

***Increasing Empathy and Awareness in Educator Preparation Through Social-Emotional Literacy Experiences with Children in Crisis Situations***

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In today's educator preparation programs (EPPs), it is sometimes difficult to find quality field placements required for practicum teaching experiences within partnering school districts. While schools may not always be willing or able to allow interns or preservice teachers into their facilities to practice professional skills, service-learning projects with nonprofit community partners provide a potential avenue for undergraduate students to gain essential skills in authentic contexts that reach beyond observation while addressing community-identified needs (Brannon, 2013; Hildebrand & Schultz, 2015; Leon et al., 2019; Toronyi, 2020; Vavasour, 2013; Williams & Lee, 2020). Research on preservice teachers' participation in service-learning has demonstrated impacts on their knowledge, confidence, bias recognition, and attitudes related to working with students from diverse backgrounds (Baldwin et al., 2007; Brannon; Chang et al., 2011; Conner, 2010; Cooper, 2007; Kajner, 2013; Leon et al.; Toronyi). As preservice teachers gain experience with children from diverse backgrounds, they enter into their repertoire of teaching a variety of interactions with children who represent diverse ethnicities, religions, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds, which further prepares them to teach in classrooms with students whose backgrounds are different from their own.

This study analyzes the reflections of 34 senior-level undergraduate preservice teachers upon completing a social-emotional literacy lesson with preschool-age children in crisis situations. This service-learning project was completed at a daycare center within a local homeless shelter serving children

## Abstract

This qualitative study examines service-learning reflections of 34 preservice teachers enrolled in a senior-level educator preparation course at a public university in the southern United States. Participants reflected on their experiences with an early literacy service-learning project with children in crisis situations. The service-learning project fulfilled course objectives of exposing preservice teachers to a variety of causes of challenging behavior in young children in an effort to increase awareness and understanding of behaviors and situations that may arise in the elementary classroom. This study addressed the following research questions: (a) how do preservice teachers engaging in early social-emotional literacy experiences describe the behavior of children in crisis situations, and (b) how do preservice teachers describe their own understanding, empathy, and openness following a service-learning experience with children from diverse backgrounds? Results from this study indicated that preservice teachers' exposure to children in crisis situations led them to increased awareness and understanding of challenging behavior in the classroom.

from six weeks old through high school age. The shelter had been in operation for over thirty years and at the time of the study the daycare center served approximately 60 children daily. Within the five years prior to this study, a new children's center was established, providing after school care in addition to the existing daycare program with a mission of supporting parents staying at the shelter as they sought and obtained outside employment.

The purpose of this study was to examine the interactions and reflections of elementary education majors engaged in an episodic service-learning project with children in crisis situations in order to understand the impacts of the experience on preservice teachers' understanding, empathy, and openness. The study investigated the following research questions: (a) how do preservice teachers engaging in early social-emotional literacy experiences describe the behavior of children in crisis situations, and (b) how do preservice teachers describe their own understanding, empathy, and openness following a service-learning experience with children from diverse backgrounds?

This study is significant in that it analyzes how preservice teachers describe an episodic service-learning experience with children in crisis situations. Given that many types of service-learning and field experiences exist in higher education institutions, which may engage students in the community for varying durations, research on a variety of service-learning and field experience contexts is needed to understand the role of episodic service-learning in educator preparation.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Service-Learning in Educator Preparation***

In educator preparation programs on college campuses, service-learning represents one way to infuse real-world experiences in surrounding communities into the curriculum. Giles and Eyler (1994) have pointed to John Dewey as a source of foundational theory for service-learning, and his assertion that hands-on experience has a crucial place in formal education similarly provided the impetus for field experiences in educator preparation programs. Giles and Eyler highlighted four criteria that Dewey established for a truly educational experience: the experience must generate interest, be intrinsically worthwhile, present problems that spur investigation, and foster development over time. Dewey, then, provided the original argument for meaningful field experiences that reach beyond observation to engage students in authentic problem-solving.

