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Reflecting on 'classroom readiness' in initial teacher education in a time of global pandemic from the perspectives of eight university providers from across England, UK

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ABSTRACT

In the context of a decade of change and reform in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) policy making, we assess the impact of the substantial changes caused by Covid-19 affecting ITE from the perspectives of eight university providers in England. Whilst previous research has documented the impact of the first period of lockdown in the UK, initiated in March 2020, we draw on the conceptual framework of classroom readiness to consider the continued and variable disruption caused by Covid-19 on ITE programmes in England during the period September 2020 – June 2021. Through a participatory workshop, which included identifying key questions, group discussion and written reflections with teacher educators working across eight institutions, we assess the changes to pre-service teacher education provision over this period, with a focus on postgraduate programmes. We identify that the nature and implementation of school visits and the role of technology and digital pedagogies are key areas of change during the pandemic period, whilst continuity in the value and strength of school and university partnerships remain. We consider the ways in which ideas of developing 'classroom readiness' have been informed and shaped through changes to teacher education brought about during the pandemic period. We argue that conceptualisations of classroom readiness need to be grounded in reflective professional learning in the context of collaborative professional communities so to enable pre-service teachers to become adaptable pastorally engaged subject specialists. We reflect on how learning from this period might be incorporated into future international ITE programmes and policy.

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Introduction

Notions of ‘quality’ are at the heart of much discourse in education policy making nationally and internationally (Clarke 2014) with concern over teacher education quality having grown since the publication of comparison tables emerging from international testing (such as the Programme for International Student Assessment – PISA). In response to these international comparisons, many policymakers have asserted that high-quality teachers are a key feature of a high-quality education system (Brooks 2021). However, the term remains variably defined and understood (Goodwin and Ling Low 2021), with terms, such as ‘teacher quality’ and ‘teaching quality’ used interchangeably (Churchward and Willis 2019). One aspect of the concept of ‘quality’ is a teachers’ ‘classroom readiness’, or the extent to which a teacher is ready to take responsibility for the learning of the pupils they teach and can respond and adapt to their school context (Churchward and Willis 2019). Drawing on the experiences of eight Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers based in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England, we reconsider the concept of classroom readiness in the context of learning about teacher education, which has arisen from the pandemic period. Before sharing our study in detail, we set out how we have considered classroom readiness as a conceptual framework for this research.

Classroom readiness as a conceptual framework

Debates about how teacher educators ‘should’ be preparing classroom teachers is a recurring focus of international policy for example, in Australia (Alexander and Bourke 2021), New Zealand (Brooks 2021), the UK (Mutton, Burn, and Menter 2017; Mutton et al. 2021) and the USA (Darling-Hammond 2010; Fuller and Stevenson, 2018), where policymakers have increased centralisation, with generic curricula that prescribe how pre-service teachers learn to teach in practice. ITE in general, and school placements especially have been frequently (re)positioned as a technical apprenticeship, where pre-service teachers train to become teachers (Curtis, Martin, and Broadley 2019; Mutton, Burn, and Menter 2017; Mutton et al. 2021). The specific focus on training, as opposed to education, has led some to argue that this limits opportunities for pre-service teachers to sufficiently integrate theory, research and practice and therefore reduces their capacity to be classroom ready (for example, Allen and Elizabeth Wright 2014). Brown (2015) identified that classroom readiness is a multifaceted concept with four interrelated domains: teacher knowledge, professional experience, dispositions and school context. To enable a pre-service teacher to develop classroom readiness, support is required across each of the four domains. Both Brown (2015) and Larsen (2017) underline the importance of collective and collaborative professional learning in developing and sustaining classroom readiness. Larsen (2017) argues that enabling pre-service teachers to develop their identity as professional learners, through collaborative, reflective practice which draws on both school-based experience and the university context, is a fundamental part of becoming classroom ready. In a study of teacher preparedness to teach in remote and rural schools in Australia, Hudson et al. (2021) observe that classroom readiness, where pre-service teachers have pedagogical support, including behaviour management, is but one of four constructs which enable a teacher to be effective in this context. The other three constructs include the self – a sense of belonging and connectedness; the school –

