

How Are NC Educator Preparation Programs Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to Teach SEL?

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Background

Considering the ever-growing understanding of the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) to support student and educator mental health, it is important to consider what pre-service teachers are learning about SEL and what additions and revisions may need to be made to their studies. Recent research from Almerico (2018), Schonert-Reichl (2017), and Souter (2022) demonstrates that the social-emotional climate of a school influences students' academic success and development. As mental health issues have become more normalized and discussed, educators are working to find ways to help students develop healthy ways to navigate the events in their lives and be positive community members.

Purpose

The purposes of this study were to examine what pre-service elementary school teachers are learning about SEL in NC Educator Preparatory Programs (EPP) courses and field experiences and to gain pre-service teachers' perspectives on additional support they need. The questions below were addressed:

1. From the preservice teacher perspective, how well is SEL addressed in EPP programs?
2. Are there any significant patterns between preservice teachers' perspectives on SEL competency and skills based on academic classification (juniors vs seniors)?
3. What adjustments could be made to improve pre-service teachers' SEL competency within their EPP and field experiences?

Methodology

This mixed-methods study employed survey and focus group data collection. The survey and focus group opportunity was sent to at least one faculty/staff member at all IHEs with an accredited EPP for elementary educators. To participate, students must have been classified as junior or senior at one of these schools, pursuing a degree in elementary education, and at least 18 years old. Participants completed a survey that included demographic information and subscales adapted from previous research related to three constructs about SEL teaching: Teacher Confidence/Self-Efficacy (Buchanan et al., 2009), Skill-Related Practices (Yoder, 2014), and EPP Experiences (Brackett, 2012). Participants responded to each item on a 5-point Likert scale. The survey responses were analyzed to inform explanatory focus group data collection. Those survey participants who agreed and were available participated in focus groups via Zoom. In these conversations, participants were asked general questions about their experiences and follow-up questions regarding survey responses, and they participated in general conversations about the role of SEL in their preservice teacher experience.

Positionality

Abby is a current senior at North Carolina State University pursuing a BS in Elementary Education, leading to a NC K-6 teaching license as well as a Special Education (K-12) add-on license. Additionally, she is a member of the University Honors Program, which supported this study. A major factor in Abby's decision to pursue a career in the field of education is how her elementary, middle, and high school teachers navigated social-emotional topics and challenges as complements to her academic learning. As a result, she hopes to be able to provide a similar caring, positive learning environment for her own students. Abby became curious as to how pre-service teachers across the entire state are being prepared to implement SEL practices, which provided the impetus for this study.

Limitations

Although this study did have participants from across the state, a larger number of participants completing the survey and focus groups, and participants representing all EPPs in the state, would enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. The positionality of the researcher as a member of the sample of interest may have introduced some bias in the data collection and interpretation.

