

Successes and Challenges of Learning to Support Children post-COVID-19

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This study investigated the experiences of faculty mentors and college students majoring in education or social work during a four-week summer program serving children in first and second grade. The college students worked as tutors, implementing an evidence-based reading program supported by mental health and behavior intervention training. The case study design was used to determine the impacts on college students. Observations of college students, reflections from the college students, and vignettes from the faculty mentors were the data sources for the study. The key themes resulting are challenges working with children from socioeconomically and linguistically marginalized communities, successes and rewards of working with children, confidence as teachers, and mental health. The research indicates that further study is needed on embedding social work tenets into education programs on college campuses, and mental health services are needed for all students K-20 post-COVID.

Keywords: literacy; field experiences; mental health in education

The impact of educator well-being on student success is emerging – particularly post-COVID-19 – as a critical area of inquiry (Cahill et al., 2020). However, in the field of K-20 education, evidence of mental health burdens in the workplace, such as teacher burnout, have long been documented as detractors of student success (Capone et al., 2019; Iancu et al., 2018). Understanding teacher well-being and the impact on students' experiences is transactional and can thus be applied in higher education settings (e.g., Chang, 2009; Jennings, 2015). As teacher educators and social workers, the researchers for this project are mindful of the layers of stress impacting well-being and academic achievement (faculty as educators, students as educators, and school-age children's mental health needs).

The college students in this study are undergraduates, mostly majoring in K-12 education or sociology. The college student population is diverse, particularly when compared to the demographics of the entire college. Only seven students identify as White, compared to nine who identify as non-White. This study occurs during work-oriented learning, where college students learn alongside and from faculty. The faculty mentors are also research subjects in this paper; the authors each reflected on our experiences during the summer program and condensed those into vignettes. This experience included a shift in how the field experience was conceptualized; the college students and faculty worked together to change how the mental health of all participants was addressed. The literature indicates that these changes are needed to address barriers to retaining both undergraduate students and teachers (once graduated) (Van den Borre, Spruyt, & Droogenbroeck, 2021). This experience-based research demonstrated high college student engagement and satisfaction levels through surveys, reflections, and observations.

It is important to note that the participants in this study are beyond their sophomore year in college. The need to understand college retention beyond the freshman year has been well-documented (DeVries et al., 2022; Morley, 2003). The participants are also what Bean and Metzner (1985) termed “nontraditional” in all ways but age: they have “lessened intensity and duration of their interaction with the primary agents of socialization” (p. 488), they are primarily for academic reasons (as opposed to social), and they are influenced heavily by their environment off-campus (including financial responsibilities, employment, family responsibilities, etc.). To retain diverse students and promote graduation, framing our work with college students around individual needs versus the generalized needs of students is necessary. Models such as Tinto's, long-held in higher education as models for retention, fail to account for differences among cultural groups such as Latinx and African/Afro Caribbean populations represented in this study (DeVries et al., 2022).

Literature Review

TRADITIONAL FIELD EXPERIENCES AND MENTAL HEALTH

Many Teacher Education programs emphasize Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as a key aspect of successful teaching (Cammack et al., 2014; Tarbuton, 2018). SEL is based upon the premise that understanding emotions, establishing healthy relationships, and setting positive goals are critical for student success in K-12 settings (Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotion Learning, 2020). Thus, SEL is a tool that may be utilized to directly impact children’s mental health. It is also common in K-12 schools to have access to health professionals, even if they are not available daily (Kelly et al., 2020; Weist et al., 2014). However, post-COVID-19, Kelly et al. (2020) warned that additional mental health resources are needed in training teachers, are available for current teachers, and are available to children and staff in all schools. Kelly et al. (2020) report that three in four social workers surveyed across the United States reported mental health needs for children as urgent.

In a traditional field experience, college students work under the supervision of licensed teachers to learn how to teach (Darling-Hammond, 2015). Many field experiences benefit from faculty mentors during this process (Braden et al., 2019). In field experiences, mental health may not be addressed if the teacher of record does not implement SEL, which can be detrimental to the student-teacher. Additionally, this hierarchical approach lends itself to teaching as one was taught – which does not emphasize the student-directed learning needed for higher-order thinking and mastery of content independently by the K-12 learners (Cook-Sather et al., 2021; Matthews, 2017). To educate and retain college students working in the field, particularly diverse college students, unique field experiences and focuses on placements where mental health for both K-12 students and teachers is critical (DeVries et al., 2022; Tauriac & Liem, 2012).

