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# The Role of Social Work Education in Relation to Empathy and Self-Reported Resilience: Results from Entry to Exit of Social Work Education on the Island of Ireland during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of people's lives worldwide, including the work of social workers and the education of social work students. Field placements are a significant part of social work education, but during the pandemic they were cut short and most teachings moved online. The current mixed methods study examined the effects of social work education on social work students' empathy and resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic on the island of Ireland. A matched sample of forty-nine students completed an online survey at the start (T1) of their degree and at the end (T2). A further 229 students who only completed the T1 survey were compared to 70 others who only completed the T2 survey. The results showed improved resilience in the cohort comparison. There were no differences in empathy in the matched sample nor between the cohorts. Thematic analysis of students' narratives showed that they found the switch to online learning difficult, with some reporting negative impacts on their mental health and the abrupt ending of placements impacting their feelings of preparedness for practice. Implications of this study and future research areas are discussed.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, education, empathy, resilience, social work students

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about numerous challenges and changes to all aspects of everyday life, including the work of social workers and the education of social work students. Globally, people were asked to stay at home and work from home to prevent the spread of the virus, and non-essential businesses, schools and universities were closed. This posed a significant challenge for the field of social work, where in-person contact had been traditionally regarded as essential for providing interpersonal support. In addition to this, social work placements for university students were cut short in many countries and teaching shifted to an online mode (McFadden *et al.*, 2020).

Prior to COVID-19, social work education had been slow to embrace online learning (Lee *et al.*, 2019), perhaps due to the traditional social work focus being on interpersonal relationships and practice skills, which many believed could not be taught effectively online (Forgey and Ortega-Williams, 2016). One such skill is empathy, which is considered to be one of the most desirable attributes of social workers as it is an essential part of the worker-service user relationship (Jani *et al.*, 2012). Research has shown that empathy can be taught to social work students both in person and via online courses. The latter may, however, be less effective in addressing certain aspects of empathy (Zaleski *et al.*, 2016).

Empathy in healthcare professionals has been linked with therapeutic change in service users (Moudatsou *et al.*, 2020), and social workers with higher empathy levels are, therefore, more efficient and productive in producing social change (King and Holosko, 2012). Students need supervisory support to develop empathic skills, and they also need to be guided to develop the ability to set emotional boundaries to help them avoid empathic distress, which may adversely affect their practice and personal well-being (Grant, 2014). This balanced empathy is called 'accurate empathy', and it is the ability to communicate empathic understanding whilst avoiding emotional distress from the situation (Rogers, 2007). Social workers who develop accurate empathy have been found to be more emotionally resilient (Kinman and Grant, 2011). In a profession that is known to be highly stressful, mainly due to excessive workloads and less-than-ideal working conditions (McFadden *et al.*, 2015; Ravalier *et al.*, 2021), being empathic towards service users whilst avoiding emotional burnout may seem like a significant challenge. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that social work education incorporates elements of teaching empathy to students. Indeed, research with field supervisors of final year social work students has shown that they expect the newly qualified social workers to have at least 'moderate-level' skills across the different practice areas and they highlighted the importance of empathy as one of these skills (Yu *et al.*, 2016). The existing research exploring the changes in empathy levels in social work students is limited. However, existing evidence suggests that levels of empathy can be increased in social work students, for example, through focused workshops (Grant *et al.*, 2014). Studies have also shown that education can improve social work students' resilience (De las *et al.*, 2014).

One of the most influential models of empathy suggests that the subjective experience of empathy is a result of four necessary components which dynamically interact with each other: affective sharing with others, self-other awareness, mental flexibility to adopt another's perspective and regulation of one's own emotions (Decety and Jackson, 2004). Affective sharing with others is an automatic unconscious process, which involves the neural networks in our brains to be stimulated when we listen to others' feelings or observe their behavioural expressions of emotions. Gerdes and Segal (2011) argued that affective sharing with others can be promoted by training social workers to observe and listen to their clients mindfully. Self-other awareness and mental flexibility with emotion regulation are not automatic, but rather, they are skills that are learned and developed. It is important that all of these four components of empathy are developed through training, including through social work education, and this will in turn enhance social workers' effectiveness with their clients and prevent burnout (Gerdes and Segal, 2011). In their social work model of empathy, Gerdes and Segal (2009) take the above model one step further by proposing another necessary

component of empathy—conscious decision making. This is the need for empathic action that requires social workers to act on their interpretation of the situation of others to promote social justice and, again, this skill can be learned and developed.

