

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Perceptions of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Pre-Service Teachers' First Classroom Observations

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### Abstract:

This study examines the narratives of students following their first field placements in an introductory education course. The research aimed to explore changes in students' perspectives on teaching and identify factors that surprised them during their initial experiences in the classroom. The study's purpose was to use these insights to inform revisions to teacher education curricula to better prepare future educators for internships and student teaching. Data were collected from student summaries after completing 15 hours of classroom observation. These narratives were analyzed for themes using coding. Three major themes emerged: (1) the importance of building relationships with students, teachers, and school staff, (2) the challenges of classroom management, and (3) the significance of careful lesson planning. Students reported a newfound awareness of the complexities of teaching, including the workload and emotional demands of the profession. They also expressed a desire for more structured support and guidance during their preparation. The findings highlight the critical role of field experience in shaping future educators' understanding of teaching and underscore the need for curriculum changes. Recommendations include increasing field placement hours, providing more mentorship from experienced teachers, and enhancing preparation for the challenges of classroom management and planning. The study emphasizes the value of early practical experiences in teacher training and calls for a reevaluation of the quantity and setting of field placements integrated into the education pathway.

**Keywords:** teacher education, field placements, classroom management, lesson planning, teacher preparation

## 1. Introduction

Field placements play an essential role in teacher education by providing students with hands-on experience in actual classroom settings. These placements are often the first opportunity for future educators to observe and engage with students, teachers, and school environments. Through these experiences, aspiring teachers begin to understand the day-to-day responsibilities and challenges that



come with the profession. However, many students enter their first placements with preconceived notions about teaching that may not align with the realities they encounter.

The purpose of this study is to explore how students' perspectives on teaching change after their initial field placements. Specifically, it seeks to understand what aspects of teaching surprised them and how their understanding of the profession evolved because of these early experiences. The study aims to use these insights to inform and improve teacher education curricula, ensuring that students are better prepared for the demands of student teaching and their future careers.

This research was conducted by analyzing the final projects of students enrolled in an introductory education course at a four-year university. The course required students to complete 15 hours of classroom observation and write a summary of their experiences. These narratives were then coded and analyzed for common themes, with a focus on identifying areas where students' perspectives shifted and where they felt unprepared for the challenges they observed. This analysis will help guide future modifications to teacher preparation programs, ensuring that students receive the support and knowledge they need to succeed in the classroom.

## 2. Literature Review

The role of reflective practice in pre-service teacher education is essential for developing teaching expertise. Journaling plays a significant role in shaping how pre-service teachers process and deepen their understanding of teaching experiences, especially when paired with peer interactions. Yee, Abdullah, and Mohd Nawi (2022) analyzed the reflective journals and interviews of 20 pre-service teachers in Malaysia. Their findings revealed that participants primarily described their experiences rather than critically evaluating them. However, deeper reflection was achieved through peer interactions that encouraged emotional expression. This suggests that incorporating peer discussions can enhance the reflective process, enabling pre-service teachers to engage in more meaningful assessments of their teaching practices.

Similarly, Dos Santos (2020) emphasized the importance of peer observation in improving pedagogical skills. By examining South American teacher interns, Dos Santos found that even those with limited teaching experience could enhance their instructional methods by observing more experienced educators. This underscores the need for a structured peer observation process to support the development of effective teaching strategies, highlighting observation as a pivotal component in the learning process for pre-service teachers.

Bandura's (2004) social learning theory further supports these findings, suggesting that observation and self-belief are essential to professional growth. Bandura (1997) argued that self-efficacy—teachers' belief in their ability to succeed in specific tasks—plays a vital role in their willingness to emulate observed behaviors. As a result, teachers' actions, outcomes, and goals are significantly influenced by their experiences and observations. The incorporation of classroom observations, reflective practices, and structured feedback mechanisms is essential for enhancing teaching effectiveness and fostering professional development.

Danielson (2012) emphasized the necessity of developing specialized observational skills, which include effective reflection on teaching practices and appropriate evidence-collection methods. She underscored the importance of post-observation discussions between observers and teachers to provide



personalized feedback. Wajnryb (1992) echoed this perspective, arguing that observing others not only enhances teachers' understanding of diverse instructional methods but also refines their ability to analyze and interpret classroom dynamics, ultimately benefiting their instructional practices.

