

# A Closer Look

## Examining Social and Emotional Competencies in Teacher Education Courses

Brandy Smith & Allison Barness

Pre-service Teacher

Social and Emotional Competency

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Nodal Moments

In this self-study research, two teacher educators describe our journey as we examine social and emotional competencies supported within our preservice teacher courses. As we observed preservice teachers, we noticed many of them reflecting on social and emotional situations they encountered with students. This, coupled with growing knowledge of low social and emotional health of teachers (Schonert-Reichel, 2017), challenged us to look at how we were addressing social and emotional competencies in our teacher education courses. As we met for weekly coffee, conversation, and emotional support as young teacher educators, our curiosities took off and this endeavor began.

We had many conversations about our work and the work of our students. Meetings, reflection between meetings, and tasks we assigned each other led us to narrow our focus to environmental support for social and emotional competencies, creating questions about how we teach and support preservice students' social and emotional competencies, as they, in turn, struggled to support their PreK-12 students. Kitchen (2009) described teacher development as "a complex interplay of intellectual, emotional, and social processes" (p. 59). We challenged ourselves to examine practices within our courses and to scrutinize the teaching of social and emotional competencies, finding holes in practice in order to improve our teaching, ultimately producing a stronger teacher preparatory program.

The study utilized the inter-related core social and emotional competencies from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (Payton et al., 2008), including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Specifically, when considering self-awareness the consideration of how the preservice teacher could assess their own feelings and keep themselves emotionally grounded was considered. The criteria for self-management reflected on how a preservice teacher handled stress and challenge with emotionally appropriate expression. Social awareness looked at how a preservice teacher might not only take the perspective of another person but empathize with that person. Additionally, some social awareness included elements of recognizing similarities and differences within a group of people. Relationship skills include a consideration of how preservice teacher might establish and maintain a mutually healthy relationship with another.

Responsible decision-making criteria was based on the preservice teachers' consideration to make respectful, ethical decisions and when necessary apply decision-making skills in a critical situation. We observed existing social and emotional competencies in preservice teachers to better inform and improve our teaching practices with regard to social and emotional competencies.

## Aim/Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this research was to investigate the social and emotional competencies supported in our teacher education courses. Samaras (2011) observed that we practice what we value. We say we value social and emotional competencies, but do we? Through this self-study we considered key competencies of social-emotional growth (Payton et al., 2008) to discover where, or if, we were addressing them in our courses.

This research has continued to build self-study research practices for us, in-turn informing our teaching practices. Samaras (2011) identified three specific questions to be answered in every self-study:

- What do you wonder about in your teaching practice?
  - Do we teach social and emotional competency to students?
- Why is this issue important to you?
  - Assure we understand and can teach social and emotional competencies to better prepare our preservice teacher educators for their careers.
- Who would benefit from addressing this question?
  - Future students of the teacher educators, preservice teachers, and us.

Our overarching research question being, “To what extent, if at all, do we teach specific social and emotional competencies to preservice students and how does this inform our own teaching practices?”

## Methods

We started with the five commonalities of self-study research found across the work of Barnes, LaBoskey, and Samaras (Mena & Russell, 2017):

1. initiated and focused by the individual studying personal practice;
2. aimed at improvement and development of new knowledge of practice;
3. undertaken interactively and in collaboration with others;
4. using multiple research methods; and
5. demonstrating methodological rigor and trustworthiness (p. 107).

This work was focused and self-initiated to improve our pedagogical and methodological practices. We used multiple methods to collect data, building trustworthiness through triangulation between nodal moment analysis (Tidwell, 2009), instructor response from those nodal moments, reflection from critical friend meetings, and consideration of personal journal reflection.

Preservice teachers drew nodal moments (Tidwell, 2009) about what moment stood out to them as they reflected about classroom experiences. IRB approval was attained and ethical procedures followed. We utilized a table, as seen in Figure 1, listing each social and emotional competency and analyzed the drawings to understand whether competencies were present.

**Table 1**

*Example of a Table used to Analyze Nodal Moment Data.*

Self- awareness: accurately assessing one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well- grounded sense of self- confidence;	Self- management: regulating one's emotions to handle stress, controlling impulses, and persevering in addressing challenges; expressing emotions appropriately; and setting and monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals	Social awareness: being able to take the perspective of and empathize with others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; and recognizing and making best use of family, school, and community resources;	Relationship skills: establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; and seeking help when needed; and	Responsible decision- making: making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision- making skills to academic and social situations; and contributing to the well- being of one's school and community.	Picture	Notes	Center of focus
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Separately, we analyzed each of the data points and then came together to compare and contrast our analysis.

As critical friends (Samaras, 2011) we met regularly to discuss analysis of the nodal moments and practices observed during our class time. We made notes and reflected after each meeting. Personal journal entries documented our thinking progress.

We coded data from the nodal moments using the CASEL inter-related competencies (Payton et al., 2008) as a guide, matching CASEL categories to characteristics in the drawings and explanations. Specifically, we considered whether competency was present and implemented in a positive or negative manner. For the first several nodal moments coded we pulled out all social and emotional competencies we felt were present. After our first critical friend meeting after analysis began we mutually decided this was beyond the scope of what was being considered for this study, and we decided to code only the primary social and emotional competency present in each nodal moment. During critical friend meetings we used constant- comparison method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) to explore our courses and uncover how, or if, we were teaching CASEL categories to students. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, we triangulated data using multiple sources including nodal moment analysis (Tidwell, 2009), instructor response from those nodal moments, reflection from critical friend meetings, and consideration of personal journal reflection. We also coded the data independently before coming together to compare our codes, discuss any on which we did not agree, and then arrived at a consensus. For the purposes of this study, the term preservice teacher refers to the university student in the teaching role and the term student refers to the young children in the schools where the preservice teachers completed practicum hours.

## Analysis

After we analyzed the data individually we also came together as critical friends to reflect. The categories we applied as we began our analysis stemmed from the direct consideration and wording of the social-emotional competencies from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (Payton et al., 2008):

- Self-awareness - accurately assessing one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence;
- Self-management - regulating one's emotions to handle stress, controlling impulses, and persevering in addressing challenges; expressing emotions appropriately; and setting and monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals;
- Social Awareness - being able to take the perspective of and empathize with others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; and recognizing and making the best use of family, school, and community resources;
- Relationship skills - establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; and seeking help when needed; and
- Responsible decision-making - making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; and contributing to the well-being of one's school and community.

Through the process of reflection and collaboration, we noticed a theme with the nodal moment drawings from our students and began to create a rationale for their reflective nodal moment drawings. We noticed a distinct contrast between nodal moments that depicted the preservice teacher at the center of focus in the moment compared to the student(s) being the center of focus. We started to include code to differentiate if the preservice teacher or the student(s) was the center of focus for each nodal moment.

These preservice teachers are first or second-year students who are trying to decide if the path of education is for them. They are trying to accurately assess their own feelings towards the profession as is evident in the nodal moments. Through this process of emotional awakening, students are focused on themselves and are trying to envision themselves as teachers. This is the main objective of the course, and it is a critical analysis for all that believe the teaching path is for them. However as we took a deeper look at each nodal moment, the question still lingered, what am I doing to support them in this social and emotional process they are naturally encountering? Am I being intentional? Where in our curriculum, if at all, are we intentional with each social and emotional competency?

## Self-Awareness

Nearly half of our preservice teachers chose to reflect on their own self-awareness.

Specifically, 23 out of 50 preservice teachers reflected on self-awareness in a positive light and three in a negative light. The great majority of reflection was done specific to the preservice teacher "accurately assessing one's feelings, interests, or strengths" (Payton et al., 2008). While 23 of the preservice teachers displayed moments of great self-awareness and excitement, a few showed the opposite emotion. One specific nodal moment of interest saw the preservice teacher expressing excitement as they got to work with students on I.E.P.s during small group math.

There was a sense of honor this preservice teacher had that her teacher allowed her the privilege of working with a small group of children, specifically noted, "It was very exciting that my mentor teacher let me help them and keep them on track. I was also super grateful for the opportunity to work with the smaller group of students and actually see that I helped them."

Many students also reflected on their own self-awareness through their journals. One student wrote:

*My open-mindedness has also grown because I was placed in an overall very diverse school and so I was in a classroom that was more diverse than I had really even seen. This helped me in being more open-minded because I had to start considering cultures that I just didn't encounter before.*

The faculty's response to the student was the following:

*As you know, professional dispositions are critical to the success of the teacher with his/her students. I have enjoyed reading your reflections about the dispositions of your mentor teacher and of yourself. It is important to consistently be reflecting on your own practice and refining your areas of weakness. I have thoroughly enjoyed working with you this semester and only wish you the best of luck in the future. I believe you have the necessary groundwork to continue to grow into an effective educator that can truly make a difference in the lives of students. Continue to ask questions, seek opportunities, and reflect on your own practice and learning. Best of luck to you...keep in touch!*

What I noticed most was how I didn't specifically address any of her personal reflections and made my feedback broad and open. I could have used this opportunity as a teaching moment to capitalize on her reflections and push her to dig deeper into her thought process.

In an opposite nodal moment that demonstrated lack of self-awareness, specifically being able to keep a well-grounded sense of self-confidence, was a reflection by a preservice teacher that noted the chaos of the classroom during the period there was a substitute teacher. The preservice teacher reflected:

*So far in my classroom it seems as if the kids are not doing what they are supposed to. We currently have a substitute teacher and the kids have been acting up causing there to be a lot of yelling or discipline in the classroom. We hardly do fun activities and the lessons are repetitive. I've decided teaching might not be for me.*

## **Self-Management**

Very few nodal moments considered self-management of the preservice teacher. Those that were (N= 3) counted were more often in a negative reflection. As self-management specifically considers handling stress and persevering through challenge, the lack of accounts of self-management could be for several different reasons. An interesting, although disturbing reflection, demonstrated not only a lack of self-management on the preservice teacher's part but a lack of understanding of developmentally appropriate stages and growth of young children.

This preservice teacher reflected:

*I read the same book 5 times in a row. It was both unpleasant and eye opening as to how kids focus on one thing. It was just as exciting for them every single time. Every time I read to them, it's either the same book 3+ times, or I cannot even finish 1 whole book before they either take it from me or walk away.*

## **Social Awareness**

Ranking as the second most accounted for social and emotional competence 19 of the 50 reflections focused on social awareness in a positive consideration, while five were negative. While not surprising, the majority of positive social and emotional reflections saw the student at the center of the nodal moment. There was a general sense of joy and excitement in many of these nodal moments where preservice teachers expressed delight and excitement in watching the student learn something new or come to an understanding of a previously challenging topic. One reflection spoke to how taken aback the preservice teacher was as the students in the classroom expressed that they were most thankful for their teacher when prompted with the question, "What are you thankful for and why?" This preservice teacher noted, "over half the classroom listed a teacher and said something about how they help them learn or how they make them feel special." So while the center of focus of this nodal moment was the students' responses, there was clear anticipation from the preservice teacher to understand they someday will make that impact, noting, "This made me realize how much of an impact being a teacher can have on a child's life."

## *Relationship Skills*

This category coded 7 out of 50 positive concepts of relationship building with students and one negative. While the nodal moment was noted for relationship building the center of focus was most frequently on the preservice teacher and their perception of how building a relationship or friendship with a student helped them in a positive light.

Of the analysis only one preservice teacher, of the 7 coded in relationship skills, spoke of the importance of the relationship between the students in the classroom, specifically noting how a student found great importance in getting to play basketball with his friends. One preservice teacher described a kindergartner running up to her and giving her a hug. She felt inspired to educate the next generation because this student demonstrated affection and kindness. The student was beginning to recognize the power of relationship in education.

## *Responsible Decision-Making*

Few reflections took responsible decision-making into account, only accounting for 3 of the total coded nodal moments. Of these, two showed a sense of “making skills to academic and social situations; and contributing to the well-being of one’s school and community” (Payton et al., 2008) expressing joy and accomplishment for getting to arrange or create learning space in a classroom. One preservice noted excitement as they were able to take “full creative rein” in creating a language environment.

## *Critical Friend Reflections*

Our journey as critical friends has strengthened throughout this process. As both of us are fairly new to self-study, building trust in one another to openly reflect on our strengths and challenges as new faculty was exhilarating, but at times frightening process. As we wanderfahred (Miller et al., 2002) through topics, one discussion led to another and another. Our gained trust in each other, ultimately helped us figure out where we would begin this study. We stumbled around social and emotional awareness but took time firmly understanding how to turn our lack of understanding in social and emotional competencies into our self-study. We diligently met in regular coffee shop meetings, giving each other tasks to complete by the next time we met. These completed tasks helped our study take shape and we really started to understand what we were looking for. During this time our discussions helped us begin to realize why our students were not demonstrating some social and emotional competencies as strongly as others.

In our teaching, we both consider a strength in helping students start to understand who they are and teach skills specific to understanding their biases and dispositions around children. Teaching these skills helps build strong self-awareness and social awareness. In contrast, while we talk about the critical importance of relationships with students, we were not specifically teaching the “how-to” in building those relationships. The concept of self-management and responsible decision-making were not taught in our curriculums.

## *Personal Journal Reflections*

Ironically as we were analyzing and finding less specific consideration of responsible decision-making in the preservice teachers, similar themes emerged in personal journals.

Specifically less confidence in responsible decision-making around appropriate social norms and applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations, and contributing to the well-being of one’s school and community. An excerpt below from a personal journal shows a specific example:

*These are amazing kids, but how do I help them be teachers when it is so hard to figure out myself? I feel like I’m hitting what they need, but never enough time. How do I get them to go deeper? Do they trust me? Am I telling them the right thing? Who’s to say we know what the right thing is? I need to follow up on the video from Allison last night.*

How do I know my take on this isn’t through the lens of a white woman of privilege? Is the research bias? How do I know?

## Outcomes

This self-study began with questions focused on social and emotional competencies with preservice teachers in our courses. During data analysis, we noticed the preservice teachers' sense of teacher-centered self-awareness. Reflection during our weekly meetings confirmed a teacher-centered view was typical for preservice teachers early in their programs. Further discussions during our meetings led us to conclude we need to be more intentional teaching preservice teachers how their actions impact PreK-12 students and provide feedback to enable them to reflect deeper about social and emotional competencies. We noticed little reflection on self-management or responsible decision-making, while social awareness of the preservice teachers and the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others was split.

At times the consideration of social and emotional competencies seems to be a "buzz phrase" or a passing phase. "Social-emotional learning (SEL) is an old concept gaining new traction in education practice and policy" (Soland et al., 2019, p. 466). But as teachers, we must consider how to continually analyze and keep our own social and emotional competencies in check (Taylor & Newberry, 2018). One of the greatest realizations that came from this study was how little we, the researchers, understood the true nuts and bolts of social and emotional competencies. How can we teach social and emotional competencies if we are uncertain exactly what we are to teach? Our new directive in teaching preservice teachers includes an intensely and newly heightened awareness to keep our skills sharpened in the direct teaching of social and emotional competencies. While there is interest in social and emotional learning in education, it is often trumped by a cognitive focus (Waajid et al., 2013). This study brought the critical ah-ha moment that we shouldn't expect the tide in education to fully turn to more social and emotional teaching if as education faculty we do not fully have a grasp on what that means.

Reflection over the critical friend meetings and assignments we gave each other during those meetings revealed a theme of appreciation to keep each other accountable as early-stage self-study scholars. A consideration for accountability within a safe relationship has spurred rapid growth in both of our research pursuits while extending our respective dissertation research, yet pushing us toward more intentionality in our teaching. We understand our preservice teachers crave knowledge on social and emotional competencies to support their work with their PreK-12 students and need help with their own social and emotional health. Honest scrutiny of our teaching practices around social and emotional competencies will help us refine how and what we teach our preservice teachers, ultimately affecting how social and emotional competencies are taught to the PreK-12 students where our preservice teachers teach in the future.

## Implications

This self-study has already led to deliberate changes in our teaching practices. We are more aware of the five social and emotional competencies, which alone has changed considerably in how we teach lessons. We both have started to focus more on the social and emotional competencies of each preservice teacher and consider how we help each preservice teacher become more aware of their social and emotional competencies and what needs to happen to strengthen deficiencies. Probably most critical, this study has opened up discussions around what social and emotional competencies need to be deliberately taught through the different steps of our teacher preparatory program.

The next steps in this research will add analysis of students as they enter the third field experience phase of their education journey at our university. While the anticipation would be the preservice teachers would begin to move away from a self-focus to complete student focus, a similar analysis must take place to help understand this reality. The specific focus on self-management and relationship skills is of specific interest to us, as those are areas that are critical in the success of long term teaching careers (Alexander, 2019).

Research indicates that to succeed in life students need to leave school with more than knowledge of academics (Dweck et al., 2011). As educators at a university with an emphasis on teaching, it is our jobs to instill in our preservice teachers the critical nature of teaching the whole child. We need to first lead by example. We need to provide our



students with feedback that is specific to their needs and capitalizes on their reflections. By being more intentional through our own in-class course activities and 1-1 meetings with students we have the opportunity to model these social and emotional competencies. Our biggest personal take-away is intention. We need to be more intentional on how we provide our students with an example of supportive social and emotional development, while also providing ways to do so as teacher educators. "Holding students to high standards and giving them the attention and scaffolding they need to meet those standards sends the message of personal concern. In a sense, good teachers are like good parents— at times authoritative but consistently caring" (Dweck et al., 2011, p. 30).

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Brandy Smith

University of Northern Iowa



Allison Barness

University of Northern Iowa



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