

Changing Views of Preschool Teacher Students on the Boundaries of Practical Training: Possibilities for Adapting the TSES Questionnaire

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the attitudes and beliefs of third-year BA students in kindergarten education before and after an eight-week internship in the spring of 2024/2025. Owing to disparities in domestic practices from European systems, a standardised questionnaire could not be utilised, limiting the generalisability of the results. The preschool teacher students completed two questionnaires. One is the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES), which is a well-established instrument used in English-speaking countries. It was translated into English and adapted for kindergarten teachers, no longer remaining standardised. Given the absence of a standardised instrument, the researcher modified an existing questionnaire for the observed practice. The other instrument comprised six open-ended questions, which were analysed using grounded theory to explore changes in views (Zank, 2023). The TSES may be relevant in assessing teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, including those of kindergarten teachers. Teachers with strong self-efficacy beliefs create more innovative positive teaching-learning environments that are potentially applicable to preschool practices. This may be related to commitment to teaching, as confidence may increase retention (Hao, 2024). Self-efficacy beliefs may influence children's attitudes towards education during kindergarten-to-school transition (Çakır, 2020). The original TSES was developed by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001). We modified and translated this scale to Hungarian.

Keywords: Teacher self-efficacy, Kindergarten teacher education, Teaching internship, Grounded theory, Attitude change.

INTRODUCTION

Investigating student attitudes, professional confidence, and commitment is particularly pertinent to practice-oriented teacher education. This is especially applicable to pre-primary teacher education students, for whom field placement represents the initial context in which they engage with institutional realities in professional capacity and genuine responsibility. However, capturing the development of student attitudes and self-efficacy presents qualitative challenges. Consequently, in this study, we sought to incorporate a measurement tool that would enable quantitative monitoring of attitudinal changes before and after an internship.

To achieve this, we employed a revised version of the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) developed by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001), based on a 12-item, three-dimensional scale validated by Nie et al. (2012). The

TSES assesses teacher self-efficacy across three dimensions: Instructional efficacy, motivational efficacy, and classroom management.

Although the scale was originally designed for a school setting, in our study, we translated the TSES into Hungarian and adapted it for preschool teacher training with particular attention to conceptual and content validity. In the translation process, we considered the truncated version proposed by Nie et al. (2012), which demonstrates good internal reliability and factor structure and has been shown to be applicable in international comparative studies (Klassen et al., 2009).

Application of the TSES was complemented by a qualitative analysis of grounded theory. While responses to semi-structured questions allowed for the exploration of students' internal thoughts and emotional reactions, the TSES provided a quantitative measure of self-efficacy and attitudes. A comparison of these two data sources contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the processes involved in experiencing professional identity and teachers' roles within the context of field practice.

The TSES results were also utilised for pre-and post-assessments to evaluate the impact of an eight-week kindergarten program on students' self-efficacy. Our findings indicate that the scale is sensitive to changes in attitudes, particularly in the motivational and classroom management dimensions, which frequently serve as sources of conflict during practice. The results were compared with the coding of semi-structured interviews.

EXAMINING THE ATTITUDES OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BELIEFS, SELF-EFFICACY, AND TEACHING PRACTICES

The attitudes of preschool teachers were investigated at the intersection of their professional self-definition, pedagogical practice, and societal expectations. These attitudes influence not only interactions with learners but also how teachers interpret their roles and professional responsibilities in early childhood education. This is reflected in teachers' beliefs, experiences, and sense of self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

In the present study, emphasis was placed on measuring self-efficacy and attitude change. To this end, we adapted a 12-item three-dimensional version of the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) (Nie et al., 2012), which measures self-efficacy related to instructional, motivational, and behavioural management. As there is no validated scale tailored to kindergarten pedagogy in the Hungarian context, the TSES was translated into Hungarian and adapted to the specificities of field practice while retaining the original constructs. This adaptation facilitated the comparative study of pre- and post-practice self-efficacy.