Numerous scholars of service-learning in educator preparation programs have argued the need for more meaningful field experiences and noted the value of service-learning as an authentic context for learning (Brannon, 2013; Hildebrand & Schultz, 2015; Leon et al., 2019; Toronyi, 2020; Vavasseur, 2013; Williams & Lee, 2020). Service-learning research has found wide ranging benefits for students across disciplines, from improved academic achievement (Celio et al., 2011) and critical thinking (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000) to social and intercultural skills (Celio et al., Desmond et al., 2011; Kilgo et al., 2015; Vogelgesang & Astin; Wozencraft et al., 2014). A growing body of research supports the use of service-learning in educator preparation programs to build preservice teachers' understanding of how the environment and community influence students' experiences in schools (Nelson, 2013). Several studies

have found service-learning to have long-term impacts on teachers' attitudes and behaviors (Brannon, 2013).

A particular focus of service-learning projects in educator preparation programs has been exposing predominantly white, female preservice teachers to the diversity of student backgrounds and experiences. Kajner and colleagues (2013) applied critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008) to an educator training context to demonstrate how course concepts combined with intentional placements were used to raise preservice teachers' awareness of inequalities in the classroom and community. Leon and colleagues (2019) found that a service-learning project designed to expose preservice teachers to children with disabilities was successful in reaffirming their career choices and enhancing their sense of social responsibility, while Anita Toronyi (2020) used meta-synthesis of research on service-learning projects that engaged preservice teachers with English Language Learners (ELLs) to observe that intentional placements and class discussions that focused on a social justice perspective shifted preservice teachers away from deficit-model thinking and reduced their belief in stereotypes. Preservice teachers also gained relationship-building skills and confidence about working with students from diverse backgrounds.

A noticeable gap separates today's preservice teachers' lived experiences and that of the families and students that they may serve (Brannon, 2013). In Brannon's study, preservice teachers' reflections indicated that they experienced fear of working with students and parents whose cultural backgrounds were different from their own, and that the source of this fear was their limited experience. Brannon posited that service-learning experiences embedded within teacher education can provide an opportunity for preservice teachers to confront these fears and biases and better understand the cultures and environments of students. Brannon has further argued for the inclusion of a variety of service-learning opportunities throughout the college experience in order to achieve a breadth of experiences outside the classroom and achieve long-term changes in teachers' attitudes and behaviors (2013).

### ***Field Experiences in Educator Preparation***

Authentic field experiences are a valuable part of the preparation to be an educator. Educator preparation programs require specific field placement hours in order for preservice teachers to gain experiences with children prior to graduation and obtaining licensure. Preservice teachers require hands-on, practical experiences with children in order to gain expertise in their field, and participation in these experiences affects both teachers' and students' long-term success. According to an interview with Linda Darling-Hammond, teachers who are fully prepared remain in the profession at a higher rate than those less-prepared (Scherer, 2012). Darling-Hammond stated that teachers in the profession who have completed student teaching, been coached and observed in the field, and had opportunities to study child development and curriculum were less likely to exit the profession than those who did not have these opportunities (2012).

Research on clinical field experiences has established their role in preparing future educators with experiences of teaching and learning in K-12 schools (Hamilton & Margot, 2019), as well as the common problem of educator preparation programs lacking meaningful field experiences (Vavasseur et al., 2013). As Vavasseur and colleagues have established, field experience hours are often composed primarily of

observation rather than interaction with students, as educator preparation programs focus primarily on meeting the required number of hours for field experiences rather than the depth of the learning experience for preservice teachers. Authentic and engaging field experiences throughout educator preparation programs provide opportunities for preservice teachers to meet specific educator standards prior to graduation, thus making them better prepared for the profession.

Universities with educator preparation programs and school districts cannot simply provide experience for preservice teachers without collaborating with the communities in which the schools serve (Zeichner et al., 2014). Field experiences that allow preservice teachers to work with children in authentic community contexts expose preservice teachers to a different perspective on children from diverse backgrounds in addition to the classroom encounters that allow them to practice what they are learning. Field experiences have become a necessary component of teacher preparation. Preservice teachers engaged in high levels of field experiences gain practical knowledge and practice that prepares them for their career. Educator preparation programs build their coursework and field experiences to align with national and state teaching standards for professional educators. One way that educator preparation programs work to achieve such standards is to provide a variety of experiences in pedagogy and methodology throughout their programs.

