

**What Teacher Preparation Programs Can Learn From Preservice Educators in a Post
Pandemic World**

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Abstract

For the past 2 ½ years, the current population of undergraduate preservice teachers have persisted in their education programs despite unimaginable obstacles. As students, they moved in and out of remote instruction, often taking practicum and student teaching courses without access to in-person K–12 classrooms. At the start of the 2021 academic year, many K–12 schools welcomed back students in-person, and undergraduate preservice teachers once again had the opportunity to complete practicum and student teaching courses face-to-face. This article synthesizes voices of undergraduate education students captured at the close of the 2021-22 academic year. Results indicate that, despite the obstacles to their own education, preservice teachers sought out positive relationships with peers and professors to help them to navigate challenges and persist in their education programs. In addition, participants noted the desire to learn more about trauma-informed education practices as well as social emotional learning (SEL) pedagogies to help their students. This article concludes with research related to social emotional learning and trauma informed education practices to advocate for key areas to elevate teaching and learning in a post-pandemic world.

Keywords: teacher preparation, post-COVID learning, social emotional learning, trauma informed education

It is an understatement to say that students, teachers, preservice teachers, and communities have had a challenging 2 years. Like many organizations, schools have had to pivot multiple times to best meet the needs of their community of learners. The 2021 academic

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year brought a “return to normal” mantra that school administrators, teachers, and students hoped would lead to a comfortable school routine. In August 2021, I welcomed my preservice education students back to face-to-face meetings; their energy and hope for the academic year were palpable. From the start, though, the 2021 academic year proved to be anything but normal. As K–12 schools moved back and forth between in-person and remote learning in response to COVID-19 viral surges, preservice teachers in practicum and student teaching courses needed to adjust quickly—often overnight. In addition to the constant disruptor of the continued pandemic, the relentless political, social, and economic unrest bled into classrooms. One of my students summed it up nicely, “Even the cast of *Saturday Night Live* looks tired trying to keep up with everything!” Preservice teachers soon discovered that the K–12 classroom is a microcosm of society and when society is in a state of free fall, students act out this chaos in the classrooms.

At the close of the 2021-22 academic year, I asked the preservice teachers in my courses to take an informal survey so that I could capture their experiences. More importantly, I wanted to learn from them so that I could be better prepared for the challenges of the 2022 academic year. As educators, we look toward the future and a school year that aspires to bring more stability to our students, we have the opportunity to reflect on what these 24 months have illuminated as needs for the future educators. Teacher preparation programs are already packed with curriculum and adding to it is a daunting but necessary task. Hattie (2021) warned “perhaps the greatest tragedy to come from COVID-related distance learning would be *not* learning from this experience to improve our teaching” (p. 14). This article synthesizes voices of education students with research related to trauma informed practices to advocate for key areas that will elevate teaching and learning in a post-pandemic world.

Reflections From Preservice Educators

At the end of the 2021-22 academic year, I surveyed 91 undergraduate education students simply to get the “pulse” of the year. All participants were enrolled in either a practicum

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or student-teaching course that required between 10–30 hours of weekly K–12 observation and/or student teaching. Of the 91 students, 23 students (25%) responded. Although much of what they shared I felt in my gut throughout the year, some of their answers surprised me. The following narrative synthesizes the 23 responses and offers lessons we can learn from our current education students.

The Kids Are (Mostly) Alright

One of the first questions I asked was a simple, “How are you feeling?” To my surprise, 61% (14) responded they were doing relatively well, even optimistic about the next academic year. Responses ranged from, “I am rocking it out; the pandemic did not derail me” to, “I am slowly getting back into the swing of things.” One student remarked, “I had a good semester, but it took forever and flew by at the same time.” On the other end of the spectrum was 17% (4) who responded that the year did not go well for them. Of the students who struggled, 35% (8) stated getting back into an academic routine after a year of remote learning was the most challenging part of the year, followed by 22% (5) being concerned about their emotional well-being. Situated in between those who felt the year went well and those who struggled was 22% (5) who responded they were “in a daze” and one rhetorically asked, “Did the semester just end?” Of this group, 22% (5) cited fearing that they missed out on academic content due to the extended time of remote learning.

