# ACADEMIA | Letters

## Preservice Teachers Self-Awareness Needs Post-Pandemic

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As the pandemic continues, it has become painfully clear most segments of society were illprepared for such a calamity, especially education at all levels. Though bleak, there appears to be some positive light coming out of the darkness, the news of a multiple Covid-19 vaccines becoming available for teachers (Will, 2020) and the general public some time in 2021. While this news brings optimism for those seeking a return to educational normalcy (Rodriguez, 2020), the inoculations do not bring answers for people whose social and emotional well-being continues to be at-risk. There are multiple solutions presented in the educational literature (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; MacIntyre et al, 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020) and the popular press (Strauss, 2021; Singer, 2020; Smith, 2020) for educators who are emotionally struggling. However, a prevailing problem was the paucity of preparedness (Dalglish, 2020; Villa et al, 2020) by educational leaders. It easy to absolve poor educational policies and leadership decision-making during the pandemic because there is no precedent to follow or learn (Harris & Jones, 2020; Harris, 2020; Netolicky, 2020). Instead, the public must demand that policy makers and educational leaders reflect, reframe and reimagine their teaching and learning policies and decisions during catastrophic events (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020) so they and the public are not unprepared managing the next local, national or global calamity.

More pandemic-effects research is needed focusing on the social and emotional well-being of teachers, particularly research concentrating on preservice teachers (Flores & Swennen, 2020; Roman, 2020). This research will inform preservice educators and policymakers' curricular decisions about the effects of teaching stressors and ways to help educators manage their social and emotional well-being during catastrophic (Hadar et al., 2020a) and daily events. This letter describes why the social and emotional well-being of preservice teachers

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### Confluence of Covid-19 Pandemic and Social and Emotional Needs

Prior to Covid-19, many PK-12 leaders and policymakers were discussing and/or employing the five competencies of CASEL's Social and emotional Learning (SEL) framework in their curriculum (Chabbott & Sinclair, 2020; Hadar et al., 2020b; Katz et al, 2020): self-awareness, social- awareness, relationship skills, self-management, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). As the pandemic brought its toll on education, countless educators entered into a survival mode to help their students get 'through' the curriculum by the end of the academic year while minimal time was spent on their personal wellbeing. When PK-12 schools return to a post-pandemic learning world, teachers will need to learn how to model and engage their students and colleagues in the SEL skills. An outcome is to create a more caring learning environment to deal with the trauma they experienced (Katz et al, 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020) and become better prepared to handle future traumas.

The research suggests that at state-levels, there are clear learning and teaching gaps for the inclusion of the SEL competencies as part of state licensure requirements and teacher preparation programs (Eklund et al., 2018). The research indicates that 47 states required between one and three of the core competencies in their teacher education programs, no programs addressed all five competencies ((Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). The competencies of self-awareness and self-management were the least addressed in teacher-preparation courses, suggesting the need to include the SEL framework in teacher preparation programs (Eklund et al., 2018). Many preservice teachers have minimal preparation addressing and cultivating their students' SEL competencies (Donahue-Keegan et al, 2019).

When SEL is introduced in K-12 settings, the research suggests that skills-oriented programming for all students was preferable to psychoeducational experiences targeting specific students (Gueldner, 2020). Integrated in the preservice teachers learning experiences are mindfulness interventions delivered with supervised practice to expand their social and emotional skills (Conley, 2017). Further, cognitive-behavioral interventions, relaxation skills, and social skills interventions with supervised skills practice were identified as promising experiences for university students' social emotional well-being (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). These interventions were found to be strongest for preservice teachers' self-awareness and self-management (Conley ,2017), the two competencies most significantly lacking in preservice teacher-preparation programs (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017).

As the physical and emotional effects of the pandemic progressed to all segments of society, it became apparent that the social and emotional needs of the students and educators were

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not being met in the different and unexpected learning contexts that were thrust upon them (Gueldner, 2020). Added to the SEL dilemma were the actions of many educational leaders' inability to respond in a consistent manner to how the learning was going to delivered (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Many school leaders struggled to provide coherent messages and quick decision making, which created social and emotional strain on students, frontline educators, support staff and families (Chabbott & Sinclair, 2020Herold, 2020). This was not to be unexpected; decision-making was messy and done through trial-and-error with no certainty and no ending point for return to post-Covid learning environments. Despite this seemingly throw out the playbook and improvise decision-making; learning did not stop, teachers and school-level leaders were preparing to teach virtually with the goal to end the academic year somewhat successfully and plan for the upcoming new academic year (Harris, 2020). Consequentially, the social-emotion well-being of the students and educators suffered at extraordinary levels. In the short term, the lessons learned are that educational leaders need to create better converging processes to meet the educational and social-emotional needs for students, educators and preservice teachers (Darling-Hammond et al. 2019; Schonert-Reichl, 2019).