understanding of systems and procedures and, community – an awareness of the role of the school in the wider community (Hudson et al. 2021). These broader conceptualisations of classroom readiness are consistent with previous considerations of the connections between theory and practice (Jenset, Klette, and Hammerness 2018; Cohen, Hoz, and Kaplan 2013). Curtis, Martin, and Broadley (2019) argue that ITE should be based on a professional community model, grounded in reflective partnerships between universities and schools. In both the wider literature and the conceptions of Brown (2015), Larsen (2017) and Hudson et al. (2021), context is a fundamental part of classroom readiness. Perhaps being ‘context ready’ shifts notions of classroom readiness from a focus on an individual teacher’s ability to manage a class, to one where teachers work reflectively and collaboratively to respond to the needs of the schools and communities in which they work. The rapid and almost complete disruption that the Covid-19 pandemic brought forced significant change to the ITE sector across the globe, and we argue that this requires teacher educators to rethink the notion of classroom readiness, as long-standing practices, including school placements, were fundamentally altered for two academic years. As such, this article focuses on the experiences of eight providers of ITE in research-intensive universities in England during the pandemic period between September 2020 and June 2021. In what follows, we provide a brief overview of the context of ITE in our case study site, England.

The context of initial teacher education in England

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) has been the focus of reform for policymakers in England, which Mutton et al. (2021, 51) suggest has created a ‘complex policy landscape’. A key action has been to expand the number of routes into teaching, ostensibly with a view to increasing numbers entering the profession. This diversification has been part of a ‘relentless pursuit’ to move teaching into a school-led, training-based profession, where teaching is conceived as a craft to be learnt through a model of apprenticeship (Mutton, Burn, and Menter 2017, 16). Policy makers have moved away from a model which involves a period of education provided in partnership by universities and schools. This shift can also be seen in the terminology used by policymakers to describe the professional preparation of teachers: the preferred term in England since at least 2010 has been Initial Teacher Training (ITT) as opposed to ITE. In 2019, two further teacher education policies were published: the Early Career Framework (ECF) (DfE 2019) and the Core Content Framework for Initial Teacher Training (CCF) (Department for Education (DfE) 2019a). Together, these policies increased the period of induction for teachers from one to two years and continued the prescription of the content of teacher education programmes

The requirement for teacher education providers to deliver a curriculum that has the Core Content Framework at the centre was further underlined by a new inspection framework for ITE (Ofsted 2020) and the inspectorate’s report into the impact of Covid-19 on the sector (Ofsted 2021). Further turbulence has been felt by the government’s Initial Teacher Training Market Review (DfE 2021) which, amongst a plethora of proposals intended to reform the sector in England, includes the requirement for all teacher education providers to go through a process of reaccreditation to ensure they demonstrate their capacity and commitment to implement the Core Content Framework. The

Market Review (DfE 2021) has been met with substantial opposition across the sector, with prominent universities, including the University of Cambridge suggesting that if the proposals are implemented, they will withdraw from teacher education (e.g. see Virgo and Roberston 2021). We suggest that the Core Content Framework and the Early Career Framework, combined with the Market Review of Initial Teacher Training are mechanisms which continue the prescription of teacher education across England. Therefore, this case study of eight university-based teacher education programmes during September 2020 – June 2021 provides an opportunity to consider the adaptations and responses universities made as they grappled both with the disruption to the sector caused by Covid-19 as well as substantive and rapid policy changes.

Methods

Ethical approval was granted by author 1's university Ethics Committee (author 1) on 6 August 2020. The research was small-scale and exploratory and as such, adopted a case-study approach. Case study research involves the study of an issue through one or more cases within a 'bounded system', such as, a particular setting or context (Cresswell 1998) here, initial teacher education in research-intensive universities. Case study research was adopted because of its appropriateness in exploring the complexity of classroom readiness in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst the generalisability of case study approaches is contentious, Flyvberg (2004, 420) asserts that this conventional wisdom is misleading and states 'the force of example' is underestimated' (425).

