

EXPLORING CONCERNS OF BUSINESS STUDENT TEACHERS

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Abstract

Background: The student teaching internship is the culminating experience and has been cited as the most significant, exciting, and difficult experience teacher candidates will encounter throughout their entire teacher preparation program. In order to prepare business teacher candidates for their internships, it is critical to understand the issues and challenges they will face during their student teaching. **Purpose:** As such, the purpose of this research study was to explore the unique lived experiences and frames of references of business teacher candidates regarding their issues, challenges, and barriers during their student teaching internships. **Method:** A qualitative phenomenological approach was implemented based on three data sources: (a) an online questionnaire; (b) a semi-structured focus group interview; and (c) an analysis of weekly journal reflections. **Results:** Based on 16 business student teachers, this qualitative study found three primary concerns: (a) addressing classroom management; (b) issues with the quadratic relationship; and (c) having compromising priorities. **Conclusions and Recommendations:** Thus, it is critical that teacher educators discuss strategies and techniques for classroom management, help form synergistic relationships with qualified and passionate mentor teachers and university supervisors, and only assign coursework that are critical for the development of the student teachers in their internships.

Keywords: business education, student teaching, teacher development, teacher education, triad relationship

Exploring Concerns of Business Student Teachers

The student teaching experience has been declared as the most significant, memorable, and powerful experience teacher candidates encounter during their teacher preparation programs (Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009). The student teaching internship is also a pivotal time for aspiring teachers, because it oftentimes solidifies their passion (or lack thereof) for teaching. Due to the significance of this experience, it becomes quite problematic for those teacher candidates who do not perform well or encounter substantial issues during their internships. This leaves university supervisors and mentor teachers in a predicament, particularly because at this point it is often too late to engage in corrective action. However, knowing what significant issues and concerns prior student teachers have experienced may be a more proactive strategy for teacher educators.

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Teaching concerns are most likely expressions indicating the motivation for revelatory learning (Fuller, Parsons, & Watkins, 1974). Thus, teaching students about topics of little concern may not be of perceived value for teacher candidates. As such, teacher educators aspire to understand and address articulated concerns of teacher candidates to better prepare them for their student teaching internships, and their subsequent teaching careers (Crews & Bodenhamer, 2009). Moreover, prior research has found that investigating student teachers' concerns is important because concerns lead to stress, and this in turn may result in less teacher effectiveness in terms of decreased student achievement (Cakmak, 2008).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research study was to explore the unique lived experiences and frames of references of business teacher candidates regarding their issues, challenges, and barriers during their student teaching internships. The following research questions were examined in this study:

1. What themes emerge as meaningful to business teacher candidates when they describe their student teaching internships?
2. What do business teacher candidates identify as primary concerns during their student teaching internships?
3. How different are the concerns of business teacher candidates compared to other teacher education disciplines?

Related Research

Other disciplines in teacher education have examined the issue of student and practicing teacher concerns. For example, Melnick and Meister (2008) compared novice and experienced teachers' concerns by interviewing 42 teachers in Pennsylvania, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia. They found that novice teachers' primary concerns dealt with addressing misbehavior and accommodating the diverse needs of their students, being overburdened with high workloads and dealing with time constraints, and their lack of perceived communication skills with parents and other adults when addressing conflicts. Not surprisingly, the researchers found a significant difference between novice and experienced teachers in regard to classroom management, with experienced teachers exhibiting higher perceptions of their classroom management abilities. However, they found no significant difference in terms of time management. Similarly, based on a descriptive study of 41 agricultural education student teachers, Fritz and Miller (2003) found them to be primarily concerned with content knowledge and student discipline challenges. They concluded that agriculture education student teachers are not starkly different from student teachers in other disciplines.

Crews and Bodenhamer (2009) articulated the skills that business student teachers need prior to entering into their classrooms. These skills included classroom management, working with diverse students, organizational skills, lesson planning, teaching, and other soft skills. In addition to these pedagogical understandings, Crews and Bodenhamer also discussed various employability skills needed of business student teachers such as being dependable and the ability to collaborate with others. However, despite numerous teacher education studies on the topics of student, novice, and experienced teachers' concerns, little is known of the concerns of business student teachers. As such, the researchers were interested in discovering if business student teachers had concerns that were substantially different than student teachers in other disciplines.

Conceptual Framework

Concerns and frustrations while teaching are most intense during student teaching and during the first few years of practicing teachers' careers (Fritz & Miller, 2003). Fuller, Parsons, and Watkins (1974) developed a teaching concern conceptual model that assisted in crafting the survey and focus group questions and in interpreting the findings of this study. Fuller et al. (1974) discovered that the vast majority of teacher candidates and novice teachers experience a very similar pattern of concern while navigating through the difficulties of teaching. Fuller et al.'s (1974) teaching concerns model described teacher candidates' and practicing teachers' primary concerns based on three phases: (a) pre-teaching—characterized by survival or concerns with their own performances; (b) early teaching—characterized by task concerns; and (c) late concerns - characterized by assessing the impact on students' learning. In regard to pre-teaching concerns, Fritz and Miller (2003) indicated:

Self-adequacy concerns, described primarily as survival concerns, are often experienced by preservice and beginning teachers, and include supervisor's approval, administrative support, relationships with other teachers, subject matter adequacy, and discipline problems. (p. 48).

During the early stage, novice teachers move away from focusing on classroom management issues and are oftentimes concerned more with instructional strategies, materials, and their workloads. Teachers in this stage tend to focus their energy on students' perceptions and assessing students' learning. Those teachers in the last stage (late concern stage) are concerned with students holistically. The primary emphasis for teachers in this stage is to enhance student achievement.

Methods

Research Design

A phenomenological approach was implemented in the conduct of this study. This study was descriptive, implemented phenomenological reductions, examined

the intentional relationship between individuals and their situations, and explored psychological essences (Wertz, 2005). Further, this study investigated the consciousness of individuals as they were lived throughout everyday situations without the preconceptions inherent in most quantitative inquiries (Wertz, 2005). The purpose of the research was to explore the unique lived experiences and frames of references of business teacher candidates regarding their issues, challenges, and barriers during their student teaching internships.

Participants

In phenomenological studies, it is essential that the participants involved in the study have a revelatory relationship with the phenomenon investigated (Wertz, 2005). Accordingly, the participants in this study included 16 business student teachers that gained relatively similar experiences in terms of the structure and requirements of their internship placements. In terms of demographic indicators, 44% of the participants in this study were female and 56% were male. The student teachers were widely diverse in terms of age, which ranged from 21 to 52. In terms of ethnicity, the vast majority of the participants (88%) were Caucasian, while one participant was Asian and the other was of Hispanic origin. A fairly large percentage (40%) of the participants in this study were completing their second bachelors' degrees. The student teachers' high school placements were in diverse settings, including 19% completing their internships in rural schools (<2,500 population), 44% in small urban communities (2,501 to 50,000 population), and 38% in large urban areas (50,001 to 2 million population). None of the participants taught in metropolitan areas (>2million population)

Institutional Context

It is important to note that this study included student teachers from one institution and one program (Business Education). The researchers recruited participants from a public, four-year primarily-white institution located in a large urban community. Student teachers in this program completed 16 week internships. The first 11 weeks the student teachers were placed in a high school setting and the last five weeks were in an elementary or middle school. For comparative purposes, the researchers requested that the student teachers focus on their high school experiences in their descriptions.

Sampling Method

When identifying and selecting participants for this study, the researchers followed the logic of Wertz (2005). According to Wertz (2005), "The basis of this decision is the judgment of whose experience most fully and authentically manifests or makes accessible what the researcher is interested in" (p. 171). As such, the researchers selected business student teachers from one program at one institution. This decision was made on the basis of finding individuals that were homogeneous in terms of the requirements and structure of their student teaching internships.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three sources: (a) an open-ended online questionnaire; (b) two open-ended focus group interviews (eight participants were included in each focus group); and (c) the analysis of reflective weekly journals submitted by the participants. The data sources were utilized in order to encourage participants to provide narratives of their experiences leading up to, during, and following their student teaching internships. The researchers enabled the participants' descriptions to provide access to meanings relevant to their experiences.

Data Analysis and Data Reduction

To prepare data for analysis, the researchers transcribed the focus group interviews verbatim. Then, all three data sources (responses to the online questionnaires, focus group transcripts, and reflective journals) were examined. This study implemented a four-part process to emanate recurring themes: (a) the researchers read all data from questionnaires, focus group interviews, and reflective journals; (b) reread the transcripts to grasp the statements in their entirety while delineating the shifts in meaning; (c) reflected on each meaning unit to better understand its significance to the phenomenon under study—a process that included all three researchers; and (d) synthesized the data reductions into consistent themes that convey the psychological meaning of the experiences—which was also conducted with all three researchers collaborating (Wertz, 2005). In terms of the data analysis and reduction processes, this study utilized thematic content analysis of the interview data to glean and capture the essence of meaning teacher candidates ascribed to their challenges they during student teaching. The process of thematic analysis involved the use of themes, which were identified inductively from transcribed interview data to encode qualitative information. The procedure utilized was developed by Boyatzis (1998) and was orchestrated by coding themes based on category, definition, and indicators with analysis following.

More specifically, participants' interview data were analyzed inductively by preparing the data (transcribing and translating as warranted), reducing the data (reading, bracketing, gleaning, and winnowing text), categorizing (using constant comparative procedures) and thematizing the data, and theorizing (Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 1998). First, the interview data were prepared for analysis by transcribing the audio taped interviews. Second, each researcher listened to the audio-taped interviews while reading along with the written transcription to check for accuracy of the transcribed texts, corrections were made as needed.

Third, the transcriptions were independently examined by the research team members. They all engaged in a process of reducing, categorizing, thematizing, and theorizing the data. In reducing the text, the researchers read and marked with brackets passages they judged as of interest and importance. This process of gleaning text led to categorizing (category construction) and thematizing the

data by connecting threads and patterns within categories and between categories resulting in the emergence of recurring themes (Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 1998).

Trustworthiness and Transferability

Important strategies were implemented to reduce the impact of subjective bias, while establishing trustworthiness. To ensure trustworthiness, the researchers collaborated in designing the study and worked independently at first and later converged in analyzing and interpreting the interview data (i.e., data triangulation and investigator triangulation in searching for agreement and consistency of evidence from different participants' data) to ensure dependability of the findings. Transferability suggests "whether particular findings from a qualitative study can be transferred to another similar context or situation and still preserve the particularized meanings, interpretations, and inferences from the completed study" (Leininger, 1994, p. 106). The degree of transferability or fittingness of the findings beyond this study to other contexts or situations rests with identifiable congruence of undergraduate programs, teacher candidates, and colleges and universities (Leininger, 1994).

Findings

Based on analyses of the online questionnaires, focus group interviews, and weekly reflective journals, the student teachers voiced concerns regarding challenges and issues they believed had created difficulties for them during their student teaching experiences. In order of magnitude (or impact to their student teaching performances), the researchers uncovered the following recurring themes: (a) *classroom management*, which was articulated as not being prepared nor expecting to deal with defiance as well as difficulties with motivating older students; (b) *quadratic relationships*, which was expressed as the need for student teachers to foster synergistic relationships with their mentor teachers, university supervisors, and K-12 students; and (c) *compromising priorities*, which was voiced as needing to do trivial, but required university paperwork and lesson plans that stifled their ability to focus on more critical teaching tasks. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the complexities involved in student teaching. While the researchers identified common threads throughout the discussions, each student teacher faced unique challenges throughout the internship experience.

Classroom Management

The issue of managing the classroom surfaced as a primary concern for at least 10 of the student teachers in this study. They emphasized the dilemmas they faced with attempting to appropriately respond to defiant students that would not follow their directions—such as putting away cell phones when asked. As such,

the challenge of dealing with defiant students emerged as a subtheme underlying the classroom management theme. Second, four of the student teachers articulated concerns with not only dealing with defiance, but also motivating older students—which surfaced as a second subtheme underlying classroom management. Third, the student teachers described issues related to the diverse range of learners in their classrooms, which emerged as a third subtheme of addressing diversity.

Dealing with defiant students. These student teachers grappled with the issue of understanding why K-12 students would completely disregard their requests to stop their misbehaviors. To illustrate, Cindy, an older, non-traditional Caucasian student teacher, discussed the issue of defiance in a focus group interview, she stated: “I was astounded just by the brash willfulness of disobedience”. The defiance was something that the majority of student teachers wrestled with (both the traditional and non-traditional student teachers) because they did not remember students in their K-12 schools, from which they graduated, displaying such inappropriate behavior. Even though most of the student teachers had graduated within the past five years from high school, they could not identify with the behavior exhibited by their K-12 students. Margaret, a traditional Caucasian student teacher, stated in a focus group interview:

The disrespect that the students had. I went to a very good school district, you respect the teachers. If they say sit down, you sit down. If they say you’re changing seats, you change seats. You don’t argue. It was, I’m not moving, it’s not happening. I’m staying right here. What can you do in that situation? It just happened time after time after time. It was astounding to me; I just couldn’t believe it.

The student teachers also believed that the school environmental setting was a distinguishing factor for the difference in behavior of the students they encountered compared to the students with which they went to high school. Further, the participants attributed the school environmental setting to explain the difference in those student teachers who had fewer classroom management issues compared to those that perceived it as an insurmountable obstacle. The student teachers believed that the more urban and diverse the placement, the more challenging the assignment was in terms of classroom management.

Motivating older students. An interrelated concern to classroom management was the issue of motivating older students. The term *older* is used to denote teaching elementary/middle school students compared to teaching high school students. It was also meant to distinguish high school freshmen from seniors. In either case, the student teachers articulated their difficulties in motivating high school students and high school seniors while teaching self-motivated and enthusiastic students in the elementary/middle school settings as well as freshmen in high school. John, a traditional Caucasian student teacher, stated:

All of my classes that I taught were senior heavy classes...There were so many kids that

were just done already. They always use the excuse that they are seniors, and they have senioritis, and they are graduating...I found it very difficult to motivate them and have them do work. That was probably the biggest challenge I had with classroom management.

Related to the issue of motivating students, many of the student teachers constantly attempted to bring something new and novel into their classrooms to keep their students from being bored. They also discovered that the key to engaging their students was to develop relationships with them not only academically, but also getting to know their students personally. The student teachers added that their mentor teachers were instrumental in helping them deal with classroom management issues.

Addressing diversity. Many of the student teachers were concerned with the great diversity, mainly in terms of learning abilities, in their business classrooms. They described how their classrooms were comprised of honors students and special needs students with learning disabilities. The student teachers believed they were not prepared to address the needs of this wide array of learners. They desired more emphasis on accommodating special needs and students with exceptionalities in their teacher preparation program.

Quadratic Relationship

The student teachers in this study strongly believed that their mentor teachers, university supervisors, and K-12 students were all critically important for their development. The teacher education literature is replete with discussions regarding the essential nature of the triad relationship—the mentor teacher, university supervisor, and the student teacher. However, the student teachers in this study also communicated how important their K-12 students were in the process of their own development. Related to the quadratic relationship theme, the following issues emerged as interrelated subthemes: (a) presence, or lack thereof, of the mentor teacher; (b) the mentor teacher as friend; (c) the university supervisor as an objective assessor; and (d) a love/hate relationship with students.

Presence, or lack thereof, of the mentor teacher. The student teachers explained how they desired the presence of their mentor teachers to observe, evaluate, and provide constructive criticism related to their instruction. Many of the student teachers described how their mentor teachers were not present in the room while instruction took place. To illustrate, Robert, a non-traditional Caucasian student, revealed:

I didn't see my cooperating teacher in the morning. I had the key so I opened the door. He would be there for maybe five minutes in the morning and then 'I'll see you at lunch'. That was it.

Although a few student teachers acknowledged that they appreciated having the freedom of not having the mentor teacher present during instruction, this

enabled them to have more freedom and be empowered to view the classroom as their own, they believed that the lack of direction and feedback that resulted was detrimental to their development. As a result, the student teachers voiced concerns with the process of selecting their mentor teachers. They suggested that the teacher preparation program be more selective and undergo a more rigorous process of selecting mentor teachers such as having the teacher candidates interview their mentor teachers prior to placing them.

The mentor teacher as friend. Similar to the issue of the needed presence of their mentor teachers, many of the student teachers agreed that their mentor teachers were too nice. Stated differently, they believed their mentor teachers refrained from providing them with objective, constructive criticism because they were afraid that it would hurt their feelings. This, too, was perceived as detrimental to the student teachers' development.

The university supervisor as an objective assessor. To the contrary, the university supervisor was seen as providing the student teachers with candid, honest feedback that assisted them in the development and improvement of their instructional skills. To illustrate, Rick, a non-traditional Caucasian student noted:

I think I got the best feedback from my university supervisor as opposed to the teacher that I was actually with. Maybe they were trying to be a little too nice or not wanting to go hard on me. The university supervisor was always nice and professional, but would give good, critical criticism that helped me. I felt like that was one of the best parts of it, was getting university supervisor's opinions and feedback.

A love/hate relationship with students. The student teachers also discussed how much they learned from their K-12 students, and how this relationship was critical to their development. In fact, most indicated that developing relationships with their students was the best part of their student teaching internships. On the other hand, they also acknowledged that dealing with their students was also the most problematic elements of their student teaching. They discussed the difficulties they had with understanding their students' behaviors.

Compromising Priorities

The student teachers also described the intensity of their student teaching experiences in terms of juggling multiple tasks and responsibilities. They articulated tasks that they believed were unnecessary to their development. These tasks, they believed, took precious time away from their primary responsibilities of teaching students. These compromising priorities are listed as subthemes and are as follows: (a) required university paperwork and (b) writing lesson plans.

Required university paperwork. The student teachers in this study were required to compile an electronic portfolio that was comprised of artifacts demonstrating their knowledge, skills, and disposition towards university teacher education standards. This portfolio is a component of the National Council for

Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accreditation process. In addition, the student teachers also completed various assignments required of the business education program such as their weekly reflective journals and a unit plan. However, the student teachers did not believe this assisted in their development, and even perceived it as inhibiting their developmental progress.

Writing lesson plans. Similar to the university paperwork, several student teachers did not understand why they needed to write lesson plans. One student teacher commented that she had learned how to write lesson plans in most of her teacher education courses and could not understand why she needed to do it again during student teaching. Many of the student teachers agreed that being able to submit their lesson plans electronically would have been better than printing them out.

Conclusions and Discussion

The primary concern raised by the student teachers in this study was dealing with classroom management issues, specifically defiant and unmotivated students as well as accommodating students with special needs. This finding is not surprising, and in fact is consistent with the overwhelming majority of studies examining issues and challenges of student teachers (Gal, 2006; Sadler, 2006; Smith, 2000; Snyder, 1998), novice teachers (Hung & Lockard, 2007; Little & Akin-Little, 2008), and even more experienced teachers (Pedota, 2007; Shin & Koh, 2007). Further, this finding is explainable through Fuller et al.'s (1974) teaching concerns model, specifically of those in the pre-teaching concerns stage. The business student teachers in this study were not different from student teachers in other disciplines in terms of being pre-occupied with issues related to themselves, or their own performances and abilities to control their classrooms. When asked how much they were concerned with student learning, the student teachers stated that they were not really worried about it. They believed that they had little control over whether students learned the subject matter. As such, Cindy stated: "If they don't want to learn, they're not going to learn, period". Although concerning, not being concerned with student learning is quite typical of individuals in the pre-teaching stage (Fuller et al., 1974).

Prior student teaching studies discuss the issues and benefits of the triad relationship, which is the relationship among student teachers, university supervisors, and mentor teachers (Kent, 2001; Steadman, 2009). Valencia et al. (2009) argued:

At a time when student teaching continues to be a mainstay of teacher education programs, we need to better understand the complex interactions of the key triad members (student teacher, cooperating teacher, and university supervisor) as well as other forces that interact to create or constrain opportunities for preservice teachers to learn. (pp. 304-305)

Similar to issues raised in other student teaching studies, these student teachers also expressed the profound support (or lack thereof) they experienced from their university supervisors and mentor teachers. They also described how instrumental this support was in terms of their development. Expanding the notion of the triad relationship, these student teachers articulated how profound their relationships were with their K-12 students as well. They also expressed how essential their students were in assisting them with their own development as teachers. As such, this insight may help the field of teacher education re-conceptualize further student teaching inquiries to include K-12 students in their framework of discussion when examining the support system of student teachers. This warrants a further examination of a quadratic relationship as opposed to the traditional triad relationship.

Despite the expressed need for gaining feedback and constructive criticism from their university supervisors and mentor teachers, the student teachers in this study revealed that evaluation of their student teaching was not a major concern for them, and for some was not a concern at all. This was certainly an unexpected finding for the researchers, particularly because it is inconsistent with Fuller et al.'s (1974) teaching concern model. According to the teaching concerns model, supervisory evaluations of student teachers are typically one of the primary concerns because it aligns with the fixation of student teachers with their own teaching performances. It is quite plausible that the student teachers perceived that they were pedagogically ready to undertake their student teaching internships, and as a result were not much concerned with being evaluated.

Student teaching studies have acknowledged the complexities that exist and intense nature of the internship experience (Valencia et al., 2009). As such, typically student teachers approach their student teaching with overwhelming feelings of anxiety. The student teachers in this study were no different and expressed the difficulties inherent in preparing for teaching in addition to completing required university paperwork and writing lesson plans. They problematized it as having compromising priorities that inhibited their abilities to optimally perform and complete other teaching duties needed to be effective. The issues raised by the student teachers reinforces the need for teacher educators to solicit and reflect on the experiences of their students in order to re-evaluate and modify course and clinical experiences with the intention of providing students with the best learning experiences possible. Since the student teaching internship is so complex and daunting for most teacher candidates, it is important to ensure that student teachers are not bombarded with unnecessary coursework. However, teacher educators are oftentimes constrained by university mandates to meet NCATE and other accrediting bodies' standards, and in many cases do not have full control over what their student teachers must complete to successfully finish their internships.

From many of the student teachers' perspectives in this study, the process of completing lesson plans was also counterproductive to their effectiveness. This

was another unexpected finding for the researchers because creating lesson plans is part of the planning process of teaching. One rationale for the student teachers' contention with creating lesson plans might be that the student teachers observe their mentor teachers not utilizing lesson plans and therefore do not understand the value of the task. As a result, it is important for teacher educators to explain the purpose of using lesson plans and reinforce the implementation of the practice during student teaching. It also may be beneficial to communicate to the mentor teacher the need for student teachers to write lesson plans.

The researchers were also interested in discovering whether business student teachers would have different challenges compared to student teachers in other disciplines. It was apparent from the discussions among the business education student teachers that they were not much different from other student teachers in other disciplines and had similar issues. When asked what unique challenges the student teachers had in terms of teaching business, they identified the complexity involved in attempting to teach in all of the various content areas offered within the business education curriculum. Thus, business teacher preparation programs should attempt to provide their students with methods courses that would enable them to sharpen their pedagogical content knowledge in the content areas their students will need to be proficient in to pass their business content examinations and obtain their licenses to teach business.

Other issues that were raised by the student teachers included being concerned with the current economy and their abilities to gain employment. They also articulated their financial struggles inherent in not being able to work full-time yet having to finance the costs of tuition for student teaching. The older, non-traditional students were also very concerned with family issues during student teaching. In addition, the student teachers believed they learned a great deal from their student teaching experiences and believed it was the most valuable component of their teacher preparation program. They stated that they learned how to stay organized, the value of networking with other teachers and non-certified support staff, and they learned how to find a myriad of valuable teaching resources.

As a result of this study, teacher educators should be aware that student learning is not typically the primary concern of their student teachers. Concerns relating to classroom management and accommodating special needs students rise in importance for individuals at this developmental stage. Discussing strategies and techniques for classroom management are more likely to assist their student teachers the most in preparing for student teaching. However, it is also important to communicate to student teachers the need to focus on student learning during their internships. This study also pointed to the need to work with mentor teachers in helping them provide more meaningful and candid feedback to their student teachers. It is also beneficial to inform the mentor teacher of the need to be in the classroom with their student teacher. Another issue for teacher educators to examine is the issue of compromising priorities and being aware of the tremendous complexities inherent in the student teaching internship.

Further student teaching studies are needed to better understand the issues, challenges, and recommendations of mentor teachers and university supervisors as well. Qualitative studies, especially, might provide a better examination of the concerns of these individuals. The university supervisor and mentor teacher are more likely to have a different perspective in terms of what programmatic initiatives and curriculum enhancements are needed to better prepare student teachers for their teaching careers.

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