The quantitative application of the scale complemented the qualitative coding based on grounded theory, which was employed to explore the attitudes and experiences of students more deeply. By comparing the self-efficacy measure with reflections on open-ended questions, it became evident that students' professional commitment, sense of security, and motivation evolved both positively and negatively during the eight-week placement period.

The international literature confirms that teachers' beliefs and sense of self-efficacy are key factors in shaping the quality of the learning environment (Bandura, 1997; Nie et al., 2012). The combined methodology we employed allowed us to interpret not only the current state of students' attitudes but also their evolution, thereby contributing to the improvement of teacher education.

APPLYING GROUNDED THEORY TO THE ATTITUDINAL ASSESSMENT OF PRE-SCHOOL TEACHERS

Grounded theory (GT) is a qualitative research methodology that facilitates inductive development of theories from data. This approach is particularly advantageous for examining complex social phenomena, such as preschool teachers' attitudes, as it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and an understanding of the meaning-making process (Charmaz, 2014). In the present study, the GT methodology was employed to investigate the attitudes and sense of self-efficacy of preschool teacher students before and after fieldwork. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective diaries, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences and emotions. During data analysis, we adhered to the steps of open, axial, and selective coding, which facilitated the identification of key categories and their interrelationships (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). When applying GT, particular attention was paid to methodological rigor and transparency in the theory-building process.

This aligns with the findings of Stough and Lee (2021), who emphasise the importance of consistent and rigorous application of GT methodology in educational research. The proper application of the GT methodology ensured that the results were reliable and valid, accurately reflecting the experiences and perspectives of the participants. The categories identified in this research, such as professional identity, teaching self-efficacy, and pedagogical beliefs, are consistent with the structural model developed by Zhang et al. (2022), which classifies

preschool teachers' professional beliefs into four main categories: professional cognition, professional persistence, professional expectations, and professional intentions. This model underscores that kindergarten teachers' attitudes influence not only their interactions with students but also their teaching practices.

Grounded Theory (GT) facilitates the examination of the dynamic interplay between teachers' beliefs and instructional decisions. McNeill et al. (2016) demonstrated how students' beliefs influence their problem-solving processes and how these beliefs are shaped by their educational experience. This approach is particularly pertinent for preschool educators, whose beliefs and attitudes significantly affect the learning environment and developmental outcomes of children. In conclusion, the application of grounded theory in the attitudinal analysis of preschool teachers enables a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences, and contributes to the advancement of pedagogical practices and teacher education. The rigorous and consistent application of this methodology ensures the reliability and validity of the findings and fosters a closer integration between theory and practice.

THE ROLE OF SELF-EFFICACY IN THE PROFESSIONAL FUNCTIONING OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS: THE IMPORTANCE OF USING THE TSES

Examining early childhood teachers' self-efficacy is crucial to enhancing the quality of early childhood education. Self-efficacy pertains to teachers' beliefs in their capacity to effectively influence students' learning outcomes, motivation, and behaviour. In recent decades, pedagogical research has shown that teacher self-efficacy directly affects student achievement, teacher well-being, and teaching quality (Zee & Koomen, 2016). The Teacher

The Effectiveness Scale (TSES), initially developed by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001), has been validated as a reliable measure of teacher self-efficacy across three primary dimensions: student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management. These dimensions are particularly pertinent for kindergarten teachers who operate in complex, emotionally demanding environments daily and are often required to independently support children's development in various ways (Sun et al., 2025). Empirical research corroborates that elevated levels of self-efficacy are positively associated with the effectiveness of teaching practices.