Survey Results

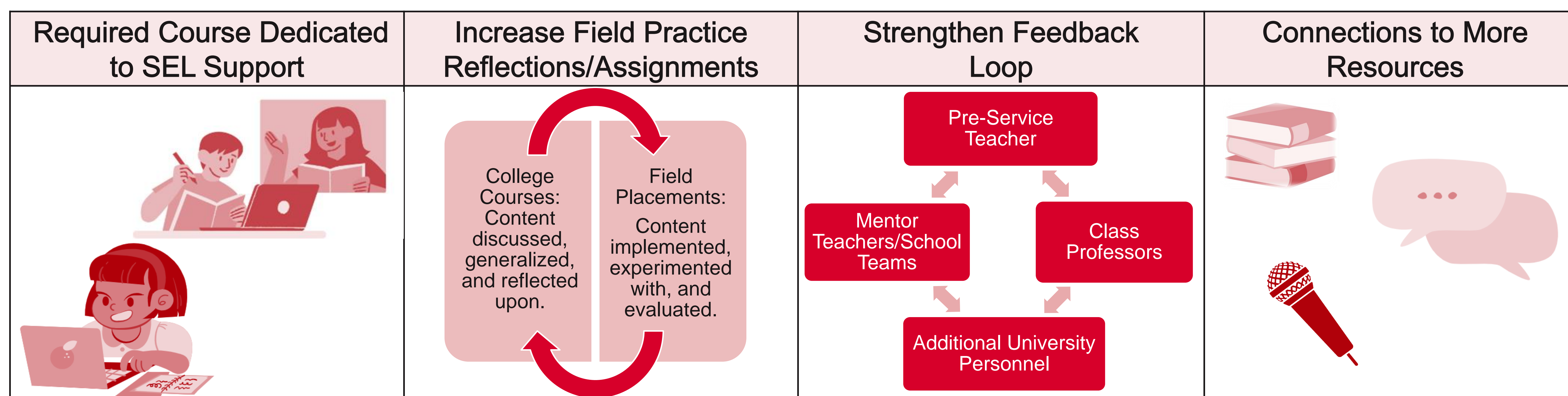
Teacher Confidence/Self Efficacy	Skill-Related Practices	EPP Experiences
73.1% of survey participants strongly agreed that "Taking care of students' social and emotional needs is an important part of being an educator."	At least 50% of participants felt either confident or very confident in their ability to implement and share self-awareness, social awareness, self-regulation, relationship skills, empathy, and responsible decision-making.	Only 56.1% of respondents (the smallest percentage agreement on this scale by a significant margin) indicated they strongly agree or agree that "I feel my EPP offers an adequate number of workshops to develop my own social and emotional skills."

Question Category	Juniors	Seniors
Self-Efficacy*	4.35 (0.1924)	4.32 (0.2449)
Skills*	4.06 (0.0755)	3.95 (0.1067)
Experiences*	4.05 (0.1981)	3.69 (0.3711)

Left: Averages for Likert Scales per subscales of the survey, distributed by indicated grade level. A T-test was completed to compare means between the two subgroups with * indicating a statistically significant difference at $p < 0.05$. This is the opposite of what we hypothesized; generally, we might assume that seniors would feel more prepared to support their students using SEL strategies and have more experience, but their average was lower in every category. This could be caused by a lack of awareness of the demands of teaching until later in their teacher preparation experience. The explanation for this finding was further explored in the focus groups.

Focus Group Results

Focus group conversations uncovered additional needs for preservice teachers. The more probing questions that were asked about preservice teachers' specific experiences, the more students seemed to recognize that they could use more support in terms of being prepared to teach and implement SEL practices. Specifically, seniors could answer questions more in detail, but the more specific they went with the situations they discussed, the more questions and wonderings they shared about the situations they have faced as pre-service teachers. Overall, four different themes emerged from the focus groups. First, many agreed that a required course dedicated to providing time for pre-service teachers to research, understand the reasoning behind, try out, and reflect on different SEL supports would help them better understand what kind of SEL strategies work for them. Second, field-based assignments related to the implementation of SEL strategies would help them better understand their mentor teachers' approaches. Third, strengthening the connections between each part of the feedback loop established between pre-service teachers, course professors, university supervisors, and mentor teachers would help to support the growth of the student teacher in SEL practices. Fourth, connections to SEL resources that pre-service teachers can use in their future classrooms would allow them to reference material covered in courses and know they are finding credible strategies. In summary, the focus groups uncovered many students notice similar trends at their EPPs; there are positive things in place, but the growth of these programs, especially related to feedback and coursework, would best support their development of SEL strategies.



Further Study Implications

Future studies could include pre-service teachers from all EPPs in the state or employ longitudinal designs to examine the SEL preparation of preservice teachers and their experiences as beginning teachers. EPP faculty may see this as an entry point to discuss with their preservice teachers what support they need to be more successful with SEL teaching, as well as collaborate with other college programs to share best practices for ensuring that each EPP is preparing the best teachers for SEL teaching.

"I feel like it is hard to know when you need to address something and when it needs to be ignored...I don't feel like that's something I know how to do...I wish there was a class we could take to make it less iffy."

"I feel like we could have had more conversation focused on SEL. Most of the conversations with my [cooperating] teacher was about my assignments and how we were going to get them done..."