

# Teacher Education and Internship: An Evaluation of Alignment Between Preparation, Practice, and the Necessity of Engagement with Social Emotional Learning

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## Abstract

Teacher education programs are established to create opportunities for preservice teachers to learn actively through course work and practicum experiences. This mixed methods study looked to understand preservice perceptions of their program post covid and to assess their perceived proficiency as an educator, by examining expectations placed on preservice teachers to indicate that there is a gap in their understanding of important concepts related to pedagogy and their application of best practices. The preservice teacher survey indicated a positive experience during their practicum experiences but the skill application for behavior management, flexibility, and classroom processes indicated limited experience and little empathetic understanding. The aim of this study is to reevaluate teacher education programs to better support and provide authentic opportunities for pedagogical skill development before graduation.

**Keywords:** teacher preparation, survey, classroom management, empathy education, care theory, social emotional learning

## 1. Introduction

University teacher preparation programs design their coursework with application in mind, the end goal is to create intelligent, motivated, and passionate future educators. Our program embeds learning theories, has over one hundred hours of in the field application, and courses tailored on the methods of teaching. Despite the program's inclusive curriculum, our students consistently become disconnected from the material presented in class. Pre-service teachers struggle to connect principles of teaching, they struggle with content, and they struggle with their own teaching philosophy. The pre-service teacher is defined as the student enrolled in a teacher preparation program who must successfully complete degree requirements including course work and field experience before being awarded a teaching license. Our mid-size, midwestern university houses a teacher education program that prepares students to enter Early Childhood, Elementary, Special Education, or Secondary Education careers. During the 2022-2023 school year a survey was sent out to cooperating teachers asking for feedback regarding their experiences with their clinical interns. Much of the feedback we received has caused the discussion within our department on whether students are applying what they have been taught in their teacher preparation courses while completing their practicum and clinical placements. The goal of this research was to elucidate student perceptions of both their teacher preparation and application from theory to practice. The key motivation that drove this initiative was to include student perceptions of their individual experiences in the field and barriers or gaps that existed during their student teaching semester. The data collected from this survey helped faculty by serving as the foundation for further review of the impact teacher preparation courses have on the transfer of course objectives into the classroom and facilitating meaning field-based experiences.

## 2. Background

Teaching practice is a crucial component of teacher education programs, providing students with the opportunity to apply theory to practice and develop practical skills. Research findings suggest that teacher candidates experience significant growth and development during their student teaching experiences (Kaya & McIntyre, 2020; Naylor, Campbell-Evans & Maloney, 2015; Purwasih, Sholichah & Pratiwi, 2021). They value practical experience and hands-on learning opportunities as important components of their teacher education program. Teacher candidates gain a deeper

understanding of teaching practices, improve their classroom management skills, and learn how to create stronger relationships with students. Moreover, practical experience allows teacher candidates to develop a greater awareness of their own personal strengths and weaknesses as teachers. This self-awareness allows them to reflect on their own teaching practice and make changes to improve their effectiveness in the classroom (Campbell-Evans & Maloney, 2015). When studying a variety of factors relating to teacher retention, Vidic (2022) found that self-efficacy was the most important. As explained by Vidic (2022), “Nevertheless, it was proven that teachers who give up teaching have weaker self-efficacy than the stayers” (p. 602). It is therefore imperative that student teachers feel confident when entering the classroom.

It is crucial for teacher candidates to develop self-efficacy during their student teaching experience, which refers to believing in their ability to succeed as a teacher (Bandura, 1997). As explained by Demirtas (2018), “self-efficacy beliefs determine the amount of effort that will be expended when coping with an activity, how long the individual will persist in the face of obstacles and how the individual can be flexible in unfavorable conditions” (p.112). Nevertheless, student teachers often face various barriers that can undermine their self-efficacy, such as managing student behavior, adapting to diverse learners, and navigating the complexities of school culture (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). If preservice teachers suffer from low self-efficacy, it can adversely impact their motivation, persistence, and willingness to experiment with new teaching methods (Hoy & Spero, 2005).

Another common problem preservice teachers continually report is a gap in pedagogical skills. For example, a researcher examining the preparedness of 92 student teachers in Indonesia found that the students' overall preparedness for field experience practice was moderate (Purwasih, Sholichah, & Pratiwi, 2021). The present study participants reported that they were prepared better in terms of their pedagogical knowledge than their pedagogical skills and attitudes.

Other challenges that preservice teachers face during their practicums include managing classroom dynamics, adapting to different teaching contexts, and dealing with student behavior issues (Kaya & McIntyre, 2020; Naylor, Campbell-Evans, & Maloney, 2015). Using a survey to explore 60 Australian pre-service teachers' perceptions of their teacher education programs, researchers found that pre-service teachers have a high level of confidence in their ability to develop relationships with students, plan lessons, and deliver content. However, they reported feeling less confident in areas such as managing classroom behavior, working with students with diverse learning needs, and assessing student learning. The participants reported that support from their mentors and peers was essential in helping them to overcome these challenges (Campbell-Evans, & Maloney, 2015). Furthermore, studying 47 pre-service teachers from a university in Australia who had completed a professional practice placement, researchers found that pre-service teachers who received regular feedback and support from their supervising teachers were more effective in planning and delivering lessons that promoted student learning (Cavanagh, Barr, Moloney, Lane, Hay & Chu, 2019). While receiving and processing feedback is a vital aspect of the student teaching experience (Darling-Hammond, 2006), coping with feedback can be a challenge, especially if it is perceived as overly critical, ambiguous, or inconsistent (Hudson, 2010; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Preservice teachers may struggle to accept constructive criticism, integrate feedback into their teaching, and balance multiple perspectives from mentors, supervisors, and peers.

Researchers also highlight the importance of preservice teachers' understanding of assessment and their ability to use assessment data to inform their teaching. Cavanagh, Barr, Moloney, Lane, Hay and Chu (2019) suggest that teacher education programs should provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to develop their assessment literacy and to practice using assessment data to inform their teaching. Overall, the researchers emphasize the importance of effective support and mentoring for preservice teachers during their professional practice placement to ensure that they can have a positive impact on student learning.

What seems to be important to consider is the value of incorporating pre- and post-student teaching reflections into teacher preparation programs and reflective practice in teacher education (Kaya & McIntyre, 2020). The participants' reflections in this study revealed that the teacher candidates gained a deeper understanding of teaching practices, improved their classroom management skills, and developed stronger relationships with students. The researchers also found that the teacher candidates' reflections revealed a greater awareness of their own personal strengths and weaknesses as teachers. The authors argue that reflections can help teacher candidates develop a deeper understanding of their own teaching practice, which can ultimately lead to better outcomes for their students.

Overall, researchers underscore the importance of teaching practice in teacher education programs and emphasize the need for effective support and mentoring for teaching degree students during their teaching practice. They argue that teacher education programs should provide ongoing opportunities for reflection, feedback, and professional development to ensure that teaching degree students are well-prepared for their future teaching careers (Zacharias, 2007; Konold, K. E., Miller, S. P., & Konold, K. B. 2004).

### **3. Methodology**

This study was conducted at a midsize public university with a large teaching preparation program leading to licensure in

early childhood, elementary, special education, and secondary education within the content areas of history, English, mathematics, science, world languages, art, and physical education. A survey was administered in both the fall and spring semesters in the last week of the seminar course required during student teaching. The research team developed a survey to purposefully examine the effectiveness of the program as a whole and to respond to the current needs of our partnering schools to better prepare our students to close the gaps in their understanding of teaching.

The survey was taken by 70 students during the final semester of their program (Table 1). The students surveyed answered three closed-ended rating scale questions asking information about their perceptions of the specifics of their clinical experiences, their readiness to begin their career, and the overall support from their mentor teacher. They were also given the option to answer open-ended questions regarding their student teaching experiences. The data were triangulated by the research team who then themed the coded data based on high frequency of appearance in all surveys, which illustrated needs for specific areas of program intervention.

Table 1. Survey Demographics

Survey Participants		N
<b>Grade Band</b>	P-2 Grade	31 (44.3%)
	3-5 Grade	20 (28.6%)
	6-8 Grade	7 (10.0%)
	9-12 Grade	12 (17.1%)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>N = 70</b>
<b>Content Area</b>	Elementary	46 (65.7%)
	Special Education	6 (8.6%)
	Secondary	19 (27.1%)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>N = 70</b>

**4. Findings**

The current Teacher Education faculty determined this research was necessary due to the majority of instructors being new and untenured coupled with the results of the mentor teacher survey feedback. These factors prompted inquiry into how our preservice teachers have benefited from the coursework provided by the program. Through this specific discourse our goal was to better understand and review the students’ gaps in their teaching knowledge in a whole program. The research team also wanted to address the changes in schools post-Covid and how university faculty need to be responsive to the new needs of the field of education.