One such set of standards, the Interstate Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards, were created to raise the level of learning in classrooms across the nation. The standards include (a) learner development, (b) learning differences, (c) learning environments, (d) content knowledge, (e) application of content, (f) assessment, (g) planning for instruction, (h) instructional strategies, (i) professional learning and ethical practice, and (j) leadership and collaboration (CCSSO, 2013). Educator preparation programs have modeled their programs to best prepare preservice teachers for meeting these standards when they begin teaching.

The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) has set forth additional standards that educator preparation programs seeking initial licensure must follow in order for their program to be nationally accredited. Such standards for K-6 include (a) understanding and addressing each child's developmental and learning needs, (b) understanding and applying content and curricular knowledge for teaching, (c) assessing, planning, and designing contexts for learning, (d) supporting each child's learning using effective instruction, and (d) developing as a professional (CAEP, 2018).

While field experiences in educator preparation programs have changed over the years to meet standards such as those outlined by InTASC and CAEP, they remain tied to Dewey's ideal of "intelligently directed development of the possibilities inherent in ordinary experience" (1938, p. 40). This belief in the value of authentic experiences within any type of education has played a foundational role in service-learning and other types of experiential learning and remains a theoretical force shaping multiple aspects of educator preparation programs.

### ***Social-Emotional Learning***

As part of their assignment for the course, preservice teachers researched and identified a piece of children's literature that addressed one of the five social-emotional competencies as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Preservice teachers chose a book that could be shared through a

read-aloud with a child in an effort to increase knowledge of one of these five components.

CASEL (2021) defines social-emotional learning as learning that both children and adults need in order to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. CASEL wheel competencies include (a) self-awareness, (b) self-management, (c) social awareness, (d) relationship skills, and (e) responsible decision-making. CASEL supports all educators and policy leaders and enhances the experiences and outcomes for all PreK-12 students. By incorporating social-emotional lessons with children, teachers can increase students' ability to make appropriate behavioral choices that can improve the classroom community and behavior as a whole (Sorbet & Notar, 2020).

Research has demonstrated increases in social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance by K-12 students participating in social-emotional programming in schools. Durlak and colleagues (2011) summarized results from 213 school-based social-emotional learning programs in a meta-analysis that reviewed the follow-up effects of 270,034 students within grades K-12. The study reported gains by students who participated in these programs in social-emotional skills, attitudes, and positive behaviors and also demonstrated fewer behavior problems and lower levels of emotional stress. This study's results are currently utilized by CASEL to further strengthen the need for continued social-emotional programming in K-12 schools. A 2017 press release by CASEL further summarized a follow-up study of long-term impacts of SEL programs, noting that 3.5 years after a social-emotional learning intervention, participating students' academic performance averaged 13 percentile points higher than their non-participating peers (Taylor et al., 2017, as cited in CASEL).

### ***Challenging Behavior in Children***

In order for preservice teachers to be able to be effective educators, they must apply multiple social-emotional skills to address challenging behavior in the classroom. Challenging behavior is defined by Kaiser & Rasminsky (2012) as a pattern of behavior in children that interferes with a child's cognitive, social, or emotional development. Challenging behavior is harmful to the child or others and puts a child at a high risk for social problems or failure in school. According to Kaiser & Rasminsky, challenging behavior may be exhibited by children in crisis situations, including those experiencing poverty, homelessness, foster care, abuse, neglect, or other situations beyond the child's control. The ultimate goal of a classroom teacher is to build trust and establish a sense of community where the child feels safe and has consistency in his or her life.

Preservice teachers who have experiences with children in crisis situations have the opportunity to increase self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making in the children they serve. In order to best understand challenging behavior in children in the classroom, preservice teachers must come to understand the underlying reasons for children's behavior. Through authentic field experiences such as service-learning and other community-based projects, preservice teachers can gain the expertise necessary to support children from diverse backgrounds who may be exhibiting challenging behavior in the classroom.

### ***Alignment of Conceptual Framework***

This study is rooted in the idea that preservice teachers need authentic field experience to gain knowledge and expertise within their profession in order to acquire skills and best practices in the elementary classroom. Service-learning provides such authentic experiences while simultaneously serving a community-identified need. Educator preparation programs training preservice teachers to be able to understand a variety of diverse learners can benefit from service-learning to expand preservice teachers' experiences beyond the classroom and make such experiences more intentional. Through this hands-on approach, preservice teachers interact with community members, increase their understanding of children's diverse backgrounds, and gain expertise and experience with children for their profession.

## **Methodology**

### ***Population and Sampling***

This service-learning project was implemented within a required course designed for elementary education majors seeking a K-6 grade level teacher certification at a mid-size regional university in the southern United States. Elementary education preservice teachers enrolled in the course titled Guidance and Management of Children learn about why students in the elementary classroom may exhibit challenging behavior and the connection of behavior to crisis situations. Two sections of this course participated in the study, comprising all of the preservice teachers enrolled in a given cohort, and both sections met for one approximately three-hour class meeting per week for a 16-week semester. The course focused on addressing challenging behavior through understanding the child's situation and needs. This course was designed to enhance preservice teachers' ability to be able to examine the cause of the challenging behavior demonstrated within the classroom and to determine if the behavior is due to the child experiencing a crisis situation.

Preservice teachers enrolled in the elementary program who participated in this study complete two semesters of classroom management courses. Preservice teachers are first introduced to social-emotional learning and the five CASEL components during their first semester of their junior year. The course introduces preservice teachers to positive approaches to classroom management while incorporating social-emotional learning in the elementary classroom. Preservice teachers enrolled in the elementary program proceed to the course Guidance and Management of Children in their senior year.

Also during their senior year, preservice teachers intern in field experiences twice weekly in an elementary classroom. During this time, they observe the significance of social-emotional learning and the impact that a positive classroom environment has on classroom management. The interns write a lesson plan addressing one of the five CASEL components within their morning meeting lesson. Preservice teachers begin to gain understanding of challenging behavior through hands-on and authentic experiences and begin to rely on research and best practices for supporting children who exhibit challenging behaviors. Preservice teachers learn that some challenging behaviors are the result of children dealing with crisis situations at home while some are not. Overall, the educator preparation program studied seeks to combine the academic study of classroom management with field experience to equip preservice teachers with

best practices for approaching challenging behavior as well as empathy and understanding for children experiencing crisis situations who may exhibit these behaviors in the classroom.

### ***Participants and Demographics***

The participants for this study were 34 preservice teachers enrolled in a senior-level classroom management course required for their curriculum in K-6 grade level teacher certification at a state university within the southern United States. All 34 (100%) of the preservice teachers identified as female; 24 (71%) identified as white, two (6%) identified as African American, four (12%) identified as Hispanic, and one (3%) identified as American Indian.

The community site visited by the preservice teachers in this study was a homeless shelter with an on-site daycare center in an urban area in the southern United States. The shelter had served the community for over thirty years and had established a children's center to provide appropriate child care during the day for young children and after school care for school-age children. This childcare allowed parents to seek and obtain employment without the concern of their children's care throughout the day. The center enrolled children from a diversity of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some children at the center were living in the homeless shelter with their families, while some were children of employees at the center. No specific demographic information about the children was included in this study. Preservice teachers in the study visited the children's center together on the same day and rotated amongst the classrooms. The preservice teachers in this course visited the center on one weekday during the hours of 9:00 am to 11:00 am and spent approximately two hours at the facility.

Parents of the children at the center were familiar with the practice of community volunteers visiting the facility, and the facility maintained signed parent release forms on file for the children in each classroom and informed participants ahead of time of any children who were not allowed to participate or be photographed. Because the focus of this study was on the impacts of pedagogical practices for university students and no children were included as study participants, the researcher received an exempt Institutional Review Board approval to collect and analyze data from student reflections. The approved IRB application #19-108 is currently on file with the university.

### ***Data Collection***

A convenience sample was used for this study. Preservice teachers enrolled in a service-learning course were the participants of this study. Hermeneutic phenomenology provided the qualitative design for this study, as it is focused on the subjective experience of specific individuals (Kafle, 2011). For the purposes of this study, only qualitative data from preservice teachers' reflections were analyzed. The researcher used inductive coding, which relies on creating generalizations based on observations of a limited number of related experiences, to identify themes that emerged from the responses (Gay et al., 2012).

The one-page reflection is common practice for preservice teachers to examine their own thoughts and beliefs coming into the field of education and align those to current research presented to them in their educator preparation programs. To complete the reflection included in this study, participants connected initial feelings of

understanding, empathy, and openness, their insights from previous reflections and class discussions, and the service-learning experience. This study focused on the immediate responses of participants upon completion of an episodic service-learning experience and the connections in-class learning about understanding, empathy, and openness.