MENTAL HEALTH AND BEHAVIOR MODIFICATIONS

Behavior modifications are continuously needed in K-12 classrooms (Boeree, 2006). By reinforcing positive behaviors and using planned ignoring and other strategies to minimize attention to negative behaviors, teachers are able to create a caring classroom where positive behavior is rewarded (Hanscom, 2010; Todd & Wolpin, 2003). A caring classroom, in turn, allows children to experience joy in school and, thus, positive mental health (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010). Keeping in mind that both social and academic integration are ultimately needed for student success, continuing to push the educational systems in the United States for inclusion and a focus on

individual needs is key (DeVries et al., 2022). The mental health of all children and teachers is more important now than ever before, given that all children who were school-aged during COVID-19 experienced an Adverse Childhood Event (DeSimone, 2022).

POST-COVID-19 AND INCREASED MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS IN SCHOOLS

Children from economically marginalized communities are disproportionately impacted by mental health issues (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Paris, 2012), in part because of inequitable structures in place; even in affluent school districts, pockets of impoverished populations can become further marginalized, and the opportunity gaps are wider in these areas (Annie E. Casey, 2022; Jotkoff, 2022). The pandemic and its ensuing economic fallout are exacerbating these issues (Agostinelli et al., 2022; Michelson et al., 2021). COVID-19 has not only created challenges for children and families, but it also created challenges for teachers. In a yearly poll administered by the National Education Association, 90% of teachers indicated that teacher burnout is a serious problem (Jotkoff, 2022). In response to this burnout, teachers indicated that stronger professional support and mental health support for children are needed.

CURRICULUM AS MODELING: ENGAGING IN TEACHING TO LEARN (I DO, WE DO, YOU DO)

The gradual release of responsibility model shifts responsibility from teacher-centered to student-centered (Pearson et al., 2019; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Teacher guidance throughout the process allows individual children to take responsibility as they become increasingly confident in the content (Harmes et al., 2016; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). When the teacher is in control, the lessons should clearly include modeling of the skills needed for mastery (Eutsler, 2022; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). This model is critically important for teachers and yet is frequently not modeled effectively in higher education for college students majoring in Education (Cook-Sather et al., 2021).

SUMMARY: GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Top-down teacher-led approaches to curriculum are rampant in K-20 education (Cook-Sather et al., 2021; Dwyer, 2018). The literature demonstrates the importance of field experiences, including mental health support for preservice teachers (PSTs) and K-12 children. However, missing from the literature is how adding mental health to teacher preparation programs and modeling self-care impacts classroom climate and PST efficacy. There is also ample literature on adding mental health post-COVID. However, there is not yet literature on how psychology, human services, and social work tenets might be added to teacher education. This study adds to that literature.

Methods

The current project is an extension of an existing summer program on a college campus. Post-COVID-19, the faculty researchers documented increased mental health needs in themselves, the college students, and the children being served in the program. To effectively modify the practices to include SEL and mental health awareness, this study investigated the impact of incorporating mental health supports as a community on the entire group.

CASE STUDY AND BOUNDED SYSTEM

Case description. This study occurred during a four-week summer program on a college campus in the southeastern United States. The college is partnered with a local school district, and approximately 75 children in first and second grade are bused to campus each day from 8:00 am to 3:15 pm for a literacy camp. The college students act as teachers for the children, and the college students are trained in mental health supports, behavior interventions, early literacy interventions, and phonics instruction prior to the program. Most of the teachers are education majors; in the summer of 2022, there were sixteen participants (see below). The summer program is the bounded system within which the action for this case study occurred.

The research questions driving the study were:

- Did implementing mental health supports and modeling those supports weekly change the climate of the classroom (both led by and including college students) (based upon observations)?
- Did implementing mental health supports and modeling those supports weekly change the way college students described SEL (based upon reflections)?
- Did implementing mental health supports and modeling those supports weekly change the way faculty researchers conceptualized mental health in schools – broadly speaking?

Consistent with case study methods (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2015), the study relied upon multiple data sources to answer these research questions. Observations recorded by faculty and utilizing video, reflections from the college students' weekly and cumulatively, and faculty reflections are the data sources. The summer program is the bounded system within which all action occurred (Stake, 1995).

PARTICIPANTS

Table 1

2022 Fast Start Tutors and Faculty

Participant	Gender Identity	Race/Ethnicity	College Affiliation
Mimi	F	African American	Education
Ellis	M	Asian American	Education
Blair	F	Latina	Education
Miranda	F	European American	Education
Katherine	F	Latina	Education
Denisa	F	European American	Education
Gigi	F	European American	Education
Tyeisha	F	African American	Sociology
Rosie	F	Latina	Education
Lisa	F	European American	Education
Brianna	F	Latina	Education
Allissa	F	Latina	Education
Missy	F	European American	Education
Tatiana	F	European American	Education
Sam	F	European American	Education
Marisol	F	Latina	Education
Rosa	F	Latina	Education Faculty
Beatrice	F	European American	Education Faculty
Amanda	F	European American	Psychology Faculty
Kamania	F	Latina	Education Staff

The study participants are 16 college students, primarily preservice teachers, working for a summer literacy program on a college campus, one staff researcher (a mental health expert), and three faculty researchers.

CODING AND ANALYSIS

Saldana's coding cycle method was used for data analysis. The first cycle was in vivo coding of observations, college student reflections, and faculty reflections. In vivo coding is appropriate in qualitative inquiry when "the actual language found in the qualitative record" is important to the researcher(s) (Saldana, 2009, p. 74). One of the goals of in vivo coding is to utilize the words of participants rather than words of the discipline, which was needed for research question two in particular. The first round of coding was completed utilizing the qualitative software program Atlas.ti and yielded 26 codes. The second round of coding utilized what Saldana (2009) refers to as "theoretical coding" (p. 163) but which many qualitative researchers refer to as selective coding. In theoretical coding, the networks explain the codes in the data that will have the greatest relevance to readers (Saldana, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

INTERNAL VALIDITY

Credibility was established in multiple ways. First, the team worked together across the varied data sources, as described previously. The observations were useful as validation of what was noted across the reflections from both the faculty and students. Additionally, utilizing data analysis software, in this case, Atlas.ti, allows for more transparency and collaboration (Paulus & Lester, 2015). As the researchers moved across the coding cycles noted in the analysis section of the paper, we began to make what Stake (2005) calls naturalistic generalizations, involving creating themes, included as findings below, and comparing those to the literature. The themes allow readers to determine if similar research methods and practices with preservice teachers are helpful in their own settings, as is appropriate when trustworthiness is established in qualitative inquiry. Finally, our team utilized the Hopscotch evaluation method to determine that our steps were complete, that our work did not contain gaps, and that triangulation could be confirmed (Jorin, 2019).

Findings

The 26 codes derived from the first cycle of coding were condensed into four themes. The college students described challenges, successes, confidence in teaching, and mental health throughout the data. The observations and surveys were included in three of the four themes: challenges, successes, and mental health. One interesting note about the themes is that while mental health was one of the research questions and was emphasized most by faculty throughout the program, it was the theme coded least with only 27 coding instances. Potential reasons for that anomaly will be explored in the discussion section.

BEATRICE'S VIGNETTE

I love the work we do each summer. My research partner is one of my best friends, and we have developed a supportive “Mom” team. We often bring our children to work with us in summer, and the children have all become friends and playmates. However, the summer work takes a toll. This summer, a student was mistakenly put onto the bus – the school gave us the wrong information. It was all fine in the end, but the mother was incredibly upset. The encounter left me in tears; I had to take time to compose myself which further delayed the bus departures. I spent some time talking to our mental health expert. Those ten minutes gave me such peace of mind. She helped me to see that all we can do is the next right thing when something goes awry. Being responsible for the career paths of all of our college students while also taking care of nearly 100 small children is so much stress, so adding any parent concerns really adds to what we do in a day. I realized that without our mental health expert I would have been like most public school administrators – left to deal with these issues on my own. Is it not possible to provide therapy onsite for our educators? Can't we do better?

CHALLENGES

In the above vignette, Beatrice describes challenges when working in a high-stress, high-stakes teaching environment. Beatrice is clearly worried about how to handle supporting parents and children while placing her college students' needs first. This is partly a struggle because of juggling so many responsibilities and personalities. Similarly, the college students described challenges such as planning for instruction, working with children, feeling unprepared, frustration with the program's structure, frustration with training, needing more resources for teaching, needing help with differentiation, and needing help staying on schedule. The most frequent code in challenges was the need for more resources. For some college students, the problems were similar to those experienced teachers face. One of the college students noted that "Some students need a teacher there to help them sound out the words . . . when the teacher moves on to another student, the student who just had support begins to struggle again" (tutor reflection). Beatrice's vignette shows similar struggles – what do we do when one person is just not enough? How does this play out in colleges of education and then in public schools?