A closed-ended 1 to 10 rationale scale was used to measure participants’ perceptions of their student teaching experiences. All three questions scored high with average ratings of 8.3, 7.8, and 8.75 respectively (Figure 1).

**Perceptions of Student Teaching**

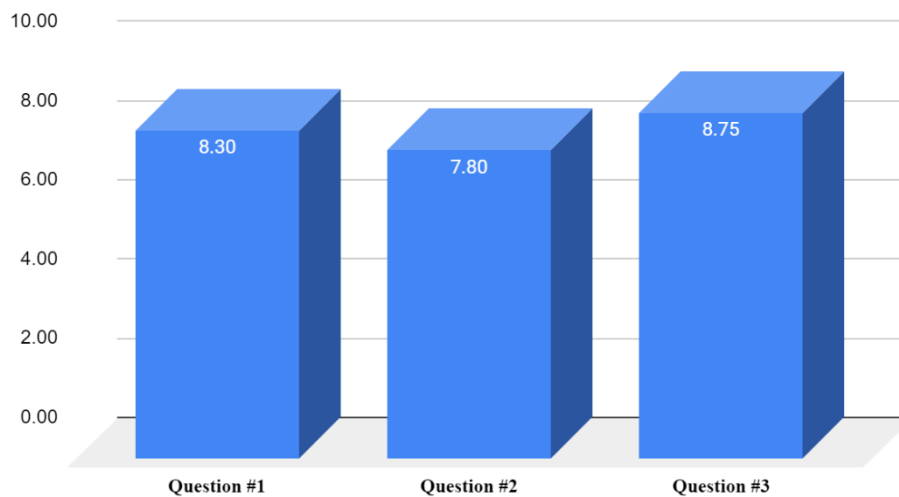


Figure 1. Ratings on a Scale of 1-10 for Perceptions of Student Teaching

Question #1 asked pre-service teachers to rate their overall clinical experience (student teaching). Only five (7%) of the seventy student teachers responded unfavorably with ratings of less than five while 79% (n = 55) rated their student teaching experience at eight or higher (Figure 2). The second question asked how much each pre-service teacher felt they were ready to begin their teaching career. Although the result was not quite as high of an average rating as the other two questions, only two responded with a rating lower than five. This question also had the lowest number of “10” ratings with only 7 students (10%). The most varied ratings but highest average occurred with the third question which asked the student teachers to rate how much support they received from their cooperating teacher. Forty-three student teachers (61%) gave their cooperating teachers the highest rating and only five rated their mentors below the median score.

### Ratings of Clinical Experiences

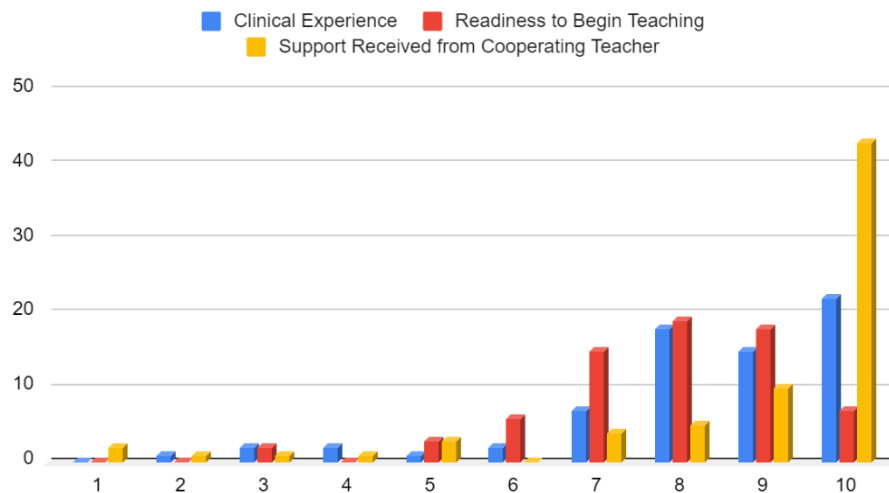


Figure 2. Ratings of Clinical Experiences

Several open-ended questions were asked that inquired about both shortcomings from their teacher preparation, and the biggest obstacles they experienced during the semester. The data analysis yielded four major program areas of intervention. The first challenge faced by student teachers was behavior management. Common issues reported include disrespectful behavior, cussing, and the mental health needs that students have. The second challenge mentioned is the lack of teaching flexibility. This pertains to preservice teachers' ability to rapidly change instruction based on student need and understanding the diversity of learners in their classrooms. The third obstacle is classroom management includes understanding the tools that teachers use such as common assessments, individual education plans (IEPs) and learning management systems (LMS).