Another desirable attribute of social workers is resilience. Social workers engage with service users in difficult situations, often listening to their painful experiences (Newell and MacNeil, 2010), they suffer from emotional exhaustion and, as mentioned above, have high caseloads. Considering these challenges, social workers need to be resilient, and education that increases their preparedness for these stresses is of paramount importance. It has been suggested that building resilience in social work students should be a key element of social work curriculum (Grant and Kinman, 2011; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014).

Recent studies have documented the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on social work students. These included personal impacts, such as disruptions to daily routines, including changes to home life, financial issues, isolation, and a rise in mental health issues, and also work and learning-related impacts, including field placements ending early, a rapid change from face to face to online modes of learning, increased levels of stress and burnout (McFadden *et al.*, 2020; Scheffert *et al.*, 2021; Bloomberg *et al.*, 2022; Lawrence *et al.*, 2022). It has also been reported that social work students were stressed about the quality of their education received through online learning (Lawrence *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, for many students, studying entirely from home was challenging as they felt distracted, they found it hard to get things done, they were worrying a lot and felt alone (Kindler *et al.*, 2022). Social work students may feel unprepared for work in the best of times (Tham and Lynch, 2019), so it is reasonable to assume that a pandemic that disrupts their education would lead to even more challenges in terms of their preparedness for practice, particularly when it comes to the ‘softer’ skills, such as empathy and resilience, which develop in interpersonal contexts and through field placements.

### Aims of the study

The current study aimed to examine the effects of social work education on social work students’ empathy and self-reported resilience. It addresses a gap in current literature about empathy in social work students. Very little is known about the effects of COVID-19 on social workers or social work students’ empathic skills and resilience. Considering the importance of these skills and attributes for the social work profession, the current study aims to extend our knowledge in this area and provides recommendations for future social work education. In the absence of comprehensive research on the effects of COVID-19 on

these aspects of social work education, but in line with the social work values and desirable attributes, it was hypothesised that at the end of their social work education, students' levels of empathy and self-reported resilience will be higher compared to the start of their social work course. Additionally, to put the quantitative findings in context, the current study examined students' narratives of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on their education.

## Theoretical framework

Empathy refers to the way one reacts to the observed experiences of another individual (Davis, 1983). For the purposes of the current study, we defined empathy as the 'ability to experience and understand what others feel without confusion between oneself and others' (Decety and Lamm, 2006, p. 1146). This is in line with the observation of Davis (1983) who argued that empathy is a multidimensional construct, which has an affective and a cognitive component. To measure the multifaceted nature of empathy, Davis developed the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, which looks at empathic concern, perspective taking, fantasy and personal distress. The first two subscales are relevant to the current study. Empathic concern is related to emotionality, and it reflects one's feelings of warmth and sympathy, and selfless concern for other people. Perspective taking is one's ability to anticipate others' reactions and behaviours, and it is related to better interpersonal functioning (Davis, 1983). As such, both empathic concern and perspective taking are highly desirable qualities of social workers.

Resilience has been defined in manyways and is contested due to a lack of focus on structural and systems issues, and criticised for individual explanations of 'being resilient or not' which can be stigmatising and pathologised. However, generally, individual definitions include aspects of 'adaptation, balance, competence, determination, optimism, and acceptance', as well as physiological processes, such as stress response and psychobiological allostasis (Wagnild, 2014, p. 11). Resilient individuals are self-confident and they are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. They adapt well to change and adversity as they are confident in their own ability to persevere. On the other hand, individuals who are less resilient may develop psychiatric disorders when facing adversity (Wagnild, 2016). Wagnild and Young (1990) defined resilience in terms of five underlying characteristics: purpose, perseverance, equanimity, self-reliance and authenticity. Purpose refers to the meaning or purpose in life, it pulls us forward when we encounter difficulties. Perseverance is the determination to keep going in face of adversity. Equanimity refers to a balanced outlook on life and it is the ability to avoid extreme and unhelpful responses to adverse situations. Self-

reliance is associated with being confident about one's own capabilities and being aware of one's limitations. Finally, authenticity means being content with oneself (Wagnild, 2016). These five characteristics underlie Wagnild and Young's (1993) Resilience scale, used in the current study, and can be considered highly relevant to social workers, who encounter adversity on a daily basis through their work with service users.

However, it remains important to acknowledge the context in which social workers do their job and the organizational and systems pressures that exist. The authors acknowledge this context whilst remaining interested in how social work students respond to questions on their own resilience.

## Materials and methods

### Design and participants

The current study used a mixed methods design to examine the role of social work education on social work students' empathy and resilience. Mixed methods research is considered to be the third methodological movement, often used to overcome the limitations of using only quantitative or only qualitative methods to answer research questions. Benefits of mixed methods research are numerous and include, for example, triangulation, providing a more complete picture of the study phenomenon, enabling stronger inferences or helping to explain findings (Doyle *et al.*, 2009). In the current study, the quantitative element used a one-group pre-test post-test design and a cohort comparison across two time points. By conducting these two analyses, the loss of data due to missing values was limited. The quantitative analysis was supplemented with a qualitative analysis of one of the survey's open-ended questions to help explain the quantitative findings.

The data for the current study come from a longitudinal survey of social work students on the island of Ireland (McCartan *et al.*, 2022). The survey collected data from social work students at six universities delivering social work education in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland (National University of Ireland Galway, Queen's University Belfast, Trinity College Dublin, Ulster University, University College Cork and University College Dublin). A total of forty-nine students completed the survey at two time points: at the start of their social work degree (T1) and at the end (T2). A further 229 students completed only the T1 survey and 70 students completed only the T2 survey. T1 data were collected in 2018–2020, when students were starting their course, and T2 data were collected in 2020–2021, at the end of their course.

## Ethical considerations

The study was approved by research ethics committees at each university. In order to avoid the students feeling under pressure to participate, they were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and the social work staff would not know who had participated and who had not. To facilitate this, a member of administrative or academic staff at each university, not directly involved with teaching the students, was responsible for corresponding with them and allocating their unique ID code for matching their T1 and T2 data. The data were then anonymised and no identifying information about the students was shared with the social work staff or across the universities. All participants provided informed consent prior to completing the questionnaire.

## Measures

Demographic variables used to describe the study sample included gender, age and relationship status.

Resilience was assessed using the 14-item Wagnild and Young Resilience Scale (Wagnild, 2016). Participants expressed their agreement or disagreement with the fourteen items using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). The scores on all items are summed to produce a total resilience score, which can range from 7 to 98, with higher scores indicating greater resilience. The scale was designed to measure five characteristics of resilience: self-reliance, purpose, equanimity, perseverance and authenticity. In our sample, it had good reliability, both at T1 (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.867$ ) and at T2 (0.884).

Two aspects of empathy measured in the current study were empathic concern and perspective taking. Both constructs come from the multidimensional Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980) and are assessed with seven items each. Participants are asked to indicate whether each statement presented to them describes them well or not. They use a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (Does not describe me well) to 4 (Describes me well). Three items on empathic concern and two items on perspective taking are reverse scored. The scores on each subscale are summed, producing a possible total score ranging from 0 to 28. Higher scores reflect greater empathy on their respective scales. Empathic concern measures feelings of sympathy and concern for others. Perspective taking measures one's tendency to adopt others' psychological point of view. The two subscales had acceptable to good reliability in our sample, both at T1 (Empathic concern: Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.706$ ; perspective taking: 0.775) and at T2 (Empathic concern: 0.688; Perspective taking: 0.793).



This study also utilised data from one open-ended question asked at T2: 'Is there anything else you'd like to add specifically about the context of the Coronavirus and progress on the course?'

## Data analysis

The data from students who had both T1 and T2 data were analysed using paired samples *t*-tests. The data from students who completed only the T1 survey were then compared to the data from students who completed only the T2 survey, using Mann–Whitney U-tests. This cohort comparison excluded students who had data from both time points, in order not to violate the assumption of independence. Effect sizes *r* were calculated for all tests of differences. Finally, data from the qualitative question were analysed thematically to help explain the findings from the quantitative analysis. The reason for including this specific question in the analysis of the current study was that the students were completing their social work degree at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, and we expected it to have some impact on their studies, and possibly their empathy and resilience, due to them moving from an in person to a remote mode of study and practice placements ending due to 'lockdown' and social distancing requirements. Thematic analysis is a method for analysing and identifying themes within data, which are repeated patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019). In the current study, the responses to the above question were analysed in an inductive, 'bottom-up' way, in order to identify common themes in the data, and then in a theoretical, or 'top down' way, to look for any links with empathy and resilience. The researchers started by familiarising themselves with the data by carefully reading it and they initially coded the responses as positive, negative or neutral. Next, the responses were coded for meaning and grouped into specific themes. The researchers then looked for connections to theory, specifically resilience, empathic concern and perspective taking. Three researchers independently coded the responses and a fourth researcher consolidated the analysis.

Missing data on the key study variables were assessed separately for respondents with T1 data only, T2 data only and the matched sample. Respondents with only T1 data had 4.04 per cent of the item-level missing values and these were missing completely at random based on Little's MCAR test ( $\chi^2 = 364.66$ ,  $df = 387$ ,  $p = 0.787$ ). Respondents with only T2 data had 14.44 per cent of the missing values and these were also missing completely at random ( $\chi^2 = 85.752$ ,  $df = 81$ ,  $p = 0.338$ ). In the matched sample, there was 3.24 per cent of the missing values and these were again missing completely at random ( $\chi^2 = 298.284$ ,  $df = 331$ ,  $p = 0.901$ ). All missing values were estimated using the Expectation Maximisation algorithm in SPSS prior to any analyses.

**Table 1** Demographic characteristics of the sample

Variable	T1, n (%)	T2, n (%)
<b>Matched sample</b>		
Gender		
Female	42 (85.7)	
Male	7 (14.3)	
Age, years		
<19	0 (0)	
19–22	7 (14.3)	
23–30	20 (40.8)	
31–40	13 (26.5)	
41–50	6 (12.2)	
51–60	3 (6.1)	
Relationship status		
Single	22 (44.9)	
In a relationship, but not cohabiting	12 (24.5)	
Cohabiting	2 (4.1)	
Married	12 (24.5)	
Divorced	1 (2.0)	
Widowed	0 (0)	
Other	0 (0)	
<b>Cohorts</b>		
Gender		
Female	187 (81.7)	61 (87.1)
Male	42 (18.3)	9 (12.9)
Age, years		
<19	9 (3.9)	0 (0)
19–22	45 (19.7)	6 (8.6)
23–30	93 (40.6)	36 (51.4)
31–40	41 (17.9)	13 (18.6)
41–50	36 (15.7)	14 (20.0)
51–60	2 (0.9)	1 (1.4)
Relationship status		
Single	89 (38.9)	24 (34.3)
In a relationship, but not cohabiting	63 (27.5)	21 (30.0)
Cohabiting	29 (12.7)	11 (15.7)
Married	36 (15.7)	12 (17.1)
Divorced	4 (1.7)	1 (1.4)
Widowed	1 (0.4)	0 (0)
Other	3 (1.3)	1 (1.4)

## Results

### Sample description

Gender, age and relationship status of all study participants are presented in [Table 1](#).

### Pre-test and post-test differences (matched sample)

Shapiro–Wilk tests of normality showed that the T1 to T2 change scores were normally distributed for all three variables. Paired samples *t*-tests

**Table 2** Mean and median values for the study variables

Variable	T1	T2
Matched sample	Mean (SD)	
Resilience	80.82 (10.62)	81.98 (9.20)
Empathic concern	22.65 (3.50)	22.57 (4.13)
Perspective taking	21.76 (3.54)	22.53 (3.84)
Cohorts	Median (interquartile range)	
Resilience	80.00 (13.00)	82.10 (8.00)
Empathic concern	23.00 (5.00)	22.67 (4.00)
Perspective taking	21.35 (6.41)	21.95 (5.00)

were therefore used to examine the differences on resilience scores, empathic concern and perspective taking between T1 and T2. There were no significant differences between T1 and T2 on resilience scores ( $t = -0.87$ ,  $df = 48$ ,  $p = 0.193$ ,  $r = 0.13$ ), empathic concern ( $t = 0.19$ ,  $df = 48$ ,  $p = 0.423$ ,  $r = 0.03$ ) and perspective taking ( $t = -1.50$ ,  $df = 48$ ,  $p = 0.071$ ,  $r = 0.03$ ). Mean scores for each variable at each time point are presented in [Table 2](#).