Data collection

This study developed from research undertaken by Authors one and two to consider the experiences of those who completed ITE programmes at their own institution during 2019–2020 and 2020–2021. Utilising a snowball sampling approach (Handcock and Gile 2011) in January 2021, Author two invited 16 ITE providers, all members of the Russell Group network to be part of a wider study. The Russell Group is an association of 24 research-intensive universities in the UK established in 1994 and 16 of these provide ITE programmes. A total of eight representatives from teacher education programmes agreed to participate in a five-hour online workshop in June 2021 (Table 1). This approach to data collection enabled a rapid response so that the perspectives of this part of the teacher education sector could be captured in 'real time'. Focusing research within this existing professional network provided a 'safe space' for data collection during an extremely challenging time. We recognise, however, that this strategy did not draw on perspectives beyond this small group of universities and did not include perspectives from school-centred routes. As such, this research draws on the experiences of one part of the ITE sector in England. Prior to the workshop, Authors one and two developed and shared a set of questions and discussion points (Table 2) drawing on their previous research (Rushton 2021). During the workshop, these questions were considered through a range of activities including individual and small group written reflections and paired and whole group discussions. The final whole group discussion and reflection session of the workshop was recorded and transcribed and this, along with participants' written reflections formed the data to be analysed.

Table 1. Overview of eight participating Russell Group university provides of Initial Teacher Education during 2020–2021.

	University A	University B	University C	University D	University E	University F	University G	University H
Location (contexts)	North-east England (Rural, urban)	London (Urban, suburban)	North-west England (Urban, suburban)	North England (Urban and suburban)	South England (Coastal, urban, rural, island)	London (Urban and suburban)	West Midlands (Rural, urban)	North England (Rural, urban)
Number of ITE students 2020-2021 (five-year average cohort size)	218 (210)	230 (185)	537 (501)	126 (125)	178 (200)	1700 (1750)	550 (470)	158 (125)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

	University A	University B	University C	University D	University E	University F	University G	University H
ITE Specialisms offered	Primary; Mathematics Secondary: Biology, Chemistry, English, Geography, History, Modern Foreign Languages, Mathematics, Religious Education.	Secondary: Biology, Chemistry, Computing, English, Geography, Latin with Classics, Mathematics, Modern Foreign Languages, Physics, with Mathematics, Religious Education.	Primary; Mathematics Secondary: Biology, Business Studies, Chemistry, Economics, English, Geography, History, Mathematics, Modern Foreign Languages, Physical Education, Physics.	Secondary: Biology, Chemistry, English, Geography, History, Mathematics, Modern Foreign Languages, Physics, with Mathematics.	Primary; Secondary: Art & Design, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Dance, English, History, Geography, Mathematics, Modern Foreign Languages, Physical Education, Physics, Mathematics, School Direct only: Business Studies, Design & Technology, Drama, Health & Social Care, Music.	Primary/Early Years; Primary; Mathematics Secondary: Art & Design, Biology, Chemistry, Computing, English with Drama, Geography, History, Mathematics, Modern Foreign Languages, Music, Physics, Religious Education.	Primary/Early Years; Primary Secondary: Art & Design, Biology, Chemistry, Computing, English with Drama, Languages, Music, Physics, Religious Education.	Secondary: Biology, Chemistry, English, Geography, History, Mathematics, Modern Foreign Languages, Physics.
ITE pathways offered	PGCE; School Direct	PGCE; School Direct	PGCE	PGDE; School Direct	PGCE; School Direct	PGCE; School Direct, Teach First	PGCE; School Direct	PGCE; School Direct

Table 2. A summary of the key questions considered, and information gathered during the workshop.

Workshop activities	Key questions/areas for consideration
Written summaries	<p>Course Overview</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Number of PGCE students during 2020–2021 ● Average number of PGCE students over the last five years ● ITE specialisms offered ● ITE pathways offered
Group discussions and written reflections	<p>How has your institution modified ITE courses delivered in 2020–2021? For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Course calendar and timing of different course components/activities. ● School placements – number, length, mentor capacity, contrasting nature, travel/logistical issues. ● School visits – online and/or in person? Did they include observation of teaching? ● University-based taught sessions – online and/or in person? Assignments and assessments of academic work. ● Subject specific aspects – e.g. laboratory work, field work, visits and trips. ● Quality Assurance, monitoring and mentor training. ● Pastoral support of ITE students and staff. <p>What were the causes of modifications to ITE course? Were these changes and modifications planned and/or reactive?</p> <p>What impacts, if any, has the COVID-19 pandemic had on 2020–2021 ITE students' classroom readiness?</p> <p>What areas of learning from 2020–2021 will you take forward?</p>

Analysis process

Data were analysed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke 2020). When analysing the written reflections and group discussion transcript, we considered our positionality as researchers through the different roles and perspectives we brought to the research including roles leading ITE programmes, teaching roles (tutor, seminar leader and lecturer), researchers with areas of interest and expertise (teacher professional development, subject specialisms) and former teachers. Our written notes and reflections enabled us to foreground our own subjectivities and positionalities and therefore our analysis was situated in our familiarity with both the ITE sector, our understanding of the specific ethos and practice of our own institution's teacher education programme(s) and the wider literature (e.g. Alexander and Bourke 2021).

Results and discussion

An overview of our findings and analytical process is provided in Table 3. Participants noted areas of continuity and change during 2020–2021 and clear ongoing implications for those who continue to work with teachers who completed ITE during 2020–2021, during their subsequent two years as early-career teachers. These reflections brought to the fore the concept of 'classroom readiness', both in what this means for an individual pre-service teacher, and ITE programmes more broadly. In what follows, we discuss each theme in turn.

Adaptations to ITE provision post-2020/21 Covid-19 period

Adaptations to ITE programmes in response to Covid-19 of the eight participating universities can be grouped into two broad areas: (1) provision of school placements, including visits and, (2) university-based teaching. During 2020–21, all eight universities

Table 3. Superordinate themes, sub-themes and indicative quotes from workshop contributions.

Superordinate Themes	Sub-themes	Indicative quotes from workshop contributions
Adaptations to ITE provision post-2020/21 Covid-19 period.	Rethinking the purpose and implementation of aspects of ITE to continue post-2020/21 (e.g. school visits; alternative school placement provision; assessments).	'We can see the potential of including an element of online school visits which reduce staff travel time and increase the focus on supporting effective mentoring relationships rather than scrutiny of a snapshot of a trainee's practice'. (University A)
	Increased prominence of technology in ITE teaching and learning would continue beyond the pandemic period.	'Having been forced to use technology in all aspects of what we do, we've had the chance to see where the benefits lie and where these approaches would be useful to retain'. (University D)
Implications for those who support ECTs from September 2021 and beyond.	ECTs require tailored support that is appropriate for their age phase and has subject specificity.	'Due to Covid-19 restrictions some students have not got experience relevant to their subject, such as lab work and fieldwork, some have not taught across all secondary key stages and this needs to be considered during their ECT years, it can't be a 'one size fits all approach'. (University E)
	ECTs have developed distinct areas of strength (e.g. lesson planning, use of technology) which need to be reflected in their ongoing support.	'I think in terms of purpose and motivation . . . and in some areas, for example hybrid teaching and planning, the 2021 cohort of new teachers will be strong and well-prepared. They will be flexible and able to manage the fast pace of change'. (University F)
	ECTs will benefit from additional support to develop specific areas of practice which were constrained during their training due to Covid-19 restrictions (e.g. pastoral work; diverse range of pedagogical approaches)	'Some many need ongoing support with behaviour for learning strategies, pastoral support (including dealing with bereavement) and opportunities to contribute to the wider life of the school'. (University C)
	ECTs require greater clarity around their ECF entitlement, the progression between training year and ECT years and how to ensure their wellbeing is maintained.	'What I am not convinced about is the support level that they will get once they are ECTs because I think that will massively vary . . . that really worries me and it really concerns me that we might see people who coped well with the PGCE year, despite the circumstances, then don't cope well because an entitlement they are supposed to have isn't happening . . . What happens if they don't get the mentoring they are entitled to?' (University H).
Rethinking classroom readiness in light of the 2020/21 Covid-19 period.	Reliance on high-quality partnerships between schools and HEIs to ensure every pre-service teacher can develop classroom readiness.	'The core parts of our programme have not changed, we have had school placements, a focus on subject specific pedagogical development and dedicated time to areas such as SEND, EAL and inclusion . . . we have largely kept these elements in the same sequence'. (University B)
	Emphasis on the individual flexibility (personal, professional, pedagogical) required by pre-service teachers to develop classroom readiness.	'We had a situation where . . . our trainees had to be ready to adapt at a moment's notice, to deliver online, to be able to do it blended and in person, to be able to flex between those very different pedagogical domains which require different thinking, different components, how you build those relationships'. (University A)

had made adjustments to school placements for many, if not all, pre-service teachers. Some had one school placement rather than two contrasting placements and/or for those training in the secondary sector, undertaking a shortened in-person or solely virtual placement in a primary school. Participants acknowledged that, with the return in 2021–2022 to the Initial Teacher Training compliance criteria (DfE 2012), the model of two contrasting placements would continue, allowing pre-service teachers to engage with different models of teaching (Jenset, Klette, and Hammerness 2018) which supports classroom readiness. For example, University B said:

It is so important for teachers at the beginning of their career to understand that schools are diverse places, with lots of approaches to teaching and learning, and that part of becoming a teacher is finding the school that is ‘right’ for them’

The approach to school visits (where a pre-service teacher is visited on placement by a university tutor) was revised in response to Covid-19. These visits frequently occurred through an online meeting between the pre-service teacher, mentor and university-tutor, which included the tutor ‘listening in’ to a discussion between the pre-service teacher and mentor focused on a recent lesson observation and more general consideration of areas of strength and future development. Participants reflected that there were benefits to this approach. For example, it provided a more rounded insight of pre-service teachers’ progress and offered an opportunity to moderate support provided by the mentor to the student. Furthermore, remote visits gave increased logistical flexibility for all, provided capacity for additional ‘visits’ responding to the needs of individuals and, to allow pre-service teachers opportunities to engage in collaborative professional learning to develop their classroom readiness (Brown 2015; Larsen 2017). It was, however, noted that in-person visits were an important part of building and maintaining effective school-university partnerships. Most participants said they were considering implementing a hybrid approach to school visits in 2021–22, as University D reflected:

We are reviewing our approach to school visits ... we usually have three visits to each student, but we may switch to two in school and one remote, with more of a focus on mentoring as part of the remote visit.

The affordances of remote school visits during pre-service teachers’ practicum have been noted by Murtagh (2022) who suggests that remote visits can support increased classroom readiness through greater pre-service teacher autonomy and reflective practice whilst also highlighting potential concerns around equity of experience for pre-service teachers. Participants in this study recognised the value of a blended approach. However, two of the eight participants suggested that they would revert to wholly in-person visits once Covid-19 restrictions allowed, to enable a return to face-to-face, collaborative discussions between the university tutor and school mentor, focused on pre-service teacher development. Furthermore, looking to the post-pandemic period, there was strong agreement across the participants for the need to sustain and refresh school-university partnerships after a period of physical distance.

In response to Covid-19, all participants had delivered the majority of their programmes online, including large lectures, small group seminars, individual tutorials, meetings and mentoring training. Online provision had advantages, it provided logistical flexibility for pre-service teachers and pre-recorded lectures allowed for repeated

watching which supported engagement. Furthermore, meetings and mentor training held online (and recorded) enabled different people to engage, and frequently (although not always) increased attendance. The value of online provision was such that all participants suggested that they would retain elements going forward. This included retaining online individual tutorials and meetings, and all were considering including pre-recorded lectures as an ongoing element of their provision. However, there was also a consensus that wherever possible, face-to-face teaching, particularly subject specific and small group sessions, would continue to be a core part of their programmes, as this better enabled university staff to model effective approaches to classroom-based teaching and learning. In addition, participants noted the importance of face-to-face sessions in providing much needed opportunities for informal and social conversations with and between pre-service teachers, that build a sense of community.

Implications for those who support early career teachers from September 2021 and beyond

A consequence of the variable nature of the pandemic on schools and pre-service teachers was the recognition that early-career teachers would require tailored support that has subject, age and context specificity. Although such bespoke support is a regular feature of ITE programmes, participants shared how the pandemic had increased the need for personalised support and diversified the nature of that need as University A outlined:

Experiences should be scaffolded within their school – rather than the ‘sink or swim’ approach ... Especially around behaviour ... and the refinement of assessment and differentiation as they get to know their classes.