#### Barriers to Successful Application: Behavior Management

Through the thematic analysis of emerging themes, the topic of behavior management was determined to be the most prevalent issue that our student teachers identified. This topic was present in thirty-three of our survey responses and had many iterations but was determined to funnel into the category of classroom behavior management. The structure of our clinical internship requires that students be placed in a classroom Monday through Friday and follow the mentor teacher's contract schedule. The purpose of this structure was to allow the preservice teacher to witness how their mentor teacher prepared for their classes, how they greeted students, and how the typical day to day of teaching transpired. Preservice teachers would see authentic classroom expectations for students and how their mentor teacher reacted to negative and positive behavior. Students were able to articulate an understanding of the importance of appropriate classroom procedures.

Several participants commented that our teacher education program had not adequately emphasized these essential practices for student self-efficacy. As one 3<sup>rd</sup> grade student teacher commented in response to their biggest obstacle during the student teaching semester, "Behavior issues I didn't know how to deal with." Students specifically wanted classroom management skills to assist with small group instruction, disruptive behavior, and motivation for students to complete their work. One of the student teachers pointed out, "The behaviors of some of these students were awful, cussing, threats, eloping. It was so difficult to maintain focus with these behaviors" (2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Student Teacher). Specific issues related to the applicable nature of what our program includes in the curriculum we create also lead students to ask for tools that they could utilize to garner quiet, behaving classrooms, "I wish I would have known more classroom management strategies and how they are implemented in the classroom." (Kindergarten-2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Special Education Mild Moderate Student

Teacher). One student teacher even went as far as to determine that mental health, stress and anxiety have been a barrier to their success as a classroom teacher, “There are a lot of students who struggle with mental health and behavior issues that will impact.” (1<sup>st</sup> Grade Student Teacher) Understanding that these issues go further than just discipline, students pointed out they lack their own attitude being regarded as a key aspect of their initial teacher identity. A student states, “I am known as a calm and nice person. Students will do their best to take advantage of that at the beginning of the semester. I wish I could have really set the tone earlier. They constantly tried being my friend instead of respecting me as the professional.” (9<sup>th</sup> Grade Physical Education)

### **Barriers to Successful Application: Teaching Flexibility**

The theme of flexibility emerged in 16 survey responses in a variety of contexts. Some of these changes were focused outside of the classroom. Flexibility and adaptability are 21<sup>st</sup> century skills necessary for preservice teachers (Bernard et al., 2019; Budrow & Tarc, 2018; Mikulec, 2014). These soft skills are desired by recruiters within the context of teaching (Budrow & Tarc, 2018). For preservice teachers, this flexibility includes both collaboration with others and as a learner (Orhan Gökşün & Kurt, 2017). As one student stated, “There were so many changes in the school which led to instability. We saw a lot of teacher and administrator conflict” (4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Mild Moderate). However, the majority of the responses focused on changes to the original lessons planned for the day. Students appeared to have difficulty with being flexible and adapting in the moment: “I wish I knew how to change plans without getting flustered and to have back up plans” as one 9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> grade Spanish candidate explained. A more simplified outlook by a K-2<sup>nd</sup> grade mild-moderate candidate concluded, “You won’t always do what you have planned. You won’t always finish what you had planned.” For some students, the concept of flexibility was centered around having multiple sections of the same course and learning that every class is different. “Adjusting to each class and each group of students even if using the same lesson plan is incredibly valuable” (9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> Grade English). Finally, some responses centered around being flexible for the benefit of the students. For example, a 9<sup>th</sup>- 10<sup>th</sup> Grade US History and Civics candidate stated, “It’s okay to get off topic if it benefits student engagement.”