However, the perception of classroom observations can vary significantly based on their structure. Poster and Poster (1993) noted that many teachers perceived observations primarily as performance evaluations rather than opportunities for professional growth, which may limit their potential development. In contrast, Postholm (2011) found that post-observation discussions in Norway allowed both observers and teachers to collaboratively analyze lessons, enhancing their mutual understanding and contributing positively to their professional growth. Mayhew (2010) demonstrated that music teachers prioritized pedagogical strategies over student behavior when evaluating lesson effectiveness, indicating that initial assessments of teaching efficacy often emphasize instructional practices.

Murphy, Marron, and Coulter (2021) explored the experiences of 25 pre-service teachers in physical education, uncovering critical insights regarding their professional identity development. Participants recognized the value, relevance, and significance of their teaching experiences, reporting a mix of anxiety and excitement that reflected the emotional complexities of their transition into teaching roles. They focused on essential instructional components, such as lesson planning, resource management, and classroom organization, emphasizing their commitment to effective teaching practices. Furthermore, participants acknowledged the importance of learning through peer observation, co-teaching, and feedback, underscoring their dedication to ongoing professional growth and development.

O'Brien, Stoner, Appel, and House (2007) examined the dynamics of professional relationships by interviewing nine pairs of interns and their supervising teachers. Their thematic analysis identified communication and trust as essential elements for the interns' development, fostering a supportive learning environment. Participants emphasized the need for clearly defined roles, which facilitated effective collaboration and mutual understanding. The researchers advocated for targeted training for both cooperating teachers and student interns to help establish these roles, thereby enhancing the internship experience and promoting professional growth.

Lehman and Quick (2011) investigated the journals of 21 administration interns to examine the evolution of their perceptions as they transitioned from teachers to administrators. Their analysis revealed a predominantly negative tone in the interns' reflections, characterized by an emerging "us vs. them" mentality between teachers and administrators. This opposition highlights the challenges inherent in transitioning to administrative roles and suggests that such transitions may affect professional relationships and organizational dynamics.

The literature emphasizes the significance of field-based observations in shaping pre-service teachers' pedagogical perspectives. According to Smith and Johnson (2020), immersive field experiences bridge the gap between theory and practice, allowing students to develop a more nuanced understanding of instructional strategies and classroom management techniques.

Research has highlighted the role of reflective journaling as a tool for promoting critical thinking and self-awareness. Dewey's (1933) concept of reflective practice underscores the importance of deliberate reflection in fostering professional growth. Recent studies (e.g., Brown et al., 2021) argue that reflective journaling enables students to critically analyze their field experiences, leading to deeper



insights into their teaching philosophy and instructional choices. Such reflection aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which posits that learning occurs through a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Furthermore, the integration of foundational coursework with field-based observations has been found to enhance students' preparedness for future teaching roles. As noted by Garcia and Lopez (2019), a combined approach strengthens students' ability to connect theoretical concepts with practical applications. This integration is critical for developing skills in classroom management, lesson planning, and the use of technology in education. Studies have also emphasized the role of structured support from faculty and mentor teachers in promoting meaningful field experiences (Anderson et al., 2022).

Debates in the literature center on the optimal timing and duration of field-based experiences. While some scholars advocate for early exposure to classroom settings (McFarland et al., 2018), others caution against overwhelming novice students with complex teaching responsibilities too early in their academic journey. The literature suggests that scaffolded experiences, where students gradually assume greater responsibilities, may lead to better outcomes (Taylor & Reeves, 2021). Additionally, technological integration in classroom observations has emerged as a focal point of discussion, with some studies calling for the increased use of video-based reflections to provide students with opportunities for self-assessment and peer feedback (Nguyen & Hodge, 2023).

The review of the literature underscores the multifaceted nature of pre-service teacher preparation. The interplay between theoretical coursework, field-based observations, and reflective practice is critical to the development of competent and confident future educators. This review not only highlights the consensus within the field but also stimulates discussion regarding the structure and support mechanisms for field-based learning. By incorporating diverse perspectives and theoretical insights, the review lays the groundwork for further exploration of undergraduate students' experiences in secondary education.

In conclusion, these studies collectively emphasize the vital role of observation, reflection, and peer interaction in the development of teaching expertise. They also underscore the potential challenges in how classroom observations are perceived and conducted, suggesting that targeted training and structured peer interactions could enhance the effectiveness of pre-service teacher education programs.

### 3. Methods

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of undergraduate students majoring in secondary education. Data were gathered through reflective journaling and a final questionnaire to gain deeper insights into the perspectives of future educators. Participants included 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students enrolled in their first course requiring field-based observations. These students completed 15 hours of classroom observations over three months at a local public school selected by the university. Upon completing their observation hours, students responded to a questionnaire with writing prompts, encouraging them to reflect on their experiences.

During the observations, the students also participated in 25 hours of college classroom instruction. The class met twice a week for 50 minutes per session over 15 weeks, totaling 30 classroom sessions. These sessions introduced students to foundational topics in secondary education, including classroom



management, time management, writing objectives, legal issues, technology usage, national and state standards, effective teaching methods, stakeholder roles, and administrative policies. These topics can be grouped into key themes such as instructional strategies, legal and ethical considerations, and technology integration.

The classroom lectures offered brief overviews of essential topics for individuals exploring a career in teaching. In subsequent semesters, students continue their education with more in-depth lectures and hands-on activities to build a stronger foundation in teaching methodologies and practical application.

Data analysis followed a structured and rigorous approach. Initially, the responses from the reflective journals and questionnaires were transcribed to ensure accurate documentation, while maintaining participant confidentiality by removing identifying information. Content analysis began with open coding to identify key phrases and ideas aligned with the research questions. Predefined coding rules ensured consistency. Each journal and questionnaire response was reviewed, with relevant segments assigned codes representing key ideas.

Once coded, the data were grouped into broader categories based on emerging patterns. These categories were analyzed to identify recurring themes that reflected the common experiences and perspectives of the students. Several rounds of refinement were conducted to ensure the themes accurately captured the essence of the data. Subthemes were identified through more granular analysis, providing deeper insights into specific aspects of the students' reflections.

The data analysis continued with the grouping of related codes into broader categories, which were further analyzed to identify dominant themes representing key aspects of the participants' reflections. The process included multiple rounds of refinement to ensure the themes captured the core insights from the data. Following the identification of dominant themes, subthemes were delineated for a deeper understanding of the nuances within the data. Throughout the analysis, themes were compared with relevant literature in teacher education to situate the findings within a broader academic context.

Finally, the themes and subthemes were synthesized into a cohesive narrative, offering an interpretation of how field-based observations influenced students' perspectives on teaching, classroom dynamics, and their future roles as educators. This analytical process ensured the data were thoroughly examined, leading to meaningful conclusions. SPSS software was utilized to perform text extraction and processing, which involved analyzing unstructured text data to identify meaningful patterns and key elements. This step enabled the software to identify important phrases, keywords, and themes within the text, laying the groundwork for deeper analysis.

The process of category creation was then applied, leveraging advanced natural language processing (NLP) techniques. This functionality automatically grouped responses into predefined or emerging categories based on their semantic similarity and contextual relevance. The automated grouping helped organize large volumes of textual data efficiently and systematically. Furthermore, the categories generated could be reviewed and refined manually, allowing for customization and ensuring that the analysis aligned with specific research objectives or domain-specific nuances.

This streamlined approach not only enhanced the accuracy and consistency of the data analysis but also significantly reduced the time and effort typically required for manual coding and categorization



of qualitative data. Through these capabilities, SPSS facilitated the extraction of actionable insights and supported a robust integration of qualitative and quantitative analyses.

### 3.1 Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample was drawn from a single university and consisted solely of secondary education majors, which limits the generalizability of the results to other institutions, programs, or geographic regions. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through reflective journaling and questionnaires introduces potential biases, as students may not fully or accurately articulate their experiences, and their responses could be influenced by social desirability or reflection biases. Another limitation is the relatively short duration of field-based observations—students completed only 15 hours, which may not have provided sufficient time to fully engage with the complexities of classroom dynamics, potentially limiting the depth of their reflections.

Furthermore, the homogeneity of the sample is a concern, as it included only 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students in their initial education courses, excluding perspectives from more experienced students who may have different insights due to greater classroom exposure. The study's time constraints, which spanned only two semesters and focused on early field experiences, also limit the ability to assess long-term impacts on students' perspectives as they gain more experience and professional development. Lastly, the lack of diversity in observation settings, with students placed only in local public schools chosen by the university, may have restricted the range of educational contexts and challenges encountered, further limiting the breadth of insights gained. These limitations highlight the need for caution when applying the findings to broader populations or settings and suggest opportunities for future research to expand the scope of investigation.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Classroom management

Students' actions and control of the classroom can be categorized as part of the working definition of this theme. The overall classroom atmosphere was noted by student observers. Incidents of outbreaks, though they may have been isolated, resonated with several memories in this category. 86% of the cases within this theme were positive, while 14% were negative.

A selection of student narratives included the following:

- "I learned when some classes have even the tiniest bit of free time they go crazy."
- "While he (my teacher) was very stringent with discipline, he also had the balance of having fun."
- "There were many altercations between students, and those altercations not only affected those involved but also most people in the school."
- "When a teacher does not have enough content to keep the students focused and engaged, it will most likely result in disruptive behavior."



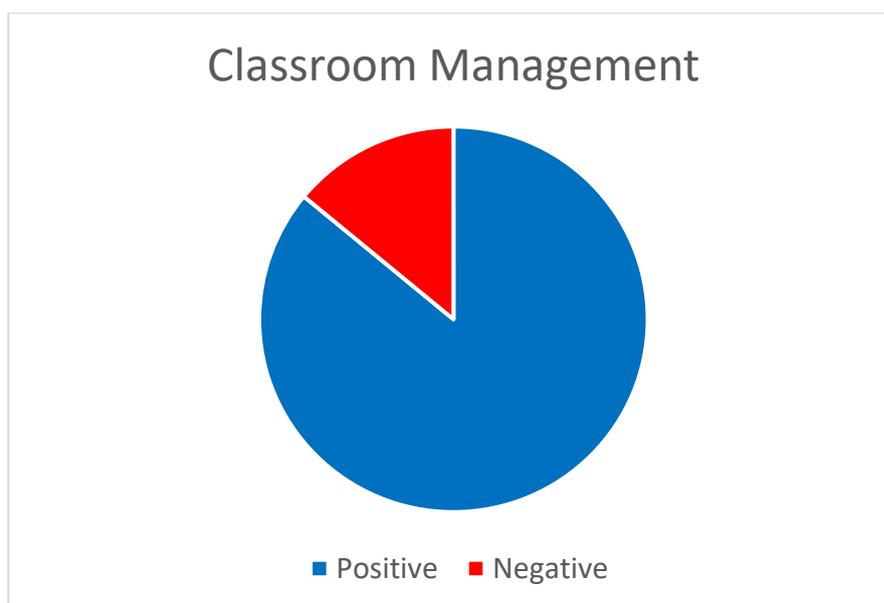


Figure 1.

## 4.2 Time management

92% of observers felt that teachers were maximizing their time within the classroom, while only 8% felt time was being wasted. The theme of time management was defined as understanding the complexity of planning and the effort required to complete the day-to-day tasks observed. Items routinely described included observing teachers working on administrative tasks as well as preparing lessons. Observers seemed amazed at how much teachers had to accomplish in such a short amount of time.

A selection of student narratives included the following:

- "Seeing the behind-the-scenes of how a classroom works and how I would have to operate my schedule from day-to-day was super influential."
- "I learned that when I am a teacher, I will set hard deadlines. Without these deadlines, students will take advantage and not get their work done."
- "Behind-the-scenes, I saw just how much he put in just to prepare the lessons."
- "I did not know what all a teacher did until I saw firsthand."



Figure 2. Annotation Example in ELAN

### 4.3 Relationships

Student observers identified two types of relationships: the first between teacher and administration, and the second between teacher and student. The observed relationship between teachers and administration was overwhelmingly negative (82%), while the relationships between teachers and students were overwhelmingly positive (92%). Observers seemed amazed at the complexity of personal relationships within the classroom setting.

A selection of student narratives included the following:

- "The relationships that she formed with students made them respect her on a different level. They cared for each other, and I personally had never seen anything like that."
- "As a teacher, you need to do your best in class to support motivation and a sense of achievement to make up for the lack of this at home."
- "Staying calm to begin with and trying to work out the problem works better than blowing up on the student. It seems to gain you more respect from the students when you do."
- "The teacher told me the administration is more concerned with test scores than supplies."
- "My teacher said the principal cut their classroom funding this year."

#### 4.4 Teaching strategies

Teaching strategies were defined as innovative and adaptive methods of instruction that student observers witnessed during their classroom experiences. These strategies encompassed a wide range of approaches, from engaging lesson delivery to personalized teaching techniques tailored to meet the needs of individual students. Observers noted the creativity and flexibility that teachers employed to keep students motivated and involved in the learning process. Within this theme, 89% of respondents indicated they were impressed with the variety of teaching styles presented, finding them effective in promoting student engagement and understanding. However, 11% of respondents felt that certain teaching styles did not work well, highlighting the challenges teachers face in adapting strategies to suit diverse classroom dynamics.

A selection of student narratives included the following:

- "I must be able to adapt a lesson on the spot and cater to individual classes."
- "He enjoys history, and he provided several ways to make history enjoyable. As I continue with my career, I want to be energetic as a teacher, and I want to be able to make social studies a fun subject."
- "My mentor teacher stressed how important it is to tap into students' prior knowledge."
- "She was always enthused about teaching her students, and she loved knowing they liked learning from her."
- "I also learned that I do not like worksheets for instruction. What I really mean is that it is important to have many kinds of lessons and activities to maintain students' interest."



Figure 3. Annotation Example in ELAN

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Discussion of results

This study uncovered several key themes from student observations, raising important questions for future practice. One significant insight is the need to better prepare first-time observers for their classroom experiences. Given the complexity of classroom environments, it is critical to explore ways to familiarize these observers with major themes—such as time management, teacher-student relationships, and teaching strategies—prior to their visits. Such preparation could help ensure that observers are attuned to the nuances of these dynamics, enabling them to make more insightful and informed observations.

The findings also suggest that specific assignments or structured activities, such as focused observations or interviews, could further enhance student observers' experiences. These tasks provide a framework for purposeful engagement with classroom interactions, allowing observers to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges and strategies employed by educators. Assignments that encourage reflection and critical analysis could enrich the observational experience and lead to stronger practical learning outcomes.

Another notable finding is the overwhelmingly negative tone surrounding the relationships between teachers and school administration, as reported by student observers. While the data indicates that teachers generally maintain positive relationships with their students, the perceived strain in teacher-administrator interactions is concerning and warrants attention. Inviting guest speakers, such as school administrators or education policy experts, could provide opportunities to discuss roles, challenges, and responsibilities. Such conversations may foster mutual understanding and promote more collaborative and productive relationships.

To guide novice teachers entering their training phase, the study emphasizes the importance of high-impact activities. These include observing classroom management strategies, analyzing how experienced teachers design and adapt lesson plans, and examining methods for building teacher-student rapport and sustaining engagement. By prioritizing these areas, pre-service teachers can focus on practices that directly contribute to their professional development.

The analysis also highlights the need to evaluate how time is spent during placements and whether it translates into better learning outcomes. Evidence suggests that intentional, structured activities—such as meaningful interactions with mentors or reflective exercises—are more beneficial than simply spending extended hours in observation. The concept of diminishing returns is also relevant, as repetitive or low-value tasks may not significantly enhance learning. A quality-over-quantity approach is thus recommended.

Structured observational frameworks can further maximize the value of placement experiences. Tools such as observation checklists, reflective journals, and mentor debriefs offer scaffolds for purposeful engagement. For instance, checklists can guide observers to focus on specific teaching practices, while reflective journaling facilitates critical analysis and application of insights. Regular debriefs with mentors provide opportunities to clarify uncertainties, gain feedback, and deepen understanding of classroom dynamics.



Another important consideration is the potential drawbacks of extended placement hours. Findings suggest that longer engagement does not necessarily lead to better outcomes and may increase the risk of fatigue or burnout. Shorter, focused observation periods with clear objectives, combined with a balanced approach that includes preparation, mentor discussions, and reflection, are likely to be more effective. This approach supports sustainable engagement and minimizes the risks of overextension.

## 5.2 Possible future research

The findings of this study resonate strongly with the existing literature on pre-service teacher education, particularly regarding the importance of observation, reflection, and peer interactions in developing teaching expertise. As highlighted in the literature review, Yee, Abdullah, and Mohd Nawī (2022) emphasized that reflective journaling, especially when paired with peer interactions, can lead to a deeper understanding and critical assessment of teaching practices. This underscores the need for better preparation of first-time observers, as highlighted in our results. By familiarizing observers with key themes—such as time management, teacher-student relationships, and teaching strategies—prior to their classroom visits, we can enhance their observational insights and promote a more thoughtful engagement with the complexities of the teaching environment.

Furthermore, the findings from Dos Santos (2020) support our discussion on the potential for structured assignments or focused observations to enhance the experiences of student observers. The emphasis on observing experienced educators to develop pedagogical skills suggests that targeted assignments could provide a framework for deeper understanding. By integrating reflection and critical analysis into these assignments, we can enrich the observational experience, facilitating a more profound engagement with classroom dynamics and supporting the development of future educators.

The literature also highlights a concerning aspect echoed in our findings: the negative perceptions surrounding the relationship between teachers and school administration. Lehman and Quick (2011) noted that a negative tone characterized the reflections of administration interns, indicating a growing disconnection between teachers and administrators. Our study's results further reveal this strain, suggesting the urgent need to address these perceptions. Inviting guest speakers, such as school administrators or education policy experts, to discuss the roles and challenges faced by both parties could facilitate a more collaborative environment, fostering a better understanding of each party's responsibilities and improving the overall educational experience.

Building on these insights, several pathways for future research emerge. A correlational analysis between first observations and successful student internships is warranted, as understanding how initial classroom exposure impacts long-term effectiveness could provide invaluable insights for teacher education programs. Furthermore, conducting surveys of student interns regarding the identified themes would help validate these findings and uncover additional areas of concern in teacher preparation.

Surveys of certified teachers could further enhance our understanding by highlighting how experienced educators navigate the identified themes throughout their careers, providing benchmarks for new teachers. Additionally, exploring the experiences of Alternate Route Teachers could reveal unique perspectives on preparation, adaptation, and instructional strategies, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of teacher development in diverse pathways.



In conclusion, the results of this study underscore the necessity of preparing student observers through both preliminary learning and structured activities, enhancing their understanding of classroom dynamics. This aligns with the existing literature, which emphasizes the pivotal role of observation and reflection in teacher development. Additionally, addressing the negative perceptions of administrative relationships is crucial for fostering a more positive educational climate, as suggested by both our findings and the literature.

## 6. Conclusions

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the experiences of student observers in classroom settings, highlighting key themes that significantly impact their understanding of teaching and learning dynamics. Through qualitative analysis, we identified critical areas such as time management, the nature of teacher-student relationships, and the effectiveness of various teaching strategies. The overwhelmingly positive relationships between teachers and students underscore the importance of fostering an engaging and supportive classroom environment, while the negative perceptions regarding teacher-administration dynamics signal a need for improved communication and collaboration within educational institutions.

The findings suggest that better preparation for first-time observers can enhance their observational experiences and contribute to their development as future educators. Structured assignments and focused discussions can empower these observers to engage more meaningfully with the complexities of teaching. Furthermore, addressing the challenges faced by teachers in relation to administration is essential for cultivating a more positive and productive school climate.

As we look toward future research, the potential pathways outlined in this study emphasize the need for ongoing inquiry into the relationships between observational experiences and successful teaching practices. By examining the experiences of student interns, certified teachers, and alternate route educators, we can gain deeper insights into effective teaching methodologies and the support structures that contribute to their success.

In conclusion, the insights garnered from this research not only illuminate the intricacies of the teaching profession but also provide valuable recommendations for enhancing teacher preparation programs. By fostering a culture of collaboration and open communication, we can better equip future educators to navigate the challenges of the classroom and positively impact the learning experiences of their students.

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The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.



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