For instance, the WISE project in Hong Kong demonstrated that teachers with higher self-efficacy levels employed more creative and child-centred teaching strategies (Leung et al., 2018). Teachers' beliefs in their capabilities influence not only the quality of teaching but also the supportive nature of the learning environment, which is vital for preschoolers' development. The development of self-efficacy can be affected by geographical and social factors. For example, a study in Ghana revealed that rural kindergarten teachers exhibited higher self-efficacy levels than their urban counterparts, particularly in terms of student engagement and the achievement of educational goals (Boateng, 2024). This finding suggests that the context in which a teacher operates shapes their internal perception of self-efficacy, and consequently, professional support should be tailored to be context specific (Boateng et al., 2019).

Teacher self-efficacy is significantly influenced by both external and internal factors. Emotional intelligence, for instance, plays a crucial role in shaping not only teachers' resilience to stress, but also their relationships with students. Sun et al. (2025) have demonstrated in their research that emotional intelligence serves as a mediating factor between self-efficacy and work engagement. Emotionally competent teachers perceive themselves to be more effective in teaching and exhibit greater engagement in the educational process.

Psychological well-being is another critical component of teachers' self-efficacy. Longitudinal studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed that teachers with higher self-efficacy report reduced stress, lower levels of burnout, and increased job satisfaction (Eadie et al., 2021). This is particularly significant in early childhood education, where demands for constant emotional presence and physical-mental endurance are intensified. The Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale (TSES) not only aids in assessing professional functioning but also provides a foundation for enhancing teacher well-being.

In conclusion, the TSES for preschool teachers offers essential insights that can be used to foster professional development, maintain psychological well-being, and support optimal childhood development. Reliable context-sensitive data are essential for designing programs aimed at improving self-efficacy, and the TSES offers robust diagnostic support.

SAMPLING AND COLLECTION

This study employed a census-based sampling method that included all students within the target population. This approach is particularly suitable for small, closed populations, where the objective is to comprehensively explore the phenomenon rather than achieve statistical generalisability (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The study involved 47 third-year kindergarten teacher students who completed an eight-week field placement during

the spring semester of the 2024/2025 academic year, thereby providing a reliable depiction of the attitudinal structure of the training phase.

The sampling method can be characterised as a combination of non-random purposive sampling and a full-scale survey, which is explicitly recommended in qualitative research when the goal is to thoroughly examine the internal patterns of a specific group (Patton, 2015). The grounded theory approach to research also favours non-random, theory-driven sampling, as the aim is not representative but rather the exploration of relationships and structures between phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Data collection occurred at two time points: prior to the field exercise and following the eight-week exercise program. The same questionnaire structure was employed for both data collections, comprising two main components. A semi-structured, open-ended satisfaction questionnaire was used to investigate students' expectations, experiences, and emotional reactions to the practice. These textual responses served as the basis for qualitative coding, following grounded theory methodology, whereby open, axial, and selective codes were developed to systematise teacher attributions (Charmaz, 2014).

The 12-item shortened version of the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Nie, Lau & Liau, 2012) was translated into Hungarian and adapted for a kindergarten context. Using the TSES, we quantitatively assessed three dimensions of self-efficacy: Teaching strategies, student engagement, and classroom management. This questionnaire was employed to triangulate and validate the qualitative findings as justified by the mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

This combined data collection strategy, a combination of qualitative exploration and quantitative measurement, allowed for an in-depth, reliable, and valid study of kindergarten teacher-student attitudes, self-efficacy, and their changes.

METHODOLOGICAL SUMMARY

This study sought to examine the attitudes and self-efficacy perceptions of preschool teacher students both before and after an eight-week field placement, with a particular emphasis on the evolution of attitudes and underlying belief systems. The study employed a methodological framework characterised by a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies through the application of grounded theory (GT) and the Teacher Efficacy Scale (TSES).