### **Barriers to Successful Application: Classroom Management**

The final emergent theme was that student teachers lacked the knowledge of classroom management skills, specifically using rubrics, grading procedures, creating and using data assessments, and using best practices for students who require accommodations and differentiation of the assignment. This theme emerged in 39 survey responses. The importance of pre-service teachers' understanding of assessment and their ability to use assessment data to inform their teaching was reported by Cavanagh et. al., (2019) who suggested that teacher education programs should provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to develop their assessment literacy and to practice using assessment data to inform their teaching.

One aspect of classroom management that emerged involved grouping students. Some candidates discussed this from an ability-grouping perspective, stating that “I wish I would have known how to use test scores to place students in ability groups and how to meet their individual needs based on those scores” (5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> Grade Mild Moderate) and “I wish I understood how to utilize and expand mixed-ability grouping. My cooperating teacher would let students choose their groups and it ended up with students getting nothing done or finished” (7<sup>th</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Science). Others wanted more general grouping strategies, stating “I wish I would have learned how to structure group work or partners. I want students to work together and come to the front of the classroom and share” (3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Student Teacher).

Another common aspect involved unit planning strategies, which occurred more often in the secondary setting than in the elementary setting. Some explanations included: “I wish I would have known about unit planning and how to chunk lesson materials for daily lessons” (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> US History), “How do I approach content from a standard view and how do I lay out the unit” (9-12<sup>th</sup> Grade World History), and “More unit planning experience would be good. I still don’t understand backwards planning while trying to incorporate everything else into the school day. How do I assess them?” (10<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> Grade English).

Additional comments revolved around various student needs. One student did not anticipate the struggle of helping students who had missed the previous class while balancing the regularly scheduled lessons for the day with the remaining students, explaining “I struggled with helping students who were behind due to absences while also teaching my whole class lessons” (7<sup>th</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Math). Another related struggle was within the realm of special education, where another student had not anticipated the variety of individual needs within a given set of students. She states that “An obstacle I had was getting to know and learning understanding how different the needs are with the SPED students” (K-2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Special Education).

## **5. Discussion & Implications**

Many factors impact teacher attrition rates, such as person-organization fit, workload, government initiatives, feeling under-valued, and work-life imbalance (Miller & Youngs, 2021; Perryman & Calvert, 2020). It is impossible to address all these factors in an educator preparation program with preservice teachers, but sufficient preparation for new teachers may reduce later workload and improve work-life balance, in addition to increasing confidence to continue in the field. It is the

job of Teacher Education faculty to make sure competent and successful practice occurs, and the skills and knowledge are transferred into application.

Dealing with student misbehavior is known to contribute to stress and burnout for teachers (Chang, 2013). In a study exploring the reasons behind teacher attrition rates, Perryman & Calvert (2020) found that over the course of a career, behavior declined as a challenging factor for teachers, and was typically addressed as a lack of support with classroom behavior by more experienced teachers or mentors. Although teachers were not leaving due to student misbehavior, 38% cited a lack of support from administration as a primary factor (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). Many of our courses embed the understanding that misbehavior is a coping mechanism for underlying issues that cause students to have difficulty adjusting to the expected behaviors in the school setting, such as poverty, inconsistent home life, motivation, boredom, and insufficient peer relationships, to name a few (Alstot & Alstot, 2015; Orejudo et al., 2020). Misbehaviors imply that a student's behavior contradicts the classroom or school rules and expectations, and that an intervention is necessary (Orejudo et al., 2020). According to Alstot & Alstot (2015).

If the teacher does not implement a behavior management strategy that addresses the category when a misbehavior is being addressed, "the likelihood of accidentally reinforcing the misbehavior increases" (Alstot & Alstot, 2015, p.24). One way to identify these categories, which could increase students' self-efficacy and skills with behavior management, is to teach teachers about functional behavior analyses. Although typical methods of determining the function of behavior vary, they all include collecting data on the context of the situations when the disruptive conduct occurs, such as the time and location, the antecedent stimulus (potential cause), the student's response to the stimulus, the desired outcome, responses to previous interventions and consequences, and other relevant information (Alberto & Troutman, 2013; Oliver et al., 2015). This information can in turn be used to develop a behavior support plan to address recurring misbehavior. Giving preservice teachers practice with implementing behavior analyses and behavior support plans during their courses could increase confidence and reduce stress and burnout in the early years of their career.

