings) may simultaneously be suffocating and recognized the risks associated with "empathy" when it gently pushes us to transplant our own past experiences or offer solutions on/to our students. Our new experiences led us to see more clearly what was missing but also what was gained. Seeing more clearly (and depending on descriptions of) what our students saw helped us to gain a greater awareness of how our "normal" being in classrooms with them and "being able to show and explain things" together with the time pressure we often experience in on-site post-observation discussions can easily blur or block our sight of our students' ways of seeing (or feeling) things.

Our experience of distanced and online supervision brought to our attention that it is also important and beneficial to "zoom out" in order to disseminate power and engage with the broader aspects of teaching which are so easily overlooked. Both Noddings and Levinas are purists, and we feel that their ideas are impossibly demanding if each is not tempered by the other. As mentioned above, Noddings' approach to caring can easily become smothering, whilst the absolute vulnerability advocated by Levinas is exhausting and unsustainable. Physically present caring and online respect for otherness temper the worst excesses of teaching approaches that would cling to either philosophy.

What did we gain from the experience that can inform our future practice? We have gained a greater awareness of the importance of carefully tuning into and negotiating

care, power and performance in different learning environments. We feel that online student–tutor conversations can facilitate valuable opportunities to hear from our students in ways that emphasise their perspectives on teaching. It is worth noting that, though Levinas’ writing on the face deals explicitly with relations between persons, his meditations on responsibility and alterity extend beyond this towards a relation to knowledge [35]. Importantly, this works against a sense of mastery. For obvious reasons, our students are searching for such mastery, but the professional conversation, which sends out feelers towards the unlimited possibilities of thinking and action (or thinking-in-action), militates against perfectionist tendencies endemic to the culture of performativity.

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