Throughout this course preservice teachers were encouraged to use thoughtful reflection to carefully identify their own thinking about their teaching practices regarding classroom management. Preservice teachers additionally reflected through discussions as a class and in small groups to determine best practices rooted in the research of classroom management theorists and behaviorists. Preservice teachers reflected often throughout the semester as they determined which rules, procedures, and expectations that they would put forth in their classrooms to best support and provide positive guidance to their students. The research questions for this study came from one of many reflective activities done throughout this course. This reflection was completed immediately following preservice teachers' service-learning experience at the center.

### ***Instrumentation***

The preservice teachers participating in the study were asked to write a one-page written reflection of their experiences at the shelter upon completion of the service-learning experience. An initial component of the assignment was to research an area of crisis experienced by children, such as poverty, homelessness, foster care, abuse, neglect, or others, to gain familiarity with possible conditions that children may be experiencing. The second part of the assignment was to respond to a reflective question which asked the following:

Write a 1-page reflective summary of your experience with this unit of study. Be sure to address not only what you learned through your research, but also how your interactions with children at the facility increased your level of understanding, empathy, and openness related to your previous assumptions and level of understanding of children in crisis.

### ***Service-Learning Project Studied***

To incorporate social-emotional learning objectives within this course, and to provide early literacy experiences to children in crisis situations, the researcher was awarded a small seed grant from the university to purchase the children's literature for the children at the center. Funds were secured in the amount of \$250 to purchase age-appropriate children's books focused on social-emotional learning incorporating the CASEL competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). The picture books were chosen based on themes related to these five competencies.

The preservice teachers who participated in this study visited the nonprofit community shelter in an urban area of the southern United States one weekday during the hours of 9:00 am to 11:00 am and spent those two hours conducting a read aloud activity. Upon arrival at the shelter, the preservice teachers each received one of the newly purchased children's books to use in the read aloud activity. Preservice teachers were divided into two groups during this visit. The day began with a briefing from the coordinator who gave background information on the families of the children in attendance and a tour of the facility.



Upon completion of the tours, the participants completed a read aloud of their social-emotional literacy picture books with the 3- and 4-year-old children assigned to them by the classroom teachers. During these interactions the professor of the course divided her time among the two preschool classrooms observing, assisting, and providing feedback on behavior management techniques to assist the preservice teachers as they completed the read aloud. The classroom teachers and staff assisted, monitored, and provided immediate feedback throughout the read aloud as well in an effort to support children's engagement during the activity.

Preservice teachers read the books to the children and discussed the overarching social-emotional themes within each book. Preservice teachers also made connections to the child's feelings and emotions toward the book, connecting CASEL core competencies as they reread the child's favorite selections. Before closing the reading activity with the child, the preservice teacher modeled how to write the child's name on the inside cover of the book and gifted it to the child. After the preservice teachers completed their read-alouds, they showed their appreciation for the children's participation through giving the books to the children. The preservice teachers said their goodbyes and thanked the classroom teachers by offering them a classroom book as a donation.

The preservice teachers concluded their visit by gathering into a multipurpose room for a debriefing with the coordinator and the professor. The coordinator thanked the preservice teachers for their service and partnership in conducting the activity and invited their continued engagement with the center. The professor then asked general questions to the preservice teachers about the read aloud activity and experience. The professor reminded the preservice teachers during the debrief to share about their experiences in more depth in their reflection assignment to be completed that evening.

### ***Analysis***

For the purposes of this study, only qualitative data from the reflections were analyzed. Each reflection was printed with the preservice teacher's name removed and analyzed by the researcher. The researcher used inductive coding (Gay et al., 2012) to analyze the qualitative data and identify overarching themes across the 34 reflections submitted. The researcher created thematic memos with data supporting each theme during analysis of these reflections.

## **Results**

This study presents results for two research questions: (a) how do preservice teachers engaging in early social-emotional literacy experiences describe the behavior of children in crisis situations, and (b) how do preservice teachers describe their own understanding, empathy, and openness following a service-learning experience with children from diverse backgrounds? Of the reflections made by the preservice teachers, three themes emerged. These emergent themes were empathy, connections to literacy, and classroom management.