Participants highlighted a range of priority areas for support which included: (1) developing a greater range of pedagogical approaches with students of different ages, especially pupil progress over time, behaviour for learning and working with learners with diverse learning needs. Other areas identified were: (2) practical work in subjects such as science, geography and physical education, (3) pastoral care, including working with parents and carers and, (4) involvement in the wider life of the school and extra-curricular provision. These areas of support for pre-service teachers have been consistently highlighted in previous research for example: behaviour for learning (Woodcock and Reupert 2017), inclusion (Attwood, MacArthur, and Kearney 2019; Peebles and Mendaglio 2014) and practical work (Glackin 2016).

Participants also acknowledged that 2020–2021 pre-service teachers had developed distinct areas of strength which should feature in their ongoing support. University F reflected, ‘The 2021 cohort will be flexible, tenacious and able to cope with change’, and University D noted, ‘strengths are likely to lie in planning well-structured lessons’. All participants highlighted that the 2020–2021 cohort had developed strengths in the use of technology and digital pedagogies during periods of school closures and to support students who were self-isolating. Consistent with la Velle et al. (2020), participants shared how they intended to continue to ‘prepare trainees for more blended approaches to their own classroom delivery’ (University C) and that digital teaching and learning would continue to be incorporated so that pre-service teachers were able to develop this

'important skill set' (University G). Universities A, B and H also reflected that greater use of technology allowed for the inclusion of groups of staff and/or students who might otherwise be limited by geography. This included partnership-wide initiatives (such as 'Teachers for the New Era' seminars) which were made more accessible because they were online.

Participants agreed that pre-service teachers who trained during 2020–2021 were dedicated and adaptable professionals who had an 'extraordinary experience'. One aspect of this was the way pre-service teachers had to work as part of a team in a time of crisis, for example the sudden onset of national lockdown of schools in January 2021. During this period, pre-service teachers had to rapidly adapt and support their school placement colleagues to implement online teaching which was frequently new to mentors and pre-service teachers alike. Across the eight participating universities, there was a sense that this experience of 'stepping-up' to provide practical support gave opportunities for pre-service teachers to show leadership and take on responsibility beyond their usual role. As University H noted:

During the post-Christmas lockdown, we really saw our students taking the initiative and supporting their mentors when they were trying to set up Google classroom, or Teams, many of them were going above and beyond to support their placement schools and the pupils.

There was clear sense from participants that pre-service teachers found this experience, where they provided as well as received support from their mentors and held additional responsibilities, was a positive professional development opportunity. We suggest that this ability of pre-service teachers to respond to changing contexts for teaching and learning is a clear indication of the development of classroom readiness. As well as noting both strengths and development needs in relation to classroom readiness, participants identified two further areas for ongoing discussion: (1) early-career teachers' understanding of the Early-Career Framework and their entitlements and, (2) well-being. University F highlighted concerns as to whether schools would be able to work with individual early-career teachers, 'from the point they are at, rather than assume a one-size-fits-all approach'. University G suggested that the 2020–2021 cohort needed greater support to transition to independent teaching and University H shared their 'worries' about what could happen to those teachers who do not receive their entitlement through the Early-Career Framework (Table 3). Concerns around beginning teachers' experience of the first two years of teaching were also linked to well-being. University B highlighted how they had provided additional opportunities for pre-service teachers to reflect on their professional identities and that some pre-service teachers had found these sessions to have 'quasi-therapeutic' effects and would like them to continue during their ECT years (Steadman et al., 2022). University A noted that they would provide well-being support to the 2020–2021 cohort through their alumni networks but that entitlement to well-being support should be part of a 'national response', and all participants suggested that well-being provision should go beyond a 'generic workload management offer' (University B).

Rethinking 'classroom readiness' in light of the 2020/21 Covid-19 period

The starting point for participants' shared understanding of the concept of 'classroom readiness' included that of Churchward and Willis (2019) where being 'classroom ready' means being a teacher who is responsible for student learning and ready to face what their school experience might involve. During workshop discussions, participants noted that a teacher's ability to face the unknown was especially pertinent given the pandemic-related uncertainty that extended beyond the pre-service year. Participants highlighted how reliant they had been on the high-quality partnerships they had developed with schools to ensure that each pre-service teacher that they worked with had the opportunity to develop classroom readiness. University H noted, 'the quality of your relationships with school partners is everything . . . when changes need to be made on short notice . . . School colleagues have been remarkable this year'.