### **Social and Emotional Solutions for Preservice Teachers**

The CASEL (2020) framework describes self-awareness as the ability to recognize personal emotions, evaluate personal self-confidence and self-efficacy, and recognize strengths and areas for growth. Some teacher-preparation programs are continually improving the ways to address components of SEL by recognizing that the social and emotional well-being of their preservice teachers is critical for their success during the program and subsequent years in teaching (Schonert-Reichl, 2019; Sugishita, 2019; Weissblueth & Nissim, 2018; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017); Schonert-Reichl, et al. 2017). The research suggests when preservice programs integrate SEL content into the existing curriculum rather than creating stand-alone courses, the preservice teachers better understand the value of SEL and are more likely to incorporate SEL into their learning and teaching, post-graduation from the program (Schonert-Reichl, 2019; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

Some teacher preparation programs place emphasis on increasing preservice teachers' self-awareness through reflective thinking, exploration of implicit biases, and development of cultural consciousness (Endo, 2015; Shavit, & Moshe, 2019; Whitford & Emerson, 2019). For example, when students were provided learning opportunities to recognize and change their bias behaviors and understand cultural competence actions, they better understood the value of the SEL social awareness competency. As students identify assumptions and participate in these opportunities, they take ownership of their language flaws and shift their perspectives on

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linguistic diversity (Endo, 2019). Gay and Kirkland (2003) found that providing preservice teachers the opportunities to engage in dialogue with others and practice their self-awareness skills will expand their critical diversity consciousness.

When empathy-inducing interventions are applied in teacher education programs, preservice teachers increased their awareness of implicit biases towards students of color, generating a decrease in their implicit biases (Whitford and Emerson, 2019. Teacher preparation programs that integrate experiences for students to uncover, process, and confront their biases and issues related to cultural competence strongly relate to CASEL's social and emotional learning components of self-awareness (2020).

#### Self-Awareness Focus Areas for Teacher Educators

The pandemic's effects exposed issues affecting teacher-preparation programs at administrative and curricular levels, such as the learning contexts in partnering schools, the use of technology, and role of parents and/or guardians. Concurrently, there are specific issues regarding the lack of support for teacher educators concerned about integrating self-awareness concepts preservice teachers in their programs (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020).

Darling-Hammond and Hyler (2020) proposed to policymakers and educational leaders the need to establish collaborative support for all levels of educators to meet the social-emotional and academic needs of students' post-pandemic. Collaboration is vitally important from a preservice teachers' self-awareness perspective as they learn to navigate in post-Covid educational environments. When educators work collegially their levels of learning and retention are higher and become more effective teachers (Papay & Kraft 2016). Covid-19 demonstrated the difficulty to maintain a sense of collaboration among preservice teachers and the teacher education faculty when most teacher education classes were moved to online or hybrid formats. Collaborating with their field mentor teachers became difficult to accomplish when many schools practiced remote learning and not allowing "others" in schools when students are present.

These stressors on preservice teachers created an atmosphere of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) with minimal preparation to deal with these outcomes (Hadar et al., 2020b.). VUCA are outcomes in a rapidly changing technology driven interconnected world that can be applied to preservice teachers' responses during the pandemic (Hadar et al., 2020b; Laukkonen, 2019; Kurzweil, 2005):

• *Volatility* is when the stability of an academic year suddenly shifts to online learning. Behaviors are fear, stress, anxiety and a sense of lacking control.

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- Uncertainty is an individual's level of confidence to predict the future. Behaviors are
  fear, distress and helplessness that effect well-being and functioning.
- *Complexity* refers to life being a complex endeavor affected by multiple factors that interact with each other. Behaviors are heightened levels of difficulty coping with them.
- Ambiguity is a lack of clarity about how to interpret and react to incomplete, contradicting or inaccurate information. Behaviors are a feeling of confusion to what is acceptable conduct and distinguishing what information is relevant.

There is need to develop preservice teachers' positive self-awareness behaviors to VUCA Covid-19 outcomes for post-pandemic realities. During the pandemic, many global problems that laid dormant in many people's minds became central points of thought, discussions and sometimes public protest focusing on what do we want to become in a post-pandemic world. Using these points as topics to collaboratively learn to respond to VUCA outcomes in reimagined integrated curricular teacher education programs to develop positive self-awareness behaviors (Hill et al., 2020):

- Equity is to teach and learn how to apply equitable teaching approaches to motivate
  preservice teachers to teach according to the contextual learning environments and
  the learning needs of their students, particularly those who have limited learning resources (Mohamad et al., 2020). Addressing the disparities in educational environments, staffing shortages, overcrowding, and remote learning infrastructures that affect
  many students and families (NAS, 2020).
- Racism is to address racist behaviors happening in all learning environments not dependent on race or age of the child as societal norms tend to guard against the exclusive construct of innocence mobilized to protect white children (Garlen et al., 2020). Cultural identity plays a crucial role in the social and emotional well-being of marginalized and historically underserved students (Jagers et al., 2019).
- Natural world is to teach and learn about sustainability, learning to teach how to understand that the individual and collective choices humans make can have lasting positive or negative consequences for the present and future well-being of our planet. (Wolff, 2020). There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that novice educators entering the field feel a moral imperative to prepare students for a globally interconnected world of increasing population levels linked to declining living systems and resources (Church, & Skelton, 2010).

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Teacher educators must remember that preservice teachers need training to learn how to transform their behaviors into positive outcomes during the remaining months of the pandemic and post-pandemic world. They will need training to help guide their students' self-awareness in a positive direction regardless of learning context. New and veteran teachers will be expected to have these abilities. The pandemic presents a unique opportunity for teacher education programs to collaboratively re-evaluate their programming with K-12 education systems by acknowledging probable broad systemic changes.

### **Conclusion**

Experts predict health crises will occur again in the future, having unpredictable characteristics and representing a major threat for all countries (Villa et al., 2020). The consequences caused by the current pandemic on the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of all people have been devastating, yet lessons can already be learned. The lack of social and emotional support in education and the outcomes are becoming clearer every day. Instead of viewing this as a problem, we need to understand this as an opportunity to rethink and reinvent teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). We need to prepare our educators to understand themselves and learn to make positive changes within, then learn to do the same with their students. 'The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another' noted William James.

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