### ***Research Question 1***

The first research question asked how preservice teachers engaging in early social-emotional literacy experiences described the behavior of children in crisis

situations. Preservice teachers' reflections indicated their belief or observation that the children were excited to have visitors to their classroom. One reflected, "I enjoyed reading to the children and I could tell they were all so excited to have all these visitors. The child I read to was such a sweetheart and I hated leaving him." Another reflection stated, "The little boy that I read to was the sweetest. He sat on my lap as I read the two books to him. He enjoyed every minute of it." Participants from this study felt connections to the children and shared their perceptions that the interactions were positive experiences for the children. Preservice teachers observed that the children were attentive and appeared to enjoy having an adult read to them.

Other preservice teachers noted that the children did not seem to be immediately engaged in the read-aloud activity. These preservice teachers noted times when they struggled to gain and maintain a child's attention during the literacy experience. One reflection stated, "She reluctantly agreed after several prompts, yet she was not listening to the book as I read." Another stated, "I was able to read to a little girl. She didn't find as much interest in the books as she did in me." Other reflections described the physical behaviors of the children; as one preservice teacher noted, "One child I was reading to did not want to come out from under the table at first. . .just needed a bit of encouragement." Another preservice teacher recalled of a child, "While I was working with him, he was very squirmy and was not very interested in the book." It was evident in the reflections that some preservice teachers perceived the children as unengaged in the reading of the picture books based on their behavior, while overall the reflections demonstrated a belief that the children enjoyed the literacy activity.

### ***Research Question 2***

The second research question asked how preservice teachers described their own understanding, empathy, and openness following a service-learning experience with children from diverse backgrounds. Preservice teachers' reflections included several responses connecting empathy to their experiences. Reflections noted that students in their future classrooms may come from a variety of cultures, experiences, circumstances, and family backgrounds, but they also connected that a teacher's job is to ensure that the classroom is safe for all students. The preservice teachers noted that the trip to the shelter helped them to broaden their perspectives and deepen their knowledge of crisis situations and their role in children's physical, social, and academic lives. Other responses explained the need for teachers to be responsive to students' needs and feelings while at school.

One preservice teacher reflected, "From this trip, I realized that you cannot just assume about a child's home life based upon immediate interactions." Another reflection stated, "This trip motivated me to be even more passionate and proactive with how I help students in crisis in my future classroom." As another preservice teacher shared, "Overall, the field trip provided me with an opportunity to become aware of the fact that poverty and homelessness surrounds us, and it takes empathy and openness to understand those who may be in crisis." These preservice teachers were able to draw upon these experiences to connect what was learned in class regarding children in crisis situations with the service-learning experience and realize that children within their classrooms may come from a variety of backgrounds and home circumstances. Preservice teachers in this study were able to increase their own social-emotional skills

of social awareness as they were made aware of children in crisis and behaviors that may arise due to these situations.

Preservice teachers in this study perceived that the children were not in control of their home situations. One preservice teacher wrote, "These students do not get to choose the situation they're in, and their parents don't have total say either, so we must be open to working with these students and cheering them on." Another reflection stated, "I used to ignorantly think that being homeless was a 'choice.' In my young mind I wondered, 'Why won't they just get a job?' But all along, it was so much deeper than that." After this community project, some participants in this study perceived that homelessness could happen to anyone at any time. Preservice teachers within this study came to the realization that the crisis situations that children experience are not always visible in the classroom, and that children have limited control of their home situation. These preservice teachers gained insight into possible causes of challenging behavior due to crisis situations and they were able to add this knowledge and authentic experience to their repertoire from which they can pull as classroom teachers.

## **Discussion**

During this service-learning project, preservice teachers gained authentic field experiences with young children while providing social-emotional literacy experiences. These preservice teachers explored the connections between children experiencing crises such as poverty and homelessness and challenging behaviors exhibited in the classroom. Most preservice teachers have very limited interactions with the community and families that they serve in their classrooms (Brannon, 2013). Immersing preservice teachers in service-learning opportunities can challenge their preconceptions and add to preservice teachers' professional knowledge.

In addition to the answers to this study's research questions, two themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data from the reflections written by the preservice teachers. Themes present within the preservice teachers' reflections of their experiences at the homeless shelter were empathy and literacy. The reflections showed the theme of empathy as students described their own feelings when interacting with students in crisis situations. Reflections also highlighted the literacy experience itself and aspects of early literacy development. Preservice teachers used both of these themes to discuss classroom management principles.

### ***Empathy***

Developing the theme of empathy, preservice teachers' responses included descriptions of their feelings that the children were victims of circumstances beyond their control, as well as expressions of commitment to the children's wellbeing. One reflection stated, "Overall, I'm really glad I got to experience this and dive deeper into a very real problem that I know as a teacher I will need to stay educated on to do my best by my students and protect their well-being." Another preservice teacher reflected that the children did not ask to be born into a crisis situation. This reflection points to the idea that preservice teachers within this experience observed that children's behaviors are connected to circumstances beyond their control. Preservice teachers connected that they would be teaching children from "all kinds of experiences, circumstances and backgrounds. Extreme poverty, along with homelessness, abuse and neglect, foster

care and natural disasters have a huge impact on these kids and their development.” Preservice teachers expressed the belief that the experience broadened their perspectives on children in crisis situations and also connected how crisis situations played an active role in the child’s development.

### ***Interactive Literacy Experiences***

Literacy was a second theme that emerged from the reflection data collected. Preservice teachers reflected that they enjoyed the experience of reading to the children and expressed a belief that the children were also excited to spend time with the preservice teachers. One preservice teacher wrote, “The children cling to visitors and enjoy being read to. I did not expect this.” Another preservice teacher reflected on the experience of reading to the children stating, “I read to a child that did not show any signs of behavior issues and was very engaged and interested when reading the book. He made comments about the funny parts, and knew what the front, back, and spine of the book was.” Preservice teachers in this study expressed the perception that the literacy read-aloud activity was an enjoyable experience for the children involved, sometimes revealing their own sense of surprise at the children’s enjoyment.

Preservice teachers in this study also reflected on the children’s reactions to receiving their own books following the activity. The reflections additionally indicated the belief that the children were excited by the sense of ownership of the book. One reflection recalled, “Once I told him that he would get to keep these books and that they now belonged to him since his name was in them, his face lit up with the biggest smile. He was so excited to have something that belonged to him and only him.” Another reflection was similar stating, “Her face lit up when we wrote her name in the books and told her she was going to be able to keep them for herself. She told us thank you multiple times and gave us a lot of hugs when we had to leave.” Preservice teachers in this study experienced a variety of emotions as they gifted their books to the children and gained many internal rewards from this opportunity that they can carry with them into their professional journey.

### ***Connection to Classroom Management***

The academic curriculum for the service-learning course studied was rooted in guidance and management of children. The curriculum and aligned objectives for the course address the diversity of backgrounds and behaviors that children bring to an elementary classroom. The objectives in the course also seek to increase preservice teachers’ understanding of children in crisis situations and the impact of these crises on their behavior in the classroom. The preservice teachers’ reflections provided evidence of connections between course content related to crisis situations and an episodic service-learning experience with children living in a homeless shelter.

One preservice teacher indicated that classroom management required being open to all students, “not only with how I will teach them, but how I care for them as well.” Other reflections on the experience further indicated an awareness that teaching children in crisis situations would require intentional effort from a teacher. One reflection stated, “As an educator, I understand it is important to reach the different needs of your student in regards to learning styles. In the future, I plan to integrate social-emotional skills throughout my lesson and conduct morning meetings that’ll be specifically planned to counsel the students in need.” Another preservice teacher reflected, “The idea brings

me back to the quote, ‘the child is not giving you a hard time, he’s having a hard time.’ I will remember this when I have students who are living in crisis in my future classroom. I now know better ways to help them cope, be successful, and feel supported in my classroom.” Preservice teachers gained insight through this experience as they came to realize that children’s behavior may be a direct result of their life’s journey and beyond their control. Preservice teachers learned that as educators they will have to assess the whole child in order to provide engaging lessons that meet educational as well as social and emotional needs.

Reflections also indicated that some children did not show any signs of challenging behavior. As one preservice teacher wrote, “I read to a child that did not show any signs of behavior issues and was very engaged and interested when reading the book. While I was in the classroom, I did see and hear some things that allowed me to make connections to my research and to what we have discussed in class.” Reflections such as this demonstrated the preservice teacher’s realization that not all students in crisis situations or from a particular background may exhibit challenging behaviors. Takeaways such as these may decrease the preservice teacher’s reliance on stereotypes and make them more aware of the biases they bring to the classroom as they engage in field experiences.

### ***New Strategies for Preservice Teachers and Educator Preparation***

Through this service-learning project, preservice teachers began to formulate their own individual philosophies of management and guidance of challenging behavior in the elementary classroom while coming to understand that the children they will teach come from many diverse backgrounds and experiences. As an episodic service-learning experience, the project did not provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to repeatedly reflect and apply new strategies; however, preservice teachers used metacognitive strategies throughout their own classroom learning, service-learning project, and reflection to develop new ways of thinking about children’s behaviors. Analysis of preservice teachers’ reflections on their experiences confirmed the findings of other studies of service-learning in educator preparation programs, particularly those that found impacts on preservice teachers’ openness, confidence, and commitment to working with children from diverse backgrounds (Leon et al., 2019; Toronyi, 2020).

This study also supports the value of educator preparation programs using service-learning experiences in community settings to place preservice teachers in authentic contexts for understanding children’s diverse backgrounds. Preservice teachers in this study broadened their perspectives of children in crisis situations and gained a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between crisis situations and behavior. Preservice teachers who might otherwise have responded to challenging behavior through discipline may instead focus on helping children to cope with challenges and succeed in the learning environment.

### ***Limitations and Future Directions for Research***

As this study used analysis of written reflection data collected at a single point in time following a service-learning experience, results reflect preservice teachers’ perceptions of their own empathy rather than a measurement using a survey instrument before and after the experience. Additionally, because all preservice teachers in the cohort were required to participate in the same service-learning experience, preservice

teachers' reflections cannot be compared with others who did not participate in the experience. While this study can provide insight into the experiences of one group of preservice teachers, additional research taking a comparative approach is needed to more fully understand the relative impacts of various types of service-learning and field experiences. One such opportunity would be to compare the reflections of preservice teachers engaging in different lengths of service-learning experiences with children in crisis situations. Additionally, further longitudinal study is needed to understand how service-learning experiences may inform preservice teachers' pedagogy and classroom management once they have entered the profession, particularly compared with preservice teachers who did not participate in service-learning experiences engaging with children in crisis situations.

## **Conclusions**

Preservice teachers are called to the profession to teach the whole child. At a time when teachers are expected to wear many hats, one such hat is one of understanding and empathy in order to best provide students with a safe learning environment at school. Immersing preservice teachers in field experiences with children from diverse backgrounds, including children in crisis situations, offers preservice teachers authentic opportunities to gain practice and expertise in serving a variety of children's diverse needs. Engaging with children exhibiting challenging behaviors due to crisis situations prior to the first year of teaching will provide the new teacher some basic skills necessary to be able to best support and manage all learners in their classrooms.

The preservice teachers involved in this service-learning project witnessed first-hand how children within their classrooms may be dealing with situations beyond their control that may cause some of them to exhibit challenging behavior. Preservice teachers' reflections in this study indicated that an episodic service-learning experience with children in crisis situations increased their own empathy and understanding of children they may teach in their future classrooms. This experience added to the preservice teachers' repertoire of initial reactions and responses toward children in the elementary classroom who exhibit challenging behavior due to crisis situations and helped preservice teachers to recognize new strategies for better understanding and responding to these children. By providing service-learning projects that incorporate early literacy experiences with children in crisis situations, educator preparation programs can provide preservice teachers with first-hand encounters in guidance and management of children prior to their first year of teaching.

Service-learning projects such as these that provide learning opportunities for children in crisis while simultaneously engaging preservice teachers in the areas of diversity, classroom management, and instruction are an important component of educator preparation. When preservice teachers are prepared for their experiences with intentional classroom instruction and critically examine them through guided reflection, episodic service-learning projects can increase preservice teachers' empathy and awareness of the sources of challenging behavior in the classroom. Experiences such as these remind us as educators that all children, regardless of their life experiences and the behaviors they use to cope, may be just as excited to engage in learning activities as other children in the classroom. Service-learning projects, when

intentionally designed, provide preservice teachers with a window into children's life experiences and allow them to enter into their profession with more empathy and understanding. Preservice teachers in this study gained insight into the crisis situations that children may face and realized the importance of a positive learning environment where all children can feel supported and thrive.

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