The sample comprised 47 third-year kindergarten teacher students who had completed an eight-week field placement during the spring semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. Census-based sampling is explicitly justified for small, closed populations when the objective is to comprehensively map attitudes for theory development, rather than for statistical generalisation (Etikan et al., 2016; Patton, 2015). Additionally, purposive sampling was employed, a common practice in qualitative research, particularly when participants possessed relevant experiences with the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data collection occurred in two phases: the initial measurement was conducted prior to the commencement of placement and the subsequent measurement followed its conclusion. Two distinct instruments were utilised on both occasions: (1) a semi-structured satisfaction questionnaire featuring open-ended questions regarding students' feelings, expectations, and experiences and (2) a shortened, 12-item version of the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Nie, Lau, & Liau, 2012), which was translated into Hungarian and adapted for the kindergarten context.

Qualitative data were analysed using grounded theory methodology, which identifies student attitudes and underlying thematic units through three stages: open, axial, and selective coding (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This methodology facilitated the emergence of theory from the data, thereby establishing an empirically grounded conceptual framework of kindergarten teacher-student mindsets.

The TSES functioned as a quantitative component, enabling validation and triangulation of the qualitative findings. By employing a three-dimensional scale of student engagement, teaching strategies, and classroom management, it was possible to quantify the students' sense of self-efficacy and assess their evolution over the course of practice.

The advantage of a mixed-methods approach lies in its ability to integrate qualitative depth with quantitative reliability, thereby enhancing the validity and interpretability of the research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The methodological strategy, comprising exhaustive sampling, two-stage data collection, and a qualitative-quantitative combination, allowed for a comprehensive investigation of the effects of fieldwork at multiple levels and from diverse perspectives. Consequently, the research provided insights not only into the current state of students' attitudes but also into the trajectory and context of their change.

Interpreting TSES Results Before and the Eight-Week Exercise

This study evaluated three dimensions of the Teacher Effectiveness Scale (TSES), Teaching Strategies (Instruction), Student Engagement (Engagement), and Classroom Management (Management), both before and after an eight-week kindergarten placement. The results of a paired t-test conducted on a simulated full sample ($N = 47$) are as follows.

Table 1. Changes in TSES questionnaire dimensions.

Dimension	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Instruction	-4.90	< .001	Significant improvement
Engagement	-1.62	0.113	Not significant, slight improvement
Management	0.62	0.539	Not significant, weak decline

The results demonstrated a significant increase in students' self-efficacy regarding teaching strategies during the eight-week field experience ($t(46) = -4.90, p < .001$). This suggests that students acquired practical experience with instructional tools and organizational routines, thereby enhancing their confidence in both the content and the methodological aspects of teaching. These findings align with international literature, which posits that practice-based learning can substantially improve teacher self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Zee & Koomen, 2016).

The observed change in the student involvement dimension was positive, although it was not statistically significant. This may imply that students have not yet fully developed competence to emotionally and attentively motivate children, a skill that typically evolves over an extended period of professional socialisation (Guo, Justice, Sawyer, & Tompkins, 2011).

No significant change was observed in the classroom management dimension ($p = .54$), with the means indicating a slight decrease. This may be attributed to the reduced autonomy students experience in behaviour management when a practising teacher is present, potentially diminishing their sense of self-efficacy (Klassen & Chiu, 2010).

The TSES results indicated that students' professional development was primarily concentrated on the technical aspects of teaching, with less emphasis on student engagement and behaviour management. In planning future training strategies, it may be beneficial to focus more on independent lesson management and the deliberate development of learner relationships to bolster professional confidence across all dimensions.

Qualitative Analysis and Results of the Semi-Structured Interviews

This study aimed to investigate the attitudes, self-efficacy beliefs, and field experiences of preschool teacher students both before and after eight weeks of field placement. The study employed a questionnaire format, serving as a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions, thereby enabling respondents to express themselves freely while being guided by the research objective. This methodology effectively bridges the gap between structured (questionnaire) and narrative (interview) data collection methods, which is particularly advantageous in educational research, where a nuanced exploration of individual experiences and attitudes is essential (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Roulston, 2010).

The sample was census-based, involving 47 students who were all in the same year and practice group, thus forming a closed and well-defined population. The two data collection points, before and after the commencement and conclusion of the placement, facilitated longitudinal comparisons and monitoring of changes in student attitudes. Qualitative data were generated in an in-situ context, with students reflecting on their experiences immediately before or after the kindergarten field exercise.