ROSA'S VIGNETTE

One of my favorite parts about working with and helping to lead teacher candidates is the opportunity to work closely with them as they learn about the complexities of teaching and learning. Those close relationships are often difficult to cultivate in day-to-day teaching during the semester, but the summer allows me to spend time with future teachers. I get to build relationships, provide feedback, and learn more about the kind of teachers that our students want to be. As I got to know the college students who worked with us, students began to be more open about their experiences as college students. One of those students was intentional in developing close relationships with her co-teachers and the elementary students in her class. This student later disclosed to me that she was a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipient and that this summer program not only provided her with valuable teaching experience but that it also allowed her to work in the summer to be able to pay for her fall tuition. She shared that she did not spend any money during the summer so that she could save enough for her tuition. This was important for this student since she had to pay out-of-state tuition due to her DACA classification. It was an emotional conversation, and I considered all the hardships that come along with being an undocumented student. When she shared this with me, I wondered how we could consider not just the needs the elementary student, but also consider the needs of our teacher candidates.

SUCSESSES

Rosa's vignette describes teaching with a team and feeling successful at building relationships. This aligns with the college students' feelings of success in teaching. The theme containing the most coding instances was a success in teaching. The college students felt that they were well-prepared to teach and loved teaching with a team. They enjoyed having on-the-job training and being able to use prior knowledge of social-emotional learning and early literacy to encourage children. They spoke frequently of the emotional rewards of teaching, and the observations and survey data reflected this as well. One noted, "One thing my team did that showed . . . results was separating students into different groups based on their reading scores. We did this two days a week. Students started to flourish in those groups." (student reflection) As noted in Rosa's vignette, faculty researchers also noted successes. One of those successes was the opportunity to work closely with future teachers and to develop relationships with them. Rosa's vignette exemplifies how the summer program not only helped us to learn ways to support elementary students but also helped us to consider ways in which we may support teacher candidates.

KAMANIA'S VIGNETTE

Working during the summer program is such an incomparable formative experience regardless of the profession you come from. As one of the two mental health professionals supporting the camp activities, it was so wonderful to actually see and understand what teachers worry about in the classroom. So many things are happening during class that often the emotional state of their students and their own self-care is the last thing on the minds of the college students. Student-teachers often saw social-emotional learning (SEL) as an independent and separate activity and had difficulty understanding it as the constant and best vehicle to deliver academic content to their students. For example, teachers utilized the positive behavior management tools only during "SEL activities" and often became overwhelmed when children's behavior presented as more agitated or less engaged than usual. One of the student-teachers needed to step back from the classroom after getting upset with one of her students and seeing him become emotional due to the consequences she had given him for his misbehavior. The situation triggered emotional responses in both due to traumatic experiences they both lived in the past. The teacher was unable to provide emotional support and psychological containment due to her own unresolved emotional needs; she was not completely aware those needs were still present in her until that moment. It was great to be able to provide support to both of them and show our student-teachers that emotions are critical in the learning experience and are always present in the classroom. Teachers started to understand they are constantly modeling their student's behavior and the importance of creating secure positive relationships with them.

CONFIDENCE IN TEACHING

Kamania describes gaining confidence in working with the program after successfully modeling an intervention impacting a child and college student. Similarly, the data from the college students, observations, and surveys showed that the college students gained confidence in their teaching as the program evolved. The observations showed increasing confidence, and the behavior surveys showed three out of four classrooms indicating fewer instances of behavior disruptions weekly. One college student noted, "My views and practices for teaching reading changed exponentially." Another said, "Putting what I learned into practice and watching the students learn and grow from what I was teaching really helped me understand how to teach." Finally, one noted, "It was really hard at first. I felt so much more confident and capable [at the end] than I did before the summer school program started. This experience has prepared me for my future as a teacher."

