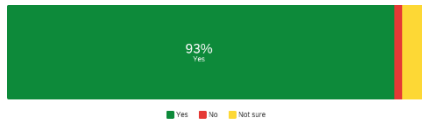


Q1. What Innovative Practices for School Placement were Implemented to Adapt to Covid-19?

In 2020/21, our immediate concern was for, PME Year 2, B.Ed and B.Ed in Education & Psychology Year 4 graduating students, who undertook their extended school placement (SP) respectively in spring 2021 and in autumn 2020. We were also concerned to provide for B.Ed and B.Ed in Education & Psychology Year 3, who had been unable to engage in SP in Spring 2020 due to school closures. We planned for these placements, and the regular schedule of placements for other year groups taking account of Public Health advice and specific sectoral guidance from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the Teaching Council (TC).¹ The set of *guiding principles* agreed by the DES, Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) and the Conference of Heads of Irish Colleges of Education (CHOICE) in July 2020 also provided valuable guidance regarding the conduct of placements. The principles advised that SP for graduating students should be prioritised in the autumn semester, and therefore SP for non-graduating students was re-scheduled for the spring semester. Clearly the trajectory of the pandemic was characterised by uncertainty and it wasn't predictable in the summer of 2020 that spring 2021 would present greater challenges than autumn 2020. When schools re-opened in September 2020, and placements commenced at the end of September, it remained uncertain whether these placements would continue. As our 464 Year 4 students were the first cohort of initial teacher education (ITE) students at primary level to undertake extended SP in 2020/2021, the College is indebted to the 367 schools who ensured that these graduating students completed their placement uninterrupted and greatly assisted us in our endeavours to chart the SP journey for all of our students during a global pandemic. The exponential



success of students' placement experience is evident in the responses to a survey independently distributed by the MIC Quality Office, to students, which delivered a 41% response rate and whereby as reported in Figure 1. 93% of students responded that SP had been an enjoyable experience.²

Figure 1. Student Survey: Did you Enjoy School Placement?

We welcome the TC's recognition of 'innovation' and would like to acknowledge specifically the pivotal role of schools and colleagues in responding innovatively to ensure that students undertook meaningful, collaborative and sustained placements. The innovative practices that emerged were underpinned by a commitment to intensive planning processes; developing clear and coherent communicative processes; directing specific attention to upskilling and adapting and responding as required to the myriad of relevant and often unforeseen variables. In this regard, the work of College personnel, including lecturers, tutors, professional services staff and school personnel was fundamental. This work, combined with the positive relationships developed between MIC and schools over many years, were in effect the twin pillars underpinning the innovative practices that evolved. Survey data at Figure 2 confirms the indispensable contribution of class teachers in maintaining the essence and integrity of the SP experience.³

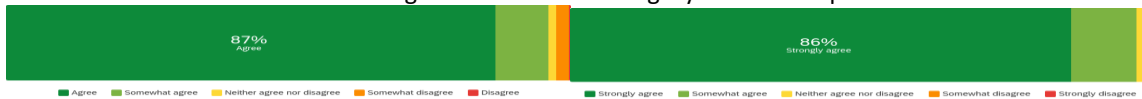


Figure 2. Student Survey: My Class Teacher Offered Relevant and Helpful Advice Tutor Survey: The Class Teacher, Treoirí, Supported the Student on Placement

A core principle of SP at MIC is that each SP experience is customised and tailored to where the student is at in terms of the continuum of their ITE journey. In planning for our 2.050 placements at primary level, we remained cognisant of adhering to both the programme accreditation criteria and required duration of SP, directing due attention to both the DES and TC guidelines and the ongoing challenges posed by COVID-19 at classroom and school level, including national and local school closures. Tutors' and students' health and well-being, in addition to workload, remained key considerations throughout. The following are some examples of adaptations that were made:

Revised Teaching Schedules on Each Placement: As befits the re-conceptualisation of *school placement* as opposed to *teaching practice*, all MIC (primary) placements incorporate a range of teaching and learning engagements for students as well as sustained whole-class teaching. As a result of the school closures in spring 2020 and spring 2021, and the consequent loss of teachers' in-class teaching time, it would have been unreasonable to request facilitation of the standard level of full-day whole-class teaching on our SP. Following consultation with principals, we adapted teaching schedules on each SP in a manner that recognised the needs of pupils, teachers' requirements for on-going contact with their pupils and the needs of the students on their learning to teach journey combined with the overall accreditation criteria. The requirement for standardised testing in schools in spring 2021 further underlined the need for flexible and responsive schedules. The resulting structure balanced the needs and requirements of all stakeholders and provided a flexibility to recognise each school's unique context and pupil cohort. Schools were very keen to continue to support

¹ Specific placement related guidance was implicit in key policy agreements and arrangements, notably *Reopening our Schools: The Roadmap for the full return to school* (DES, July 2020) and *Returning to School: Curriculum Guidance for Primary School Leaders and Teachers* (DES, July 2020) and the Teaching Council *Guidance Note for School Placement 2020-2021* issued first in August 2020 and updated in January 2021 and April 2021.

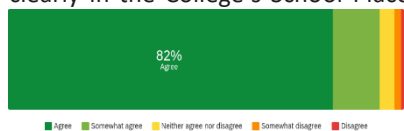
² MIC Quality Office (2021) *Spring semester school placement student survey*, Limerick: MIC.

³ *Ibid.*: MIC Quality Office (2021) *Spring semester school placement tutor survey*, Limerick: MIC.

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student teachers and to facilitate placements and they appreciated that they could avail of a student’s presence to enhance the children’s learning in the manner best suited to the school. Sourcing classes for placement is always a struggle for colleges and for students. The flexible structure of our placements ensured that hosting a student was feasible for schools and in fact provided schools with much-needed support at an unprecedented time.

Supervision of School Placement: The directives from the DES and from the TC, informed by Public Health advice, meant that school visits by tutors were feasible only in exceptional circumstances. With the exception of Year 1 students, all students had been supervised in the classroom on previous placements. We developed a protocol with co-operating schools to ensure that an agreed process was followed in the event of a school visit being deemed necessary. In the absence of in-school supervision visits by our tutors, (with the exception of exceptional circumstances as stated above), a model of remote supervision was developed. ‘Streamed visits’ were not pursued as an option, given the perspective of key stakeholders and the associated complexities these may potentially generate. Instead, we devised an approach to supervision using engagements on MS TEAMS, both for individual tutor/student engagements, group engagements with the tutor and his/her 3 or 4 assigned students and tutor support group meetings. As the year progressed, tutor support documentation became more comprehensive, as collectively we learned how best to structure (a) pastoral dialogue with students to support students’ health and well-being during what were extraordinary times (b) professional dialogue, to assist students in articulating and showcasing their accomplishments, while supporting them to identify the challenges they encountered, either routinely or occasionally. In tandem with this, we devised a format of tutor-school contacts in an effort to replicate the tutor/co-operating teacher dialogue that takes place as part of the usual supervision process. This dialogue was essential in ensuring that the teacher was supported in his/her professional engagements with the students and it ensured that the tutor’s understanding of the student’s progress was as comprehensive as possible. In addition to the customary five-page *School Placement Information Pack* created for each teacher (this had to be made available on-line due to home-working restrictions), as the year progressed the College developed bespoke documentation for each placement with a specific focus on teacher/student professional dialogue. Engagements between the three key stakeholders, the student, the tutor and the teacher, which were delineated clearly in the College’s School Placement documentation, were premised on openness and became an example of



Mackie’s trust-based mentorship within the triad (2018).⁴ Students’ satisfaction with the appropriateness of the supervision arrangements at Figure 3 confirms the success of the practice that was developed.⁵

Figure 3. Student Survey: The Supervision Arrangements were Appropriate

Pass/Fail Grading and Limited On-site Supervision: All placements were graded at Pass/Fail level. It was considered that to apply normal grading would essentially be assigning grades to students’ written work and their ability to describe their teaching practices, as opposed to their actual teaching competence. Our approach was informed by engagement with Prosser and Trigwell’s surface learning / deep learning nexus when they state that “those who adopt surface approaches to learning are more likely to have learning outcomes of a poorer quality than those who adopt deeper approaches” (1999, p.125).⁶ Students, teachers and tutors reported a reduction of placement related anxiety, greater risk taking and more authentic engagements. A high level of consensus between tutors’ and students’ experiences in this regard is evident in survey data at Figure 4.⁷ Further research is required to determine if this was an outcome of pass/fail grading or no in-school supervision.

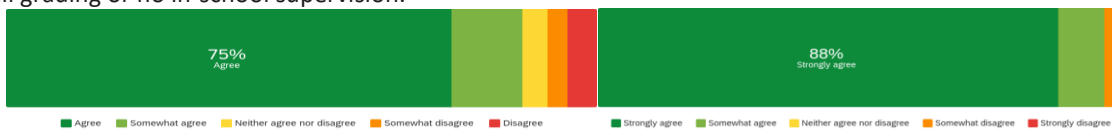


Figure 4. Student Survey: Pass/Fail Grading was Appropriate for this Placement Tutor Survey: Pass/Fail Grading was Appropriate for this Placement

E-Filing: Work on e-files for placement documentation (Planning files and Resource files) had begun in spring 2019 and this pilot work informed the transition to using the MIC/UL bespoke TUS system and MS OneDrive for all documentation during the year. MS OneDrive allows real time sharing of documentation between students and tutors and provided a platform for on-going engagement rather than confining it to scheduled meeting times.

⁴ Mackie, L. (2018) ‘Understandings of mentoring within initial teacher education school placement contexts: a Scottish perspective’, *Professional Development in Education*, 44(5), 622-637.
⁵ MIC Quality Office (2021) *Spring semester school placement tutor survey*, Limerick: MIC.
⁶ Prosser, M. and Trigwell, K. (1999) *Understanding learning and teaching: The experience in higher Education*, Philadelphia, PA.: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
⁷ MIC Quality Office (2021) *Spring semester school placement student survey*, Limerick: MIC; MIC Quality Office (2021) *Spring semester school placement tutor survey*, Limerick: MIC.

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Q2. How did these Innovative Practices Affect Relationships with Schools?

Schools welcomed the flexible nature of all placement schedules, which recognised the importance of continued teacher contact time with pupils. School closures from Jan. 11th – March 1st 2021 led to the changing of dates for placements and schools were fully co-operative as the College arranged alternative dates. In the vast majority of cases schools ‘held-over’ classes originally committed to students in spring 2020 and made them available to the students in spring 2021. While assisting with remote teaching was a viable option for final year students (and the PME2 Extended Placement, spring 2021, incorporated contributing to a school’s remote teaching arrangements), the College decided that remote teaching was not an appropriate learning to teach experience for students on their first or second placement, especially when it was not preceded by an in-class experience with the pupils.

Schools understood why supervision visits by tutors would only occur in special circumstances and welcomed that they could initiate such visits. Schools also appreciated the efforts made by tutors to contact the individual Treoiri during placements. The fact that all students were able to secure a placement in the most challenging of years is testimony to the commitment of school personnel, principals and teachers to providing learning opportunities to pre-service teachers. Students reported getting invaluable support from class teachers across the domains delineated in Figure 5.⁸ Such commitment merits recognition at a national level, and not just by individual colleges. Linking school capitation grants with participation in SP and linking Cosán with SP participation are two opportunities for such system-wide national recognition.

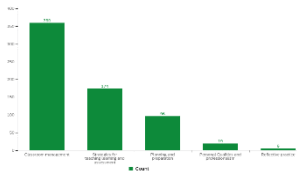


Figure 5. Student Survey: My Class Teacher Offered Advice Mostly Regarding

The autumn remained a period of relative stability in terms of Covid-19 and placements in comparison to the previous spring semester. In an eight week period in April and May 2021, MIC had over 1650 students (primary) on placement in 898 schools across 24 counties in the Republic. Given the complexity of placements and the network of relationships involved, ensuring that communication about the placements and in particular about protocols for COVID -19 related incidents was demanding but essential. While this may seem as innovative, it comprised an extension of the College’s commitment to foster clear communication structures during placement and adhere to well-established protocols. Though the TC issued SP guidelines to stakeholders, it was the experience in MIC that schools were generally unaware of these guidelines and College personnel were frequently required to communicate the TC guidelines to schools.

Q3. What were the Benefits of these Innovative Practices for Student Teacher Learning?

The adoption of **e-Files** was universally welcomed by students and tutors. Apart from the cost and environmental benefits, it fostered immediate communication between students and tutors, though the constant availability of a student’s files engendered an ‘always on’ approach by tutors and may have led to an over-emphasis on adherence to planning, preparation and reflective tasks. In tandem with removing printing costs, the use of e-Files also removed any concerns a student may have had about his/her printer not working or running out of ink. The multi-media capacity of e-Files, eg the use of Flip-grid, also meant that students were able to showcase their preparation and samples of work or recordings in a manner which was not feasible with hardcopy files.

Discussion and Documentation: became the pillars of assessment on placement and this approach empowered the students to lead the mentoring conversations with the tutor. Students described their practice, and referred to their plans, lesson artefacts and reflective tasks and with the assistance of the tutor, they set benchmarks to monitor their own progress. Ownership of their learning, ownership of identifying achievements and challenges, ownership of setbacks and advances resulted in authentic learning for the students. Meetings with tutors became sharing events during which the tutors helped the students to relate their practice to theory, to identify opportunities for progression, assessment of, and for learning and for differentiated practice. When in-school supervision resumes, it will be important to build on the student agency which remote supervision nurtured.

One-to-one tutor/student engagements were complimented by group meetings. These meetings, facilitated by a tutor with his/her group of students (typically four students), created tightknit reciprocal learning communities (Wenger 1998).⁹ These proved highly popular and beneficial for students as they shared best practice and sought and gave advice to each other – students gave them an 80% rating as helpful engagements (MIC Quality Office, 2021).¹⁰ There was no grading or assessment dimension to these meetings and this may have contributed to the high degree of openness that

⁸ MIC Quality Office (2021) *Spring semester school placement student survey*, Limerick: MIC
⁹ Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*, Cambridge University Press, London.
¹⁰ MIC Quality Office (2021) *Spring semester school placement student survey*, Limerick: MIC.

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characterised the discussions. As the year progressed, tutors became more adept at facilitating the group meetings and in their own Tutor Support Meetings shared approaches that worked best for them in terms of setting initial think-prompts for the meetings so that meetings began by addressing a shared/agreed theme before diverging into considering individual student's issues. The creation of supervision units wasn't geographically bound, therefore these meeting brought students from different parts of the country and from different school contexts together and created learning communities for students in addition to their own peer-friend network groups. It will be worth exploring how technology, so vital in re-creating supervision and support fora, can be used to create triadic (student/teacher/tutor) discussions to underpin relationships and to elaborate on feedback and thereby underline placement as a communal experience, as noted by Young and MacPhail (2016).¹¹

Though the revised teaching schedules, with students teaching fewer full days, were created primarily in recognition of the requirements that teachers had to maximise contact with the pupils, students benefitted in terms of having to prepare fewer lessons and focus on integrated planning, differentiation and assessment. Revised schedules also enabled students to become involved in a diversity of teaching and learning initiatives. Pass/Fail grading and the removal of in-class supervision, may also have encouraged less reliance on 'safe' lessons and encouraged more responsive teaching. The spring semester SP tutor survey (Quality Office, 2021)¹² indicates that 98% of tutors were pleased with the competence displayed by the students, notwithstanding all the changes made. Such a response indicates that, from the tutors' perspective the changes made, including the Pass/Fail grading, had a positive impact on students' practice. Feedback from schools has highlighted that while students' commitment and professionalism remain consistent with previous years, students appeared less anxious, less concerned about their performance and more focussed on pupils' needs and their own learning as student teachers. The absence of in-class tutor visits impacted differently depending on where students were on their placement continuum and in some cases depending on the level of challenge their class context posed for them. This approach was not a universally positive experience for all students however. While many students coped extremely well without in-class tutor visits and embraced the opportunity to monitor, document and assess their own progress, this was not the case for all students for whom placement was challenging despite the consistent support of the class teacher and remote supervision by the tutor. Looking to the future, as in-class tutor visits resume, our task is to do so in a manner that sustains and develops student agency in placement learning and in-depth engagement with the supervision process, which students demonstrated this year.

Q4. Which Innovative Practices do you Recommend should be Retained in the System for the Future?

- (i) Developing a hybrid model of remote and in-class supervision, retaining useful practices identified, including e-Files.
- (ii) Further research is required on Pass/Fail grading to interrogate further the positive experience reported.
- (iii) Re-assess SP teaching schedules, with less student teaching time and more focused diverse teaching and learning.
- (iv) Continue to build on the clearly discernible impact on students' agency and ownership of the process.

In a year in which those involved in education had to cope with, and overcome unprecedented challenges, the willingness of primary schools and collective school staffs to extend a welcome to students, and on so many occasions

"It's been very different": Learning to be a teacher in a pandemic



classroom settings and enables them to gain "hands-on" experience in a variety of school-based contexts. But Covid-19 meant schools, colleges and student teachers were forced to rethink the structure and, in many cases, the duration of the programme. "It was very different; we were getting a lot of emails from the college about the fact that the tutors weren't coming in and how it was all going to work," says Lynch. One key difference was the absence of school visits by inspectors, now known as tutors. In normal times tutors observe the student teacher in the classroom and offer advice and guidance based on these observations. "This posed problems for the colleges. "How do we guarantee the integrity around what we do, because we have not been able to conduct school visits to engage in the mentoring and supervision?" is how Dr Neil Ó Conaill, director of school placement at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, characterises the problem. In response, the college replaced the in-school visits with online one-to-one meetings between the tutor and the students. "We have also developed reciprocal peer tutoring systems for the students in an organised way so that they are a support to each other," adds Ó Conaill. Lynch says she was apprehensive about not being observed and the impact this might have on her grading, but now believes the online meetings gave her tutor a more comprehensive insight into her teaching practice.

to more than one student, is a measure of their professional commitment, which merits acknowledgement and celebration. The innovation reported was made possible by their commitment, generosity and courage. The success of our experience during these challenging times is testimony also to our students who have continued to demonstrate exceptional creativity, initiative,

resilience, flexibility and who have made an immeasurable contribution to education in these times. While it has been very different learning to be a teacher in a pandemic, as Michelle McBride's article below, to which Dr Neil Ó Conaill, Director of School Placement at MIC contributed, acknowledges (see <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/is-been-very-different-learning-to-be-a-teacher-in-a-pandemic-1.4536072?mode=amp>), it has also provided us with an opportunity to reflect on what we do and consider new directions for the future.

¹¹ Young, A-M, and MacPhail, A. (2016) 'Cultivating relationships with school placement stakeholders: the perspective of the cooperating teacher', *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 39(3), 287–301.
¹² MIC Quality Office (2021) Spring semester school placement tutor survey, Limerick: MIC.