### Cohort comparisons

Shapiro–Wilk tests of normality showed that the three variables were not normally distributed. The differences between T1 and T2 cohorts were, therefore, examined using Mann–Whitney U-tests. Resilience scores were significantly higher for the T2 cohort compared to the T1 cohort ( $U = 6483.50$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ), with a small effect size ( $r = -0.14$ ). Empathic concern ( $U = 7668.50$ ,  $p = 292$ ,  $r = -0.03$ ) and perspective taking ( $U = 7207.50$ ,  $p = 0.101$ ,  $r = -0.07$ ) were not significantly different between T1 and T2 cohorts. Median values for each variable in each cohort are presented in [Table 2](#).

Taken together, the data showed that empathic concern and perspective taking did not improve between T1 and T2 and levels of self-reported resilience increased in the cohort sample, but not in the matched sample.

### Qualitative findings: bottom-up analysis

Most themes identified in the data were negative. Students offered insights into their experiences and feelings associated with the rapid changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The main themes that emerged included (i) challenges of online learning, (ii) impact of the pandemic on mental health, (iii) placement ending challenges and (iv) implications for beginning career. A minority of comments reflected positive responses,

referring to good tutor support, adaptability and increased confidence due to the need to respond rapidly to a critically changing situation.

### *Challenges of online learning*

The rapid shift to online learning was a recurring theme within the students' responses. The comment below demonstrates the challenges associated with online learning, including its effects on motivation:

I think, like many others, I found the online learning challenging during the pandemic and I understand this must have been a huge challenge to tutors too. It was difficult continually working from home and, at times, the amount of material to get through was overwhelming and it was hard to stay motivated. (Female, 41-50 years).

The shift to online learning and the associated absence of face-to-face interaction had a negative impact on students' learning experience as well as their grades. It led to increased levels of stress and contributed to feelings of disconnectedness:

The pandemic has been an extremely difficult and uncertain time for all. It has however had a major impact on my final year of study particularly due to online learning. I feel that through the online forum I learnt extremely little this year. It felt disconnected from university life and the learning from socially interactive forums was not available. Additionally, the strain of uncertainty over restrictions and how our placements would be impacted added to my stress levels which I feel have negatively impacted upon my results. (Female, 31-40 years).

Despite many comments about online learning being very challenging for students, there were positive comments about tutor support during this phase:

The tutors in [university] have done exceptionally well to still deliver a semester filled with informative and thought-provoking lectures and seminars from the comfort of all of our homes. It has been frustrating at times and I am aware I have lacked some motivation this year with what has been happening. However, I have felt supported and encouraged with the aid of my personal tutor and module tutors. (Female, 23-30 years).

### *Impact of the pandemic on mental health*

Students commented on how the pandemic increased their stress levels and how it negatively affected their mental health. This resulted from their placements ending early and abruptly and their learning moving to an online mode, which negatively affected their overall placement experience as well as their general learning and development:

My mental health has been adversely affected during C-19. The delay in returning to and trying to complete my placement and waiting to qualifying as a social worker has contributed to this. The [university] course is tough enough as it is without this added stress. (Female, 41–50 years).

I don't think that coronavirus really impacted my social work training specifically, but definitely contributed to stress levels and the ability to think clearly and problem-solve with ease. (Female, 23–30 years)

### *Placement ending challenges*

Another recurring theme was that of challenges associated with placements. Students referred to a lack of proper endings with service users and how this had been contrary to all the teaching on service user respect and managing endings:

Placement was abruptly ended midweek and midday on 18<sup>th</sup> March preventing students from carrying out any kind of ending with service users. This goes against everything we are taught i.e. respect for the service user and importance of endings. (Female, 23–30 years)

The abrupt ending of placements and the newly introduced rules on social distancing were associated with limited learning opportunities for students:

I found placement hard as my PLO [placement] was children's disabilities and corona virus prohibited a lot of face to face contact plus lack of social workers allowed in the office left it harder to learn. At times I've been the only member of staff in the office which has impacted on my learning experience. (Female, 41–50 years).