AMANDA'S VIGNETTE

On the first day of our summer program there was a young student who was exhibiting many behaviors typical of both childhood externalizing and internalizing disorders. She was out of her seat often, not following directions, easily distracted, seeming not to listen, defiant, crying, hiding, intentionally trying to destroy property, and running from adults. While her teacher found it difficult to manage her behavior inside the classroom, the student was able to settle relatively quickly once removed from the classroom. As a team of experts in childhood disorders, treatment, and education, we immediately had a meeting to discuss the situation. Based on our initial observations, we determined that the student was currently in the classroom implementing the least of the of the behavioral strategies the college students had been trained in. The college students were reminded of the importance of providing a predictable classroom and strategies were suggested while faculty attempted to contact the mom. With no previous teacher reports on the child, we did not know if any of these behaviors were atypical. We found out from the mom that this child did not act this way at school at all, and that the behaviors we were seeing were new. Mom's input allowed us to confirm that though these behaviors appeared very similar to symptoms of behavioral concerns, they were instead related to an interaction between a stressed college student and an unstructured classroom. The interactions of a highly stressed teacher in a low-structured classroom resulted in higher stress for both the child and college student. The child was placed in a more structured classroom that same day. The college students were allowed space to ground themselves and speak with a mental health care professional.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health was one of the most important changes for the faculty researchers. As Amanda describes, there were multiple moments when taking time to debrief on mental health concerns with the college student-teachers led directly to improved mental health (and thus, behavior) from the children. The college students all had similar situations. The observations indicated deteriorating mental health for the college students, primarily from exhaustion, as they became accustomed to the demands of teaching young children. Feelings of inadequacy were evident, which was also indicated in the college students' data. One noted, "My feeling at the beginning of the program was an overwhelming sense of incompetence." Another noted the desire to do well because she "knew how important it [was] to meet all students' learning needs." Mental health was also included in positive ways in the data, as in the positive changes in behavior observed and indicated in the surveys. This was mirrored in the code "support." College students noted that "working as a team helped us each see a different style of teaching that we could learn from; I really enjoyed it. This has definitely prepared me for future collaborative lesson planning and classroom management."

Discussion of Findings

SUCCESSSES LEADING TO CONFIDENCE IN TEACHING

As with any learning experience, practice improves confidence (Adams, Rodriguez & Zimmer, 2017; Adams & Rodriguez, 2020). As the college students became more accustomed to the children in their care, the routines of their daily work, and the requirements of employment, they gained confidence in their abilities. This led to feelings of success. This is critical for teacher education (as well as social work); we need more qualified teachers and social workers to become and remain employed in schools (Edinger & Edinger, 2018). Additionally, the faculty researchers felt more satisfied with the additional support. Working as a team left all members of the group feeling more efficacious in teaching. Teacher efficacy has long been studied as a potential tool to retain teachers (e.g., Bandura, 1997). The findings that college students developed confidence after seeing repeated success over such a short program (only four weeks) suggests that further research is needed on allowing earlier and ongoing success for early-stage teachers to increase efficacy in teaching and, thus, job satisfaction (Bandura, 1997; Edinger & Edinger, 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Given that the faculty team also saw increased efficacy in reaching the college students, this partnership model focused on flattening the hierarchy and respecting the expertise of all involved may also be worth future research.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health was the most emphasized component of our program – even more emphasized than literacy. Faculty trained college students prior to camp on literacy practices, and additional mini-lessons were offered based on observations of teaching. However, mental health received a twice-weekly workshop and additional training to impact behavior modifications and remind college students to take care of themselves as they cared for the children. Yet, mental health was the least coded in the student data. This is possible because mental health became so normalized that college students did not describe it in response to our questions. The literature also suggests that seeking mental health support is challenging when stress occurs – the college students were reflecting without time since their experience teaching in the program (Velasco et al., 2020). It is also possible that post-COVID, the attention college students are seeing paid to mental health will impact their acceptance of it as reality (Esterwood & Saeed, 2020).

For faculty, however, mental health was always at the forefront of our minds. The faculty researchers' vignettes show a shift in emphasis to thinking about our own boundaries and limitations as well as honoring those of our college students. This shift may allow us to keep doing this stressful work; we strongly recommend focusing on mental health for all pre-service teaching programs (and potentially all school districts) moving forward. We believe this is a ripe area for future research for our team and others.

Implications

In addition to future research on mental health and supporting mental health through social-emotional learning, our research team has several plans to add to this research. Data was also collected on children's literacy gains during the program, with overwhelmingly positive results. Data was also collected by an undergraduate researcher on the impact of interventions on Latinx children in her classroom; she plans to disseminate that work. In future summers, the program will continue to explore the impact of changing the way we combine teacher education and social-emotional support strategies; the data support a model where tenets of each program are added to the other. This approach will be explored further on our campus. For others interested in collaboration or research on similar programs, we suggest the mental health impacts of collaboration as well as collaboration as part of induction models for new teachers as rich areas for further inquiry.

The implications for college retention and teacher education are much more critical. Changing the way we educate teachers will be critical to recruiting and retaining teachers in the field (Hirshberg et al., 2023). The cyclical problem of mental health declines in both K-20 students and their teachers, leading to K-12 teaching shortages, equates to increased demands in K-12 and higher education (Hirshberg et al., 2023). Understanding self-regulation and other tenets of social work and implementing those into education may be what is needed to create lasting change and efficacy for teaching in all environments (Salimi et al., 2021). However, understanding the need for paid field experiences in both social work and education is also at the forefront of the new apprenticeship models gaining traction due to student demand (Morley et al., 2024).

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