When reflecting on what 'classroom readiness' meant for the 2020–2021 cohort, there was a recognition that being 'classroom ready' was unusually dependent on their individual experiences of their ITE year, for example the chance to develop expertise across contrasting school contexts and age groups. University A noted, 'In terms of our trainees' progress, we have defined this around taking responsibility for learning in the context that they have been working in, depending on the opportunities afforded to them'. As well as variability of experience, participants also placed an emphasis on an individual teacher's flexibility and the need for personal, professional and pedagogical adaptability. University E viewed classroom readiness as including the ability 'to be part of a dynamic profession, cope with change and be adaptable' and similarly, University F said, 'The 2021 cohort of new teachers will be strong and well-prepared. They will be flexible and able to manage the fast pace of change'. When considering what 'classroom readiness' might look like in the future, in the light of learning during the pandemic period, University C reflected, 'I think going forward we need our trainees to be ready to adapt pedagogical practice and therefore be cognisant of how to teach in various ways – be this through developing online and face-to-face'. Online and digital pedagogies were understood as a core part of future conceptions of 'classroom readiness' by University H who described the 2020–2021 cohort as 'remarkable' in the way they were able to 'respond, adapt and flex in the face of rapidly changing pedagogic demands'. University H highlighted how this group of pre-service teachers have, 'a wider toolbox of assessment for learning and teaching strategies because they have had to adapt to online learning as well as face-to-face teaching'. Across the participants' reflections there remained further questions about the concept of 'classroom readiness', and the place of technology and online learning within the professional practice of pre-service teachers. University B asked, 'To what extent are trainees expected to learn online pedagogies?' whilst University C asked, 'How do we prepare teachers for multiple contexts, including face-to-face, online and hybrid?'. The necessary widespread incorporation of online teaching during the pandemic period has meant both challenges and affordances for the ITE sector as noted by the eight participating universities. For example, in March 2020 in response to the closure of university campuses, lectures, seminars and tutorials were held online and both university-based staff and students had to develop digital pedagogies. On reflection, there was a consensus from participants that some elements of these reactive changes would be retained because they demonstrated pedagogical value. Prior to the pandemic, online

learning has been a feature of ITE programmes internationally, including Australia (Burke and Fanshawe 2021) and the ways in which the pandemic has increased the use of digital pedagogies in ITE internationally has been highlighted by researchers including Donitsa-Schmidt and Ramot (2020) and Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020). Burke and Fanshawe (2021) suggest that online learning in the context of ITE is more likely to develop pre-service teachers' confidence, understanding of theory and classroom readiness when practical learning tasks are a core feature. We contend that the international ITE sector would benefit from time and space to reflect on the implications of this rapid incorporation of technology and digital pedagogies. However, due to the rapid pace of policy reform and review in contexts including the UK and Australia, this is perhaps unlikely to happen. In what follows, we share our reflections on the implications of the pandemic experience in the context of what is understood by classroom readiness in ITE in both England and beyond.

Implications

The eight participating universities in this study included a diverse range of subject specialisms and age phases (Table 1). As such, we argue that the findings from this case study have relevance across the sector in England and beyond. The nature of school visits and the role of technology and digital pedagogies are key areas of change that have been identified. Consistent with previous research (Passy, Georgeson, and Gompertz 2018) continuity in the value and strength of school and university partnerships as a key component of enabling a pre-service teacher to develop classroom readiness has been underlined. Furthermore, the nature of classroom readiness has been reimagined to include a greater emphasis on an individual teacher's capacity to be flexible and responsive both personally and professionally and to adapt their pedagogical practice across in-person, remote and hybrid teaching and learning domains. Based on remote visits to 75 providers of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) between January and March 2021, the inspectorate, Ofsted (2021) published an 'evaluative report' to assess the impact of the pandemic on teacher education in England. This found that due to reduced opportunities to teach in the classroom 'all trainees' would need additional support during their first induction year (Ofsted 2021, 3). The report findings, although the data on which they are based have been questioned (e.g. UCET 2021), contain a focus on behaviour management, suggesting that 'trainees are particularly behind in their experience of managing behaviour' (Ofsted 2021, 6) and 'trainees have not had the opportunity to develop classroom management skills' (Ofsted 2021, 13). For the inspectorate, classroom readiness is seemingly inextricably linked with, and arguably limited to a teacher's ability to manage behaviour in the classroom. In contrast to Ofsted (2021), our findings do not suggest that 'all' pre-service teachers lack expertise or are 'behind' in their capacity to manage a classroom effectively (Ofsted 2021, 6). This is perhaps because this article considers ITE providers' experiences and learning from across a complete academic year (September 2020 – June 2021) whereas the Ofsted report provides a snapshot of three months (January – March 2021) during a key period of disruption, which included the substantial closure of schools and universities across England. This disconnect between the findings of our research and those contained within the report by Ofsted (2021) is perhaps also due to fundamentally different conceptions of classroom readiness. Ideas of