Despite their qualitative nature, the responses exhibit several quantitative properties. The number of respondents ($N = 47$) ensured that the thematic units identified (e.g. fear, motivation, and lack of support) were presented as repeated patterns, allowing for theoretical saturation in grounded theory coding (Charmaz, 2014). The length, complexity, and frequency of the responses enabled the data to be structured not only in terms of content but also in terms of quantifiable coding frequencies, thereby integrating qualitative and quantitative methods at both methodological and analytical levels (Silverman, 2014).

Qualitative analysis was augmented by the quantitative application of the Teacher Efficacy Scale (TSES), a structured self-completion instrument designed to quantify self-efficacy beliefs. The integration of both data types facilitated methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings and providing profound understanding of the internal processes underlying attitudes. The variability in the length and depth of responses to the open-ended survey questions did not constrain the applicability of grounded theory analysis. As demonstrated in Ildikó Zank's (2023) doctoral thesis, grounded theory methodology is predicated not on the length of texts but on the conceptual content and network of meanings they convey. Thus, even brief fragmented reflections can be instrumental in theory-building.

Zank emphasised that fragmented texts can embody a meaningful coding system if the researcher approaches the data with sensitivity and contextual awareness. This approach corroborates the methodological choice of the present study, wherein student texts, although not structured as narrative interviews, exhibited conceptual richness and recurrent thematic patterns, rendering their qualitative analyses fully valuable.

Raw text (extract)	Open code	Axial code	Main category
"I am satisfied because they helped me to the maximum."	support	support	training
"Motivated, helpful, kind"	positive characteristics	assessment of the trainer	mentor
"Anxiety, fear, self-doubt"	negative emotions	pre-exercise condition	feelings
"I want to be"	professional identity	career guidance	professional commitment
"Spending more practical time"	Practice	Suggestion	needs
"Successful sessions, positive feedback"	positive reinforcement	Experience	experiences
"More experience in singing sessions"	methodological background	area to be developed	shortcoming
"I look forward to it"	Waiting	attitude	expectations

Table of codes summarising the exercise before

Raw text	Open code	Axial code	Main category
"I feel tired, it didn't go as I expected."	fatigue	exhaustion	student feelings
"I'm a bit disappointed, not enough guidance."	lack of guidance	Evaluation of practitioners	mentor
"I'm not sure this is my path."	career uncertainty	professional identity	professional commitment
"I didn't always know what was expected of me."	vagueness of expectations	opacity of the practical structure	Training
"There were good moments, but I expected more."	difference between expectation and experience	satisfaction	experiences
"I had to improvise a lot, there was no methodological background."	improvisational constraints	methodology	Development directions
"I didn't always get feedback on how I was doing."	lack of feedback	limited practical self-reflection	gaps
"I'm not sure I know more now than I did before."	stagnation	development dynamics	professional self-image

Codes table summarising the exercise before

The tables indicate that the categories "support" and "attitude" were present only prior to the exercise and subsequently disappeared, suggesting a potential decline in initial optimism. Conversely, the categories "lack of feedback" and "stagnation" emerged solely after the exercise, indicating frustration and a halt in the learning progress. Categories such as "positive experience/satisfaction," "career orientation/identity," and "gaps" gaps were observed at both time points, representing a consistent, yet evolving aspect of students' cognitive processes.

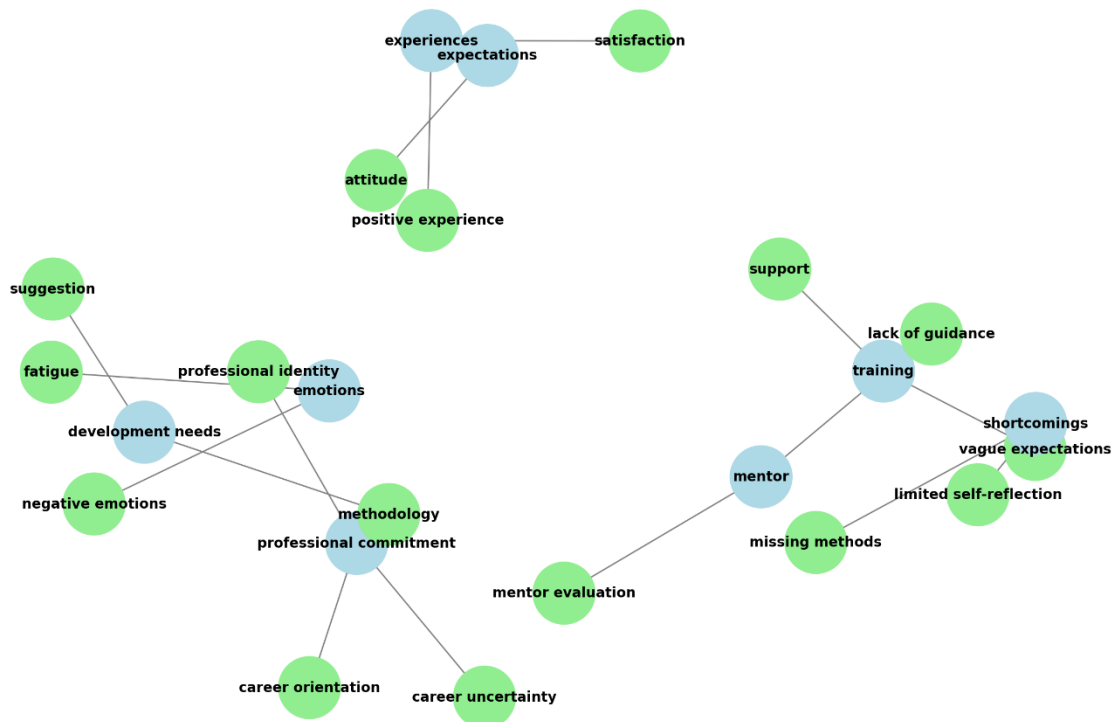
To enhance the interpretative value of the results, we conducted a thematic clustering of codes (e.g., "support" + "vagueness of expectations" → training), a pivotal step in the categorisation and grouping of codes within grounded theory (GT) and qualitative content analysis (QCA). This process, known as code aggregation or code clustering, is employed in GT methodology for secondary (axial) and tertiary (selective) coding. The objective is to organise open codes that are similar in content and meaning, or contextually related, under common higher-level categories (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021).

The thematic integration of codes was based on the following content convergences: although the terms "support" and "vagueness of expectations" possess different emotional connotations, they both pertain to the transparency and helpfulness of the training structure. This warrants the establishment of "training" as a common and abstract main category (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Theoretical saturation occurs when multiple codes converge on the same conceptual node, prompting the GT procedure to propose their amalgamation into clear and consistent categories for theorisation (Charmaz, 2014). Thematic networking, involving the logical juxtaposition and graphical representation of 'code nodes', is also

advocated by Ryan and Bernard (2003), who emphasise that conceptual connectivity, rather than linguistic identity, is the primary criterion for identifying relationships.

Thematic relationships of codes before and after internship (combined GT model)



Code relationships based on content convergences.

Source: self-made Python 3.12.

SUMMARY

This study sought to investigate the evolution of attitudes, self-efficacy beliefs, and experiential processing among kindergarten candidates over an eight-week practicum period. Employing a mixed-methods approach that integrated grounded theory-based qualitative analysis with the TSES quantitative scale, this study aimed not only to describe but also to interpret changes, with a particular emphasis on the development of professional identity and self-confidence. The findings indicated that although teaching strategies were enhanced, there was minimal change and, in some instances, a decline in emotional and interpersonal dimensions, specifically learner engagement and management. The thematic network derived from the qualitative responses elucidated students' own experiential interpretations.

LIMITATIONS

The primary strength of this research lies in its methodological rigor and the strong alignment between the two data sources.

However, this study has several limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size, restricted to a single-year group within one institution, limited the generalisability of the findings. The adaptation of the TSES lacks formal standardisation, rendering the validity of the results to be exploratory. Although, as Zank (2023) suggested, qualitative texts are interpretable, they are typically brief and fragmented, necessitating a high degree of sensitivity from the researcher during analysis.

Additionally, the heterogeneity of mentoring and institutional backgrounds may have influenced the direction and intensity of experiences, which were not measured separately in this study.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that students did not exhibit uniform development across all dimensions of self-efficacy during their training. Specifically, in the domain of teaching strategies, elements such as direct experience, trial-and-error, and feedback are effectively reinforced.

In contrast, the dimensions related to classroom management and learner engagement, which necessitate advanced social skills and autonomy, showed less development and frequently resulted in frustration. This observation implies that the current fieldwork structure is insufficient for fostering comprehensive competence development.

The codes identified as "stagnation", "uncertainty", and "lack of feedback" in the GT-based coding further substantiate this trend.

This study aimed to investigate the transformations in attitudes, self-efficacy beliefs, and experiential processing strategies among kindergarten candidate teachers following an eight-week field experience in a kindergarten setting. The study employed a grounded theory methodological framework (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015) alongside the quantitative Teacher Efficacy Scale (TSES) (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001) to document student experiences and examine the underlying meaning structures and elements of professional identity.

The qualitative data revealed that pre-practice attitudes were predominantly characterised by optimism, professional interest, and willingness to enter the profession. These attitudes, as reflected by the codes 'motivation', 'expectation', and 'desire to prove', suggest a potential for development, aligning with existing literature on the early stages of career socialisation (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Korthagen, 2004).

Following the experience, more nuanced and ambivalent attitudes emerged among the students. While some participants felt empowered, others reported a lack of structure, methodological uncertainty, insufficient feedback, and diminished professional confidence. Correspondingly, the TSES results indicated significant increases in the dimension of teaching strategies ($p < .001$), whereas stagnation or slight decreases were noted in the areas of student engagement and classroom management. This finding corroborates the notion that student progress is nonlinear and varies across competency areas, as evidenced by several international studies of novice teachers' learning trajectories (Klassen & Koomen, 2016; Klassen & Chiu, 2010).

The main categories identified in the grounded theory analysis, such as career identity, mentoring support, structural dissatisfaction, and positive or frustrated experiences, revealed an interconnected thematic network in which the experience of professional self-efficacy was strongly influenced by the context of practice and active presence of mentors. It is particularly noteworthy that many interpreted the lack of feedback as a lack of developmental dynamics, underscoring the importance of incorporating reflective practices (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

It is important to highlight that the semi-structured questionnaire interview format used in the research not only facilitated qualitative data collection but, as Zank (2023) argues, fragmented texts can also carry thematic density suitable for theory building if the researcher adopts a contextually and theoretically sensitive approach. This was particularly justified in this study, as the responses were not in narrative form, but as brief reflections.

Therefore, the results of this study indicate that apprenticeships can function not only as developmental spaces but also as filters: they can strengthen, sway, guide, or discourage. Consequently, when developing future training programs, it is insufficient to merely redesign the content requirements and credit numbers. Thus, the manner in which students are emotionally and professionally supported requires reconsideration. The quality of mentoring, organisation of feedback, and allocation of time and space for reflection before and after placement are all critical factors in the development of professional identity.

In conclusion, fieldwork represents a potential "turning point" in the training of pre-school teachers: it is self-affirming when properly supported, but without this support, it can become a self-destructive experience. Therefore, the assessment of students' attitudes and sense of self-efficacy serves not only as feedback on the effectiveness of the training but also as an indicator for training institutions.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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