What seems to be important to consider is the value of incorporating pre- and post-student teaching reflections into teacher preparation programs and reflective practice in teacher education (Kaya & McIntyre, 2020). The participants' reflections in this study revealed that the teacher candidates identified a deeper understanding of teaching practices, had improved their classroom management skills, and developed stronger relationships with students. The researchers also found that the teacher candidates' reflections revealed a greater awareness of their own personal strengths and weaknesses as teachers. The authors argue that reflections can help teacher candidates develop a deeper understanding of their own teaching practice, which can ultimately lead to better outcomes for their students. The challenge is making sure that preservice teachers develop a mindset of empathy rather than one of authority. A good teacher is a caring teacher (Demetrulias, 1994; Nguyen, 2016). Developing how preservice teachers understand students' personal situations and developing an ethic of care in response to students' needs is a necessary part of teaching (Meyers et al., 2019). It is crucial for teacher candidates to develop self-efficacy during their student teaching experience, which refers to believing in their ability to succeed as a teacher (Bandura, 1997).

### **Barriers to Successful Application: Social Emotional Learning**

An unexpected finding that has emerged on the forefront of our program redesign is the dearth of empathy and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies present in our current courses. In several responses the research team members noticed that the comments from the survey showed a lack of compassion and little understanding of the structures necessary to support student needs in a post-Covid classroom environment. As Conley (2015) argued that higher education must recognize "the value of the role of social and emotional, as well as academic, learning" (p. 208), we have realized SEL for teacher candidates should be considered more significantly. The inclusion of SEL best practices in our programs could potentially provide preservice teachers ways to navigate behavior management problems and teaching flexibility, thus strengthening the self-efficacy of our preservice teachers who have indicated gaps in those areas.

Our response to this survey's feedback indicates a need for courses to include aspects of social emotional learning (SEL). This can include looking into the current course offerings and either redeveloping an existing course, for example one that currently is not required for licensure or adding those components into existing courses. Utilizing the CASEL framework (2023) as a guide to breaking down the essential components of SEL curriculum, CASEL outlines these five foundational areas: developing self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and encouraging strong relationship skills. Reflecting back on our survey data, researchers can identify proposed courses where this would naturally fit, for example the methods courses, and how we can pull in local expert educators to examine situational approaches to application. Working intentionally with our partnering school districts, building a strong foundation to application is our next step as we redevelop our courses to better prepare student teachers for classrooms and to foster empathy and care. Noddings (2003) believed that "the primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring" (p. 172). Engaging purposefully with theoretical

frameworks like the Ethic of Care and pushing those conversations into our courses. “Teachers, like mothers, want to produce acceptable persons - persons who will support worthy institutions, live compassionately, work productively but not obsessively, care for older and younger generations, be admired, trusted and respected. To shape such persons, teachers need not only intellectual capabilities but also a fund of knowledge about the particular persons with whom they are working” (Noddings, 1988, p. 221).

The researchers understand the limitations of using surveys of program completers as an evaluation tool (Bastian, Sun, & Lynn, 2021). Triangulation requires that “researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251).

## 6. Conclusion

Our program must adapt to the feedback and needs of our preservice teachers. Our response to this feedback necessitates that our courses must include components in SEL as a way to navigate through behavior problems and enrich teacher relationships through more practical application and university support. This means that as a faculty, we also must have as much application of taught methods as possible. Ensuring instructors of methods courses are present and accountable and to provide feedback that is active, rather than passive. The findings indicate that our students really need to embody understanding and empathy as an instructional philosophy. Some of the open-ended survey data indicated a very shallow understanding of their own role in the relationship they build with students. Their understanding was very limited in how they talk through classroom problems and how each student be treated differently, as each students' needs fluctuate. As we begin to look through method course syllabi it is on the task of faculty to utilize authentic reflections in their coursework and provide real time feedback to preservice teachers. With the understanding that journal reflections are useful, it is imperative that we identify specific areas within our program to provide critical feedback, thus potentially lessening the gaps by the time students reach their final semester in our program. Our discussions have also included using virtual observations and recordings where issues can be quickly identified and corrected, as well as providing faculty with incentives to travel to school sites for in-person observations. As faculty, we could identify shortcomings sooner and initialize disposition forms to emphasize the skills that must be applied and applied well. Upon examination, it appears that our student teachers feel compelled to reflect on their own needs that they have expressed during their time in our program but are not willing to extend that same empathy to students as young as six years old.

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