classroom readiness found within our research include teachers being able to be autonomous professional learners who work and learn in a collaborative and reflective ways that is responsive to their contexts. This requires teachers to move across a range of professional domains including those of being a subject specialist, pastorally engaged and adaptably use a range of pedagogies. We argue that this conception of classroom readiness moves beyond a narrow and short-term focus on behaviour management and keeping 'control' of a classroom.

As we have previously noted, the pandemic period in England comes at a time of rapid and sweeping change in education policy (Mutton et al. 2021) and this approach of 'disruptive innovation' in ITE has been replicated across the globe (Ellis, Steadman, and Are Trippestad 2019). Drawing on our findings, we firstly consider the implications of our research for teacher education policy making in England, with a focus on new teachers developing classroom readiness. We finish by considering what classroom readiness could mean post-pandemic for teacher educators across the globe.

Returning to the specifics of policy developments in ITE in our case study site of England, we recognise that a two-year induction period gives those at the beginning of their teaching careers more time and support to develop their professional practice, to become classroom ready. Relatedly, the role of the mentor, as set out in the Early-Career Framework, could have enhanced status, if appropriately resourced and funded. We note that there is potential within the Early-Career Framework for universities to work with teachers during their years as Early-Career Teachers. This would provide welcome continuity between the pre-service year and two subsequent years as early-career teachers, with the opportunity to strengthen and develop existing partnerships, which our research has demonstrated is a key part of how teachers develop classroom readiness. Furthermore, the Early-Career Framework could formalise a community of practice, where teachers in the first three years of their careers can engage with professional learning networks which have been shown to support positive professional growth (Torrey, Krutka, and Paul Carpenter 2016).

We also recognise that, as currently written, there are aspects of the Early-Career Framework which are problematic in relation to classroom readiness. Firstly, if the Early-Career Framework is implemented through a centralised model that is focused on a small number of providers delivering training to schools across large geographical regions, this will likely mean local partnerships between schools and universities will be weakened not strengthened. We also question how individual needs will be met if the Early-Career Framework is implemented through generic resources and materials that are not able to consider individual needs and/or schools' context. Relatedly, we are concerned that the centralised and potentially prescriptive approach of the Early-Career Framework lacks the scope for an individualised approach to working with early-career teachers which promotes autonomy in professional learning. This has the potential to overlook individuals' areas of strength which have been developed during the pre-service year and a failure to build on these strengths. Consistent with the work of Stevens (2010), we suggest this has the potential to reduce professional autonomy and diminish classroom readiness. We note the lack of specificity with regard to age phase and/or subject within the Early-Career Framework as it is currently written. Some subject associations have recognised this and developed materials and resources to support schools and mentors (e.g. Geographical Association 2021) so that early-career teachers

develop subject-specific classroom readiness. We argue that this potential lack of specialist support is of concern as previous research has highlighted the importance of subject specialisms in teachers developing self-efficacy (Douwe, Verloop, and Vermunt 2000).

As we have highlighted, classroom readiness is a concept which features in theorisations of teacher education programmes and policies across the globe. However, in our case study context of England, policy makers narrow classroom readiness to a focus on behaviour management which, Hudson et al. (2021) have underlined, forms only one of four aspects which contribute to being an effective teacher. As we move into the post-pandemic period, we contend that the international sector needs to proactively articulate conceptions of classroom readiness as a broader consideration of a teacher's capacity to adapt and respond to their context, work collaboratively and reflectively, and engage in ongoing professional learning. As Alexander and Bourke (2021) note, this will require teacher educators to become more actively engaged in policy debates concerning the nature and purpose of ITE across the globe if they are to challenge current reductive notions of classroom readiness which dominate current policy.

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