### *Implications for beginning career*

The following quotes demonstrate how, despite support mechanisms being in place, the pandemic affected students' confidence and their feelings of preparedness for their new career:

It has been difficult graduating early and being flung into the work force. There are some great supports however I feel that had I had the opportunity to complete my final placement I would have been more skilled, resilient, and better able to cope with the pressures of social work post. (Female, 23–30 years)

Although most comments were negative, one student felt that the ability to adapt and respond to the requirements due to COVID-19 was like a test of their resilience:

Our final placement ended sooner than expected and our qualification was fast tracked so I am now in the workforce sooner than I anticipated. I feel this in a way has helped with my confidence as I had no time to

over think things or worry as we went straight into job. I feel my ability to adapt to situations has improved. (Female, 23–30 years)

## Qualitative findings: top-down analysis

### *Empathic concern*

Students demonstrated empathic concern in their responses by explaining how leaving their service users without a proper ending, due to their placements finishing early and abruptly, was not the right thing to do as it had direct impact on service users:

...This goes against everything we are taught i.e. respect for the service user and importance of endings. (Female, 23–30 years)

### *Perspective taking*

The responses below are examples of perspective taking. Students empathised with the lecturers and showed an understanding of the potential difficulties of having to deliver all teaching material online:

I also want to highlight that I fully understand that it was not an easy task for [university] to teach on-line and they absolutely did their best but I just felt a bit lost. (Female, 41–50 years)

This is still a very uncertain time for everyone, including myself. I think it's harder for lecturers and students who have young families, caring responsibilities, or are an at-risk group. (Female, under 19 years)

### *Resilience*

The majority of responses reflecting resilience were negative. Students explained how the effects of COVID-19 on their placements caused them a lot of stress and anxiety, particularly due to them feeling unprepared for entering the workforce:

...many may struggle with AYE [Assessed year in Employment] due to feelings of anxiety and inadequacy due to not properly finish the programme. (Female, 23–30 years)

## Discussion

The current study examined the role of social work education on social work students' empathy and self-reported resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. We found that there were no significant differences in the

matched sample between T1 and T2 in empathic concern, perspective taking and self-reported resilience. This was slightly different in the cohort comparison, where resilience was significantly higher at T2, thus partially supporting our hypothesis.

The finding that empathic concern and perspective taking did not change between T1 and T2 was surprising, considering the central role of empathy in social work. This is, however, not the only study which did not find an improvement in empathy over the course of a social work education programme. Zaleski *et al.* (2016) compared graduating social work students to those completing their foundation year and similarly found no differences in empathy between the two cohorts. The authors considered that perhaps social work attracts individuals who are already empathic and there is not much left to change, but this idea may not be wholly accurate (Grant, 2014). Further research in this area is needed to ascertain the accuracy of this assumption.

It is also possible that the online learning inhibited the development of social presence in students. The narratives of students in our sample showed that they found online learning challenging as they felt disconnected from the university and their learning. Social presence, the degree of awareness of others in an interaction (Walther, 1992), is an important aspect of all learning, but requires special pedagogical attention if it is to be developed in online learning contexts. Activities such as small group discussions are essential to the development of social presence and are associated with high-quality, well-designed online learning (Akcaoglu and Lee, 2016). Having a sense of the social presence of classmates supports the process of socialisation and the development of social identity (Arslan, 2021), which underpins an aptitude for 'social perspective taking' (Gehlbach, 2004). The rapid switch to online teaching at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic did not utilise best principles and practices in digital education and the development of social presence may have been one casualty.

Levels of self-reported resilience in our matched sample did not differ significantly between T1 and T2, and similar results have previously been reported in a group of social work students in India (Stanley and Buvaneswari, 2020). Others have, however, found that resilience levels increase as social work students progress through their course (De las *et al.*, 2014), which supports the finding from our cohort comparison.

It is possible, however, that empathy and resilience are harder to teach online, especially when the switch from face to face to online mode of study is rapid and unplanned. Indeed, Hodges *et al.* (2020) argued that the planning and designing of an online university course typically takes six to nine months. During COVID-19, the switch from face to face to fully online teaching took mere days and this pivot, labelled 'emergency remote teaching', by Hodges *et al.* (2020) reflects the view of many learning professionals that much of the remote teaching during the pandemic does not reflect the principles and practices of high-quality digital

education. The authors cautioned about directly comparing remote teaching with prior in-person teaching, suggesting that the focus of the evaluation should be on the context, input and process, rather than the product (i.e. learning).

