

## Preservice Teachers’ Concerns about the Classroom-based Internship Experience

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**Abstract:** In Abu Dhabi, Emirati preservice teachers attending a teacher-training college are allocated to government elementary schools for a twelve-week internship during the fourth and final year. The preservice teachers are non-native English speakers responsible for teaching in the English language to students who are also non-native English speakers. Data from a questionnaire, interview, and samples of participants’ reflective writing from their internship portfolios were used to discuss the concerns preservice teachers had about teaching during the final internships and the importance for future practice. To analyze the data, a mixed methods approach was used. Results indicated participants’ concerns about teaching were distributed amongst four themes: (1) classroom management, (2) communication, (3) instruction, and (4) evaluation. Implications for teacher education programs are discussed as a way to address the concerns and challenges prospective teachers encounter.

**Keywords:** concerns about teaching; preservice teachers; teaching internship; United Arab Emirates.

### INTRODUCTION

Classroom-based internship experience is an integral component of teacher training programs. The internship orientates and supports preservice teachers’ progression and development by promoting the acquisition of new, as well as the application of prior knowledge, skills, and dispositions [1]. Preservice teaching is still seen as one of the best ways to prepare future professionals [2]. One of the main goals of the internship is for preservice teachers to gain confidence and experience before entering the profession. Learning from experience, such as internships, can be a very powerful socializing experience that can lead to a dramatic improvement in the quality of instruction [3]. In addition to educational courses, classroom-based internship experience is essentially where prospective teachers learn to teach.

Investigation of preservice teachers’ concerns during teacher internship experiences reveals their beliefs about the transferability of knowledge and skills from education courses into the classroom [4, 5], concerns about teaching [6, 7], and concerns about evaluation by faculty members during teaching [8]. In turn, these factors contribute to preservice teachers’ beliefs regarding the ability to have a positive and significant impact on students [9-11]. Moreover, these

teaching efficacy beliefs are related to key student outcomes such as achievement [12] and motivation [13].

There is a growing body of literature addressing preservice teachers’ beliefs and concerns about teaching in non-Western contexts [4, 9, 14-17], but very few studies have examined this phenomenon in the context and culture of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) [6, 18, 19]. According to the Abu Dhabi Education Council [20] Emiratis have a critical and vital role to play in the on-going development and running of the country’s educational system, due to unique experiences, insights into the culture, and traditions of the UAE.

In the teacher training college in which this study took place, fourth year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) Emirati students spent twelve weeks at an allocated government elementary school to develop teaching skills and to gain more awareness and knowledge about teaching. The purpose of this study was to focus on Emirati preservice teachers’ concerns and experiences during the final teaching internship. We aim to shed light on the elements of professional readiness that preservice teachers are concerned about in the Gulf Region. To our knowledge, just a few

studies have been conducted in the UAE regarding preservice teachers' concerns related to their future profession [6, 18]. This type of research can also help inform other countries in the Gulf Region with similar educational contexts.

Another aim was to contribute to the developing area of international research examining preservice teachers' concerns and beliefs across different cultures and contexts.

### Experimental Section

An explanatory sequential mixed methods approach was used to analyze the obtained data [21]. The approach began with the collection and analysis of quantitative research from a questionnaire. Results were further explained using data from subsequent qualitative research from an interview and samples of participants' reflective writing from their internship portfolios.

### Research questions

- (1) What concerns about teaching are expressed by preservice teachers regarding the final teaching internship?
- (2) What are the characteristics of positive and negative experiences of preservice teachers during the final teaching internship?

### Setting

The teacher training college where the study was conducted, the only one of its kind in the United Arab Emirates, solely offers a Bachelor's of Education degree to Emirati nationals who wish to teach in public elementary schools (grades one through five) in Abu Dhabi. This provided a favorable setting to conduct research on Emirati preservice teachers. The college has a curriculum in which students can receive professional certification to teach English, Mathematics, and Science in elementary schools. The program includes education studies, curriculum studies, and professional experience in elementary school settings. To become certified, preservice teachers must successfully complete 20 weeks of teaching experience over the course of the four-year degree, under the supervision of a college mentor and a school mentor teacher.

The supervisory model utilized allowed for collaboration between college mentors, school mentors, and preservice teachers to assess teaching performance and share decision making about preservice teachers' field experiences. College mentors acted as liaisons between preservice teachers and the faculty and staff at their designated elementary school. Responsibilities of the college mentors included guidance, support, supervision, observation of planned teaching lessons, and providing oral and written feedback to preservice teachers. School mentors provided preservice teachers with a general orientation to the school and the classes, which includes sharing teaching experiences, lesson

plans, and learning materials. Furthermore, school mentors observed planned teaching lessons to provide positive, constructive, oral and written feedback.

### Participants

Participants ( $n = 31$ ) were recruited from a cohort of 50 fourth-year students enrolled in a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program at a teachers' training college in Abu Dhabi. Preservice teachers, 29 females and two males, were engaged in a twelve-week-teaching internship in inclusive classrooms. All participants were Emirati between the ages of 21 and 45 years ( $m = 25.6$ ) with no prior higher education qualifications. A convenience sample of ten participants were asked to be interviewed and have their teaching portfolios analyzed.

### Data Collection

Data from a questionnaire, interview, and samples of participants' reflective writing from their internship portfolio was collected during and after the final teaching internship. Participation in the study was voluntary and all participants signed a consent form. No personal information that allowed for the identification of participants was requested. The questionnaires were completed anonymously. Any student identification information from the recordings of the interviews was not used in the data analysis.

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire was an adaptation of the *Student Teacher Concern Scale* (STCS) [9]. The scale measured the types and degrees of preservice teachers' concerns during the teaching internship, but was adapted, with permission, to the research goals of the current study. The revised scale was translated into Arabic by a professional translator to provide students the option of reading the questions in either English or Arabic. The first seven questions were demographic questions about the participants. The remaining 23 questions asked participants about the frequency in which some feelings, concerns, expectations and behaviors occurred during the teaching internship. Response choices for these items were presented on a 5-item Likert scale (i.e., "never", "rarely", "sometimes", "often" and "always").

### Interviews

To further explore the written questionnaire and obtain more descriptive information about participants' opinions and experiences of the internship, structured interviews were conducted to the convenience sample. All interviews were audio recorded and consisted of 13 open-ended questions covering areas such as classroom management, relationships with mentors, and overall teaching internship experience. The interviews took place in the teacher training college and were performed by the college mentors (also researchers of the present study)

after grades for the teaching internship were published. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

**Portfolios**

The ten participants who were interviewed, also consented for their teaching internship portfolios to be analyzed. The portfolios provided access to a final reflection that preservice teachers made about their teaching internship experience. The final reflection was guided by three questions related to what preservice teachers learned during the teaching internship, the challenges faced, and the ways in which the teaching internship prepares preservice teachers for their future careers.

**Data Analysis**

After reverse-scored items of the questionnaire were transformed, correlational analyses were conducted on the closed-ended items of the questionnaire, via SPSS, to obtain a reliability measurement. Given the small sample size ( $n = 31$ ), a factor analyses on the items of the STCS was not calculated, but internal consistency of items was examined. Results yielded two factors: Class Management (11-items) and Concerns about Evaluation (8-items), with acceptable internal consistency values (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .66$  and  $.79$ , respectively,  $p = .05$ ). Descriptive statistics regarding the frequency of responses to closed-ended items on the questionnaire was then performed.

Response frequencies on the 5-point Likert scale used in the STCS were then dichotomized to make the results more meaningful. The practice of optimizing rating scales by collapsing categories has been successfully followed in several bodies of work [22 23]. Further, Royal *et al.* [22] posit that “sometimes the most useful and meaningful information resulting from survey analyses is simply whether or not a trait of phenomena is present or absent”. For the purposes of the current study, interest lied in the presence or absence of concerns, rather than the frequency (i.e., never, rarely, sometimes, often, always) in which concerns were experienced. Therefore, the participants’ questionnaire responses presented in the results section were dichotomized such that a response of “never” equals “No” and all other responses, such as “rarely”, “sometimes”, “often”, and “always” were collapsed into the single category of “Yes.”

The interviews were transcribed by the researchers and then coded according to the categories provided by both research questions and interview questions. Then a qualitative content analysis was performed in order to assess students’ opinions on the different categories: *Concerns about evaluation, Classroom management, efficacy beliefs about teaching and positive/ negative experiences during internship.* Lastly, quotations from the preservice teachers’ responses to the interviews were presented in order to support the findings from questionnaires and further our reflection on the meaning of the data.

Finally, a content analysis of the portfolios was performed using the main themes which emerged from the questionnaire and the three questions that guided the preservice teachers’ final reflections on the internship experience. The preservice teachers reflections were read by the researchers and two new categories emerged: *concerns about communication* and *concerns about instruction.* Then quotations from the preservice teachers were categorized and presented in the results. The portfolio analysis was performed in order to triangulate the results obtained from the questionnaire and the interviews. The researchers wanted more evidence to support the findings.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Quantitative data, from the questionnaire, and qualitative data, from both the interview and portfolio, were classified into themes that emerged as areas where preservice teachers reported having concerns: classroom management, communication, planning and implementing instruction, and evaluation.

**Concerns about Classroom Management**

Most (26) preservice teachers did not express, in the questionnaire, having concerns regarding classroom management in general. However, many expressed having concerns with specific issues related to classroom management such as dealing with novel cases, managing the behavior of students, and keeping students’ attention. To be more specific, only 5 participants responded with having concerns about classroom management in general, but 30 participants responded with uncertainty of how to deal with unexpected cases, and 27 participants responded with concerns about how to deal with problematic students. Similarly, 25 preservice teachers responded with fear of their inability to keep students’ attention (Table 1).

**Table 1: Preservice Teachers’ Concerns about Classroom Management**

Statement	No (%)	Yes (%)
*I have concerns about classroom management	25.8	74.2
*I don’t know how to deal with unexpected cases.	16.1	83.8
I am concerned about how to deal with problematic students.	12.9	87.1

\*Indicates a reverse-coded item

The convenience sample of ten preservice teachers discussed concerns about classroom management during the interview. Participant A shared, "In my first [lesson], I had a problem with managing the classroom behavior and managing my time. The time is running out while I'm still teaching, or I still have an activity." Participant B, