

Leveraging Candidate Feedback to Support Early Field Experiences for PK-3 Pre-Clinical Teacher Candidates

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Abstract

This study investigated the perceived comfort levels of PK-3 pre-clinical teacher candidates before and after their first semester of field experience to identify potential gaps in curriculum, instruction, or program design. The Field One Experience (FOE) involved weekly, full-day placements over eight weeks in a public-school classroom with the same mentor teacher. Using a paired-samples t-test, the study found statistically significant gains in candidates' confidence related to observing classroom instruction (Q1, $p = .012$), engaging in hands-on teaching activities (Q4, $p = .002$), and developing relationships with students (Q9, $p = .030$). Additional areas showed positive but non-significant trends. However, comfort levels remained low in domains such as educational technology, assessment practices, and school-community engagement, highlighting areas for targeted instructional and experiential support. These results underscore the value of early field experiences while pointing to specific opportunities for program enhancement.

Keywords: *early field experiences, mentor teachers, educator preparation programs, early childhood education, classroom observations*

Early field experiences (EFEs) are the cornerstone of teacher preparation, providing preservice teachers with their first opportunities to connect coursework with classroom realities (Ferguson & Sutphin, 2024; Kwok & Bartanen, 2022). In PK-3 educator preparation programs, these placements are especially critical because they not only introduce candidates to the complexity of young children's learning but also shape their early beliefs about teaching, professional identity, and instructional readiness. The more time pre-service teachers spend engaged in structured, practice-based pedagogies, the more responsive they are to student thinking and therefore exhibit improvements in early instructional decision-making (Mancenido et al., 2023). While much of the research on teacher development emphasizes clinical teaching or student teaching, less attention has been paid to the preclinical stage (Kwok & Bartanen, 2022), where initial confidence and skill building begin.

EFEs serve as scaffolded learning environments, allowing candidates to observe, reflect, and gradually engage in instructional tasks under the guidance of mentor teachers. Grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Lave and Wenger (1991) communities of practice, these

experiences highlight the role of knowledgeable mentors and authentic contexts in supporting novices as they progress from peripheral participation to more active teaching roles (Bartanen & Kwok, 2021; Mancenido et al., 2023). Strong partnerships between educator preparation programs (EPPs) and PK-12 schools further enhance the process, ensuring candidates are supported through observation, collaboration, and feedback.

Despite their importance, EFEs often reveal uneven growth across teaching domains. While some competencies develop quickly, others require more intentional support and guided practice (Kwok & Bartanen, 2022). Identifying these patterns early can provide preparation programs with actionable insights for curriculum and program improvement (Kwok & Bartanen, 2022), ultimately contributing to stronger teacher retention and effectiveness (Goldhaber et al., 2020).

This study examined how PK-3 pre-clinical teacher candidates perceive their comfort levels before and after their first semester of field experience. Therefore, we examined the following research questions:

1. What are early pre-clinical teachers' perceived comfort levels before and after entering their first semester of field experience?
2. What concerns or gaps are identified in the teaching, curriculum, or programming strategies after their first semester of field experience?

By answering these questions, this study contributes to ongoing conversations in teacher education about practice-based preparation, the role of mentorship, and the development of novice teacher identity. The findings not only affirm the value of early field experiences but also provide direction for enhancing EPPs to better support PK-3 teacher candidates. By focusing on PK-3 teacher candidates at the preclinical stage, this study provides novel evidence on how early field experiences shape professional identity and instructional readiness, yielding actionable insights for improving program design and reducing attrition in the teaching workforce.

Literature Review

Teacher Retention and the Role of Early Field Experiences

Teacher attrition remains a persistent challenge in education, with inadequate preparation frequently cited as a contributing factor (Coggshall et al., 2012; Shules & Flores, 2020). Preparation programs that lack a strong field component often see disproportionately high rates of graduates leaving within the first few years (Coggshall et al., 2012; Tompkins, 2023). Research suggests that early and structured opportunities to observe and practice teaching along with mentorship and support are linked to greater preparedness and long-term commitment to the teaching profession (Ronfeldt et al., 2014). EFEs, while more limited than clinical teaching, can still provide candidates with confidence and professional insight that helps reduce early career attrition (Freeman, 2010, Kwok & Bartanen, 2022) and ensure that they are well-prepared for the classroom (Subramaniam, 2012). Examining preservice teachers' perceptions during these early placements can therefore illuminate critical areas for program improvement.

Social-Cultural and Situated Perspective on Learning to Teach

Because this study focuses on how teaching candidates develop confidence through interaction with mentors and authentic classroom contexts, sociocultural and situated learning theories provide an appropriate lens for interpretation. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes the importance of scaffolded support and the presence of a more knowledgeable other (MKO) in learning. For preservice teachers, mentor teachers often serve as the MKOs who assist candidates in making meaning of their experiences and developing pedagogical skills (Goldhaber et al., 2020). This support is particularly essential during early fieldwork when candidates are still forming their professional identity and instructional confidence.

Complementing this perspective, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation with communities of practice highlights how novices learn through engagement in authentic settings. By observing, then imitating, and gradually participating alongside experienced teachers, preservice candidates begin to internalize professional norms and practices. Candidates' teaching identities begin to develop as they work alongside a seasoned professional.

Mentor Teachers as Catalysts for Candidate Growth

The effectiveness of EFEs is closely related to the quality of mentor teachers who guide the candidates. Research indicates that strong mentorship not only shapes immediate learning but also influences the long-term effectiveness of future teachers (Goldhaber et al., 2020; Ndebele & Legg-Jack, 2024). This support is particularly important, as preservice teachers often have overconfidence in their teaching abilities and expectations (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021; Adams et al., 2022).

An integral component of field experience is collaboration. This is demonstrated through collaboration between faculty and pre-clinical teacher candidates, collaboration between the pre-clinical teacher candidate and their mentor, and collaboration between faculty and mentor teachers (Hart, 2020). Each opportunity provides guidance, feedback, and support, helping pre-clinical teachers navigate classroom challenges (Ndebele & Legg-Jack, 2024). Field placement

mentor teachers also help preservice teachers develop reflective practices, which are critical for continuous improvement and adaptation (Kwok & Bartanen, 2022). Support from field placement mentor teachers can foster preservice teachers' confidence and developing professional identity (Izadinia, 2015), while effective modeling, feedback, and instructional support can strengthen their preparedness for teaching (Matsko et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction and scaffolded support within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). For preservice teachers, mentor teachers serve as the more knowledgeable other (MKO), modeling effective practice, providing feedback, and supporting candidates' growth in authentic classroom contexts. Through guided participation, novices move from dependence on mentor modeling to independence in the classroom.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation within communities of practice complements Vygotsky's perspective by highlighting how professional identities are formed through participation in authentic social settings. As preservice teachers observe, collaborate, and gradually assume instructional responsibilities, they not only develop pedagogical competence but also begin to see themselves as members of the teaching profession. Together, these frameworks guide the design of the study and the interpretation of its findings. They frame early field experiences as socially situated opportunities for scaffolded learning in which mentor teachers, peers, and classroom contexts serve as critical supports. This lens provides a foundation for analyzing changes in preservice teachers' reported comfort levels during their first field placement.

Methodology

This study was conducted within a PK-3 EPP at a four-year university in Southeast Texas. The EPP placed participant candidates in public school classrooms for one full school day per week over the course of eight weeks, working with the same mentor teacher. Designed as action research, the

study aimed to uncover program-level insights for ongoing improvements (Mertler, 2020).

Participants

Participants were chosen using a purposive sampling method specifically designed to address the research question (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Forty-eight Field One PK-3 pre-clinical teacher candidates entering their first semester in the EPP were surveyed at the beginning of the semester prior to entering the field and again at the end of the semester. This was their first structured exposure to field experience.

Instrument

The instrument utilized for this research is a Qualtrics survey created by the researchers to provide the opportunity to examine attitudes and beliefs within a population (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) and gain their different perspectives (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The survey contained 10 questions, each with a five-point Likert scale, based on objectives listed in the University's PK-3 Field 1 Handbook. The researchers used nominal scales to provide options for participants to choose when responding to the questions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The scale options included Very Comfortable (5), Comfortable (4), Neutral (3), Uncomfortable (2), and Very Uncomfortable (1), addressing key competencies such as classroom observation, relationship building, instructional strategies, educational technology, assessment, and school community engagement. Participants were allowed to provide written responses to further explain their scale option choices. Pre-clinical teachers rated their comfort level for each survey item listed below:

1. Observing teaching and learning experiences in classrooms.
2. Becoming part of a learning community as a novice teacher.
3. Planning for and instructing small groups of students.
4. Participating in hands-on experiences in classrooms.
5. Interacting with peers and reflecting on observations and experiences.
6. Applying educational technology in the classroom.

7. Engaging in supervised teaching activities, when applicable.
8. Interacting with the school community (teachers, staff, administrators, parents, etc.).
9. Developing supportive relationships with students.
10. Using assessment tools with students.

Data Collection

The survey was conducted twice during the semester: before and after the candidates' field experience. The survey was shared via a link posted in the institution's learning management system, and the pre-clinical teachers were provided with an opportunity in class to complete the survey.

Data Analysis

Data collected from the pre- and post-surveys were analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the early pre-clinical teachers' perceptions and comfort levels (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Responses were recorded in Qualtrics. The raw data was transferred from Qualtrics into SPSS and analyzed. Participants' pre-test and post-test Likert scale responses were first grouped by question. To analyze the data for this quantitative study, a paired t-test was employed to compare survey results from the same individuals measured at two different points in time, as recommended for such analyses (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Individual question responses without pre-test/post-test matches were excluded from the data, resulting in an analyzed sample size ranging from 29 to 32 participants. Open-ended responses were analyzed to further support the quantitative findings. Researchers independently coded responses, aligned with the survey items, and identified themes that illustrated candidates' perspectives. Representative quotes were selected to highlight these themes.

Findings

This study explored the self-reported comfort levels of PK-3 pre-clinical teacher candidates before and after participating in their first field experience semester. Analysis of pre- and post- survey data revealed both statistically significant improvements as well as areas which could benefit from further instructional and/or

experiential supports. A two-sided, dependent-samples t-test revealed statistically significant differences in pre- and post-test scores for questions one, four, and nine, with p-values for each less than 0.05, as indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Paired Samples Correlations

Question	Number of Paired Responses	Correlation	Two-Sided p value
1	32	.441	.012
2	32	.322	.072
3	32	.332	.064
4	32	.516	.002
5	32	.200	.273
6	31	.050	.791
7	30	.166	.382
8	29	.140	.468
9	30	.396	.030
10	30	-.100	.599

Pre-test responses indicated pre-clinical teachers had a diverse range of prior experiences, with participants expressing varying degrees of comfort and a strong interest in learning from peers and mentors. Some participants noted they were unfamiliar with classroom observation, while others reported feeling at ease due to previous exposure through family connections, work experience, or earlier coursework. Post-test data showed a general increase in participants' confidence. Many reported feeling more comfortable in classroom settings, especially after engaging with supportive mentors and observing instructional practices firsthand.

Areas of Strength

The data highlighted several areas of increased comfort levels in pre-clinical teachers. The results indicate that students felt significantly more confident in observing teaching and learning experiences in classrooms, participating in hands-on experiences in classrooms, and developing supportive relationships with students after completing their first semester of field experience observations. While not reaching statistical significance, learning community integration (Q2) and small group instruction (Q3) both showed upward trends. (Q5) and (Q7), which addressed peer collaboration and supervised teaching, respectively, showed midrange gains as well. These areas may benefit from more intentional preparation and focus.

Areas of Growth

Survey items that did not show statistically significant improvement highlight potential opportunities for targeted curricular or programmatic development. Educational technology (Q6) was identified as the lowest in confidence post-test, suggesting limited exposure or unclear expectations in this domain. Using assessment tools with students (Q10) showed some growth. However, comfort levels remained low, indicating an opportunity for improvement. School and community engagement (Q8) also remained low in reported comfort levels post-survey, indicating additional room for growth. These areas have been identified as ones where candidates may need additional support as they begin their EFEs. Faculty can use this data to enhance their course curriculum to offer targeted assistance to these candidates.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight meaningful changes in PK-3 pre-clinical teacher candidates' perceived comfort levels across three broad themes: observing teaching and learning, relationship building, and instructional strategies and tools. Viewed through the lens of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, these results illustrate how scaffolded field experiences with mentor teachers, peers, and faculty support pre-clinical teachers' progress from novice observers to emerging professionals with growing pedagogical confidence. By examining the data and findings in detail, we aimed to uncover nuanced insights and implications into how early field experiences impact the development of preservice teachers. This thorough exploration identified gaps that can be addressed through program improvements.

Observing Teaching and Learning in the Classroom

The increase in confidence levels related to observation-based learning reflects Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and the role of mentors and observation in early development (Vygotsky, 1978). As teacher candidates enter the classroom for the first time, they are exposed to teacher mentors who, through experience and modeling, transfer their knowledge to the teacher candidates. This transfer of knowledge supports Vygotsky's ideas that growth occurs when students are exposed to authentic environments with knowledgeable people. These improvements in confidence

levels would likely indicate that exposure to children in an educational setting assists students in improving their perceived comfort levels in these areas, as expected. During the Field 1 experience, students spent 64 hours with their mentor teacher and students. It makes sense that their confidence level increases in the area of observing and learning experiences and developing supportive roles.

The pre-test results revealed a wide range of experience levels, with many participants reporting varying levels of comfort and eagerness to learn from their peers and mentors. While some participants voiced that they were new to observing classrooms, others felt comfortable due to prior exposure through family, work experience, or previous coursework. Some participants commented on their excitement about learning through observation, stressing the value of field experience as a key learning tool. Comments such as, "I am open to learning from others, whether I agree with their styles or not" and "I love to see how other teachers handle classroom management, etc." reflect the participants' recognition of the importance of diverse perspectives and a willingness to grow through real-world examples and reflective practice.

Post-test feedback revealed an overall increase in confidence among participants. Many felt more comfortable in the classroom environment, particularly after interacting with supportive mentors (Vygotsky, 1978) and directly observing teaching techniques (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This shift in comfort levels was significant, with participants noting a growing ability to manage small group activities and engage more confidently with students. One participant shared, "I jumped right in the first week. Been feeling confident more and more each week," while another noted, "I feel very comfortable in the classroom and have gained confidence in leading small group activities." Several participants acknowledged the value of learning through observation, saying that direct experience and asking questions led to a deeper understanding of classroom dynamics and teaching methods. This interaction is exemplified by Lave and Wenger's (1991) peripheral participation within communities of practice. Field experience provides candidates with a supportive environment in which they begin taking on the role of a teacher. As one candidate reflected, "I learned a lot of techniques in teaching different students," illustrating how

structured observation and mentor support facilitated the shift from initial uncertainty to growing confidence.

Relationship Building

Growth in candidates' ability to build supportive relationships with students and peers highlights the social nature of teacher learning. It covers items such as becoming part of a learning community, collaborating with peers, and interacting with the broader school environment. Participants' growth in building relationships with students aligns with Vygotsky's emphasis on the social nature of learning. In sociocultural terms, these relational interactions provide a framework for scaffolding a deeper engagement with instructional practice (Vygotsky, 1978). The development of trust, rapport, and classroom belonging was not only a source of emotional support but also a cognitive gateway for developing a teacher identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As students navigated classroom dynamics with support from their mentors and peers, they internalized relational strategies that form the foundation of effective teaching. This finding affirms the value of mentorship and access to a MKO in helping pre-clinical candidates move from observation to active participation and membership in school communities. The analysis of relationship-building skills revealed notable progress in participants' ability to connect with peers, mentors, and students.

Pre-test results showed different levels of comfort with interaction, especially when it came to building relationships with students, engaging with school staff, and becoming part of a learning community as evidenced by comments ranging from "I have not yet been into a classroom yet so I do not know what to expect yet," to "I feel comfortable because I have one year experience as a substitute." This variation highlights the diverse experiences candidates bring to their preparation, reinforcing the need for scaffolded opportunities that support novices at different starting points as they begin to build professional identities. While some candidates feel comfortable, many reported limited engagement with family and communities, which reflects limited scaffolding beyond the classroom. Often, EPPs underemphasize family engagement and school-wide collaboration with leaves new teachers unprepared in these areas (Epstein, 2001; O'Connor, 2008).

Post-test findings showed an increase in comfort levels across all categories, though the statistical analysis revealed only (Q9), developing supportive relationships with students, as statistically significant. Participant feedback highlighted the positive impact of supportive classroom environments on their confidence. One student shared, "I had amazing relationships with my students and believe that they felt supported by me," reinforcing the quantitative finding. Others echoed this sense of belonging and support within the classroom, with one noting, "Everyone in the school has been very welcoming and nice to me." However, participants also pointed to limited exposure beyond the classroom, suggesting an area for growth. As one candidate reflected, "I feel very welcomed by my mentor teacher and her classroom aides, but I have not had much experience with the community." These responses suggest that while strong relationships were built within the classroom, more structured opportunities to engage with parents, administrators, and the broader school community could further enhance relationship-building capabilities.

Instructional Strategies and Tools

Candidates reported greater comfort with hands-on teaching and small group instruction, yet less confidence with educational technology and assessment practices. From a sociocultural perspective, these findings indicate that instructional skills supported by modeling and guided practice, such as hands-on activities and small group instruction, were successfully scaffolded. However, domains with fewer opportunities, such as educational technology and assessment of students, remained outside of the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). These findings reveal that while field experiences provide scaffolding for basic instructional strategies, more intentional support is needed in technical domains. The lack of growth in educational technology integration reflects a persistent challenge in teacher preparation (Koh et al., 2016; Mandinach & Jimerson, 2016). Also, candidates' uncertainty pertaining to assessment underscores the necessity for intentionally scaffolding experiences in designing, administering, and interpreting multiple forms of assessment (Popham, 2009).

Pre-test results revealed that participants were generally least confident in using educational technology and assessment tools. Several expressed concerns about their

limited experience in these areas, commenting, "Not very techie myself but here to learn," and "I am not a tech savvy person, so I feel like I lack in this area and have a lot to learn."

Others admitted unfamiliarity with assessment practices, noting, "I haven't really done official assessments," and "I do not know all assessment tools or what they properly measure." While confidence in participating in hands-on experiences and small group instruction was somewhat stronger, it still left significant room for growth. Participants also expressed discomfort with supervised teaching activities, particularly when being observed.

Post-test responses indicated overall improvement in confidence across all teaching domains. Growth was particularly notable in hands-on instructional experiences, with participants stating, "I feel very comfortable engaging in hands-on experiences in the classroom, as they create meaningful learning opportunities," and "I enjoyed preparing and working with students on my created lessons." Confidence in applying assessment tools also improved, though comments suggest this remains an evolving skill. Despite some increases in confidence levels, educational technology persisted as the biggest area of challenge, with a p-value of .791, suggesting that applying educational technology in the classroom is still a challenge for candidates. One participant reflected, "I think I still need more practice; there's still more to using technology in the classroom that I can get more knowledge," while another shared, "I am comfortable with technology, but have not had a lot of experience with educational technology in the classroom," both implying that either technology experiences were outside of the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) or not present within the classroom community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Participants' comments about needing "more practice" with technology and uncertainty about "official assessments" highlight the need for explicit modeling, opportunities for application, and feedback loops to support deeper learning in these areas. In sum, the findings reinforce the power of intentional, scaffolded early field experiences in teacher preparation.

Implications

The results of this study reinforce the value of early field experiences as scaffolded opportunities for teacher development and highlight areas where program design can be strengthened. Gains in observation, relationship building, and small group instruction demonstrate that when candidates are provided with authentic contexts and mentor support, they develop confidence that contributes to their emerging professional identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). However, persistent gaps in domains such as educational technology, assessment literacy, and school-community engagement suggest that EFEs alone may not provide sufficient opportunities for growth in more technical areas.

For teacher preparation programs, these findings point to the need for intentional design of EFEs that go beyond exposure. Embedding guided reflection, structured opportunities to practice with technology and assessment tools, and intentional engagement with families and school staff might ensure a more balanced experience. This confirms prior calls for practice-based teacher education that scaffolds both instructional skills and broader professional competencies (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2017). Programs that adopt these approaches may not only improve candidate readiness but also contribute to long-term teacher retention and effectiveness.

One surprising finding was that candidates reported low confidence in educational technology in both the pre-survey and post-survey, despite being part of a generation often assumed to be "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001). This suggests that general familiarity with social or personal technologies does not automatically translate into comfort with integrating technology for instructional purposes. Therefore, an important implication from this study is that teacher preparation programs should not assume candidates are technologically savvy by default; instead, they should provide explicit, scaffolding opportunities to practice digital tools in lesson design, assessment, and differentiated instruction.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size ($n = 29-32$)

limits the statistical power of the findings and may not fully represent the broader population of pre-clinical teacher candidates (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Second, the reliance on self-reported confidence levels introduces the possibility of response bias, as participants may overestimate or underestimate their actual comfort levels (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Third, data were collected from a single cohort during one semester, which limits the generalizability of the results across different institutions, programs, or academic years. Future studies should consider longitudinal designs or larger, more diverse samples to enhance the robustness and applicability of findings (Mertler, 2020).

Next Steps

Building on the findings of this study, several actionable steps are recommended to enhance the preparation of PK-3 pre-clinical teacher candidates. First, curriculum designers should integrate focused instruction and support in areas where candidates reported persistently low comfort levels, particularly educational technology, assessment practices, and school-community engagement. Prior research has emphasized the importance of targeted coursework and practical application in these domains to build teacher efficacy (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Mishra & Koehler, 2006).

Second, future studies should expand the scope of field placements to include diverse classroom settings, allowing candidates to experience a broader range of instructional practices and student populations. Research suggests that varied and extended field experiences contribute to stronger teacher identity and adaptability (Zeichner, 2010; Ronfeldt, 2015). Additionally, collecting qualitative data through reflective journals, focus groups, or interviews could provide deeper insights into the pre-clinical teacher candidates' perceived growth and ongoing challenges (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Finally, a longitudinal approach is recommended to track candidates across multiple semesters, examining whether EFEs predict future confidence and competence. This would align with calls for evidence-based program improvement and support efforts to design developmental pathways that foster readiness for full-time teaching (Grossman et al., 2009).

Conclusion

This study examined how PK-3 pre-clinical teacher candidates' comfort levels shifted from before to after their first field experience. Results showed meaningful growth in classroom observation, hands-on teaching, and relationship building, underscoring the value of field 1 experiences in supporting novice teachers' professional confidence and identity formation. Despite these gains, candidates expressed limited confidence in educational technology, assessment, and school-community engagement. These findings reinforce the value of early field experiences as scaffolded opportunities for professional growth and identity development. The findings also highlight the importance of not assuming candidates enter with strong preparation across all domains. In particular, the low confidence reported in educational technology suggests that programs cannot assume today's college students, often considered digital natives, are automatically prepared to integrate digital tools into the classroom. By addressing these gaps, programs can more effectively prepare novice teachers for the complexities of PK-3 classrooms and contribute to a stronger, more resilient teacher workforce.

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