The lack of improvement in empathy and resilience (in the matched sample) in our study could be, at least to some extent, explained by the rapid switch to online learning, as outlined above, but also by the fact that students' placements ended early and their career as social workers started before they felt ready. The qualitative analysis showed that social distancing rules and remote working limited students' learning opportunities and finishing their placements early meant that many felt unprepared for entering the workforce. The early placement endings potentially hindered the development of empathy and resilience skills in students. Many were not allowed to properly end their involvement with clients, which limited their training opportunities in this area. Davis and Mirick (2021) reported that in their sample of social work students, the abrupt endings to placements elicited strong emotional reactions in students, suggesting that they felt unsupported. Not having the opportunity for proper ending with clients meant that they missed out on this important learning experience.

Additionally, students in our sample talked about increased levels of stress and deteriorating mental health. Other studies have reported similar findings (Ezulike *et al.*, 2021; Bloomberg *et al.*, 2022). It has also been reported that resilience and mental ill-health are positively correlated (Gheshlagh *et al.*, 2017), and a similar relationship has been found with empathy; specifically, empathic concern and perspective taking being protective factors for mental health symptoms (Huang *et al.*, 2020). It is therefore possible that the deteriorating mental health impacted on students' feelings of empathy and self-reported resilience, but further research in this area is needed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been discussed in the literature in terms of shared trauma, which is a concept used to describe the circumstances in which the clinicians and clients are exposed to the same collective trauma (Tosone *et al.*, 2012). Shared trauma could have negative implications for the therapeutic relationship, as the clinicians could feel that their role as a helping professional is impaired. Students are particularly at risk, due to their lack of training and experience, which make them vulnerable to secondary traumatisation. Their ability to express empathy in such situations may be impaired (Nuttman-Shwartz and Dekel, 2009).

## Limitations and future directions

The current study has limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the sample size for the matched comparison was relatively small, and it



would therefore be beneficial for future studies to recruit larger samples to see if the results are replicated. In terms of empathy, studies could look at comparing social work students at the start of their degree to those from other disciplines to see if social work attracts students who are inherently higher in empathy. It will also be important to replicate the current study with future cohorts of social work students, once they return to face-to-face learning, to ascertain whether the current results were solely due to COVID-19, or whether the social work courses need to make some changes to their curriculum to promote better learning of empathy and resilience.

## Implications

The results emphasise the importance of preparation for practice in social work. Research is therefore needed on how social work students integrate and internalise curriculum areas, related to their professionalism and practice. This would help to improve the process of designing the curriculum with the aim of enhancing students' empathy and resilience levels. Additionally, exploring the possibilities of teaching these skills in a virtual classroom would be beneficial in case of future pandemics or disasters, or even simply for distance learning. Furthermore, whilst lessons can be taken from the impact of rapid change required during COVID-19, and the need to rapidly shift to online learning, this too had an impact on students' feelings about their readiness for practice, compounded by early exit from placement to the workforce. These shortened placements further highlight the importance of practice teachers being clear about what standard of practice is 'good enough' for students to successfully complete the placement (MacDermott and Harkin-MacDermott, 2021).

It is also important for educators to understand that students' emotional and psychosocial needs may be different during times of crisis. By recognising these, educators can make better decisions and choices in relation to designing their online classrooms, which, during situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, may require elements of trauma-informed approaches to teaching and learning (Hitchcock *et al.*, 2021).

The article raises important questions about the role of education and preparedness, but it also raises questions about what we as a profession need to do to ensure that social work students have absorbed the significance of important learning areas. Furthermore, how we guide educators to enhance the curriculum and teaching areas that are critical to best practice in social work is a lesson from this research.

## Conclusion

The current study found that COVID-19 had a negative impact on social work students' education on the island of Ireland. With the exception of a few qualitative responses, which showed resilience, the majority of students in our sample felt that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their studies. The quantitative findings were largely in line with the qualitative narratives, as students' empathic concern and perspective taking did not improve over the course of their degree. Their self-reported resilience did not improve in the matched sample, but was slightly higher at T2 in the cohort comparison. These findings could be a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and with that associated rapid switch from face to face to emergency remote teaching and students' learning opportunities being limited due to their placements ending early. Future studies in this area will be needed to ascertain whether the social work courses at the universities in our sample can effectively teach empathy or whether changes to the curriculum are needed.

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