Relationships Helped Students Navigate Challenges

As I dug a little deeper with my questions, I was struck by the vulnerability and honesty in the survey results. I asked the students to describe their own behaviors or actions they attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, and 26% (6) admitted to feeling more depressed or skipping courses more than pre pandemic. Even with struggling with their own challenges, though, 83% (19) cited positive relationships as being the best part of being back on campus. 26% (6) cited seeing friends as being the best part of returning to in person instruction, while

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35% (8) cited working in schools with students face to face as being the best part of their year.

35% (8) reported that working with caring professors was the best part of their year.

Witnessing Trauma in the Classroom

All education students surveyed participated in face-to-face practicum or student teaching courses throughout the 2021 academic year. Although I had heard anecdotal accounts from my students about the traumas they were seeing in the K–12 schools, I wanted to capture data through three specific questions. Through these three questions, I discovered that all participants observed and described an increase in classroom management issues attributed to trauma exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first question specifically asked the preservice teachers about their perceptions of the ways the COVID-19 pandemic affected P–12 students. Unsurprisingly, the preservice teachers surveyed noted multiple areas. Loss of content learning and loss of consistent relationships with teachers was noted by 87% (20) of the preservice teachers, with 13% (3) believing that students felt a loss of sense of stability.

The second question asked the preservice teachers to report on behaviors they observed in the K–12 classes that either they or their cooperating teacher directly attributed to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. An overwhelming number, 91% (21), reported observing more behavioral issues such as student anger followed by 9% (2) reporting observing student risk-taking behavior.

Lastly, I explored the research around childhood trauma and trauma-informed practices to craft my third question. The ACES (Felitti et al., 1998) study is the benchmark for identifying childhood experiences that negatively impact students into adulthood. Using the ACES survey as a foundation, I asked students to identify any of the identified areas that they had first-hand knowledge of their students experiencing in the 2021 academic year. Thirty-nine percent (9) preservice teachers reported knowledge of their students experiencing divorce; 61% (14)

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preservice teachers reported knowledge of physical or emotional neglect; 26% (6) reported knowledge of abuse; and 17% (4) reported knowledge of substance abuse in the household.

They Know They Want to Help Their Future Students

Given that some participants were preparing to graduate and start their careers, I was interested in finding out what strategies they would bring to their classrooms. I asked, “Given that your future students will still be navigating their own traumas, what will you do to help them?” Their responses demonstrated their resilience:

- I will be their support guide no matter what. I want my students to feel comfortable enough to talk to me about whatever is bothering them. I want to be able to help others.
- I will hope to make sure that my future students will know that my classroom is a safe environment. That they can come and talk to me about anything and everything and not have to worry about anything.
- Provide a “I wish my teacher knew . . .” box for my students to provide anonymous or signed writings. This will provide me an opportunity to help someone individually or teach something related to their concern.
- I think putting the teacher-student relationship above content and working with the students' parents is the best thing we can do for them. Also, being aware of services in the area to give the families resources.
- Provide a safe space for students.

Lessons From Preservice Teachers

Repairing Relationships Through Social Emotional Curriculum

In a poignant student editorial in the *New York Times* titled “It Took a Global Pandemic to Stop School Shootings,” 17-year-old Lauren Koong (2021) expressed relief when she learned that classes would be moving online in March 2020, because she would no longer fear the

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trauma created by active shooting drills or, in her case, active shooters running through her school. This sentiment has been echoed by students and teachers alike and illuminates the need to reset school climate and rebuild a sense of community. As we move back to face-to-face instruction, it is critical that we recognize the need for positive K–12 school climates.

Yet, of the education students surveyed, 83% (19) cited being back on campus with their friends and their relationship with caring professors as being contributing factors to managing the stress of the academic year. There is a disconnect between those preparing to teach in schools and those currently learning in them. This group of future educators knows that relationships are key to building resilience, but they need instruction on how to transfer that to their students when they enter the K–12 schools. Preservice educators need direct instruction on social emotional curriculum and must also know how to work with issues for students caused by trauma.

School relationships and trust grow when all students believe they have worth (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). A school curriculum rich in social emotional learning activities is a way to repair the trust our students have in their future. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) recommended that school districts create an infrastructure where resources are readily available to share. In its roadmap for school reopening after the March 2020 school shut downs, CASEL (2020) offered a path forward with suggestions such as creating multiple spaces to grow the whole child both in and out of the school.

Students learn best when they feel safe and are in a trusting relationship with their teachers and their peers (CASEL, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Jones et al. (2015) found that social and emotional skills in kindergarteners were also positively correlated with their personal well-being and inversely predictive of involvement in crime and substance use. Creating an environment where students are given the platform to demonstrate agency can transform social, emotional, and academic behavior (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Kamei & Harriott, 2021). Kraft and Falcen (2020) provided practical ways for schools to do this by

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recommending cross-aged peer tutoring as a way to remediate loss of learning due to the pandemic while also building trusting relationships between the K–12 student body.

Providing Instruction on Trauma-Informed Practices

Education students have lost much in the last 24 months. They have lost loved ones to the COVID-19 virus, friendships due to social distancing and remote instruction, and, most importantly, trust that their future will be better than their past. Our education students are also entering the teaching profession at a time when K–12 teachers are reporting an increase in behavioral issues due to the stress of the ongoing pandemic (Vestal, 2021). There is much research calling out the need to attend to our students' social and emotional needs as we move from a time of crisis to a new normal (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Kamei & Harriott, 2021). K–16 students are experiencing chronic stress as a direct result of the traumatic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Vestal, 2021). Although there has been some progress of infusing trauma-informed practices into K–12 schools, there is no model or standard for preparing preservice teachers in the pedagogy (Thomas et al., 2019). Teachers often report feeling underprepared to meet the needs of students who have experienced trauma (Hobbs et al., 2019). Brunzell et al. (2019) found that teachers had not been provided with specific strategies to help students who had experienced trauma. According to Brunzell et al., when asked what types of courses they would like added to their teacher preparation program, 37% stated courses in trauma-informed education. Education programs need to make room for direct instruction on trauma-informed teaching practices.

Alleviating Compassion Fatigue and Burn Out through Self Care Strategies

Brunzell et al. (2021) concluded teachers “benefitted when modelling and mirroring the same capacities they were hoping to nurture in students, thereby showing by living examples the benefits of consciously embedding strategies to bolster wellbeing” (p. 102). Education students have witnessed first-hand the excessive stress of the teaching profession. They understand the irony that they will have multiple job offers upon graduation simply because so

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many veteran teachers are leaving the profession (Giffin et al., 2021). They are willing to do the hard work, but they also need the tools to avoid burnout and compassion fatigue. Post et al. (2022) found many teachers are not only inadequately trained in responding to students who have experienced trauma, they are also not trained in ways to manage their own stress responses. When asked what types of courses they would like added to their teacher preparation program, 26% (6) of the preservice teachers in this study stated courses in teacher self-care strategies. A school community needs to attend to the needs of all involved. CASEL (2020) recognized the value of tending to educators' health and wellbeing by recommending time for self-care be built into professional goals and professional development be geared towards trauma and fatigue.

Conclusion

There is much work to be done, but this global pandemic has stirred the muck at the bottom of the lake and what has floated to the surface are key areas of growth. Early findings show that from tragedy can come opportunities for positive changes in our educational systems (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Kraft et al. (2021) went so far to conclude “catastrophe *can* be a catalyst for positive change” (p. 29). Teacher preparation programs can add in more coursework focusing on SEL and trauma-informed teaching pedagogies. Classroom teachers can be mindful of SEL strategies and trauma-informed practices when building curriculum by empowering students to take control of their learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Professional learning opportunities need to focus on SEL and trauma-informed practices so that our students, our teachers, and our communities can heal and move forward together. Most importantly, educators need to remember that life is now different. We have this small moment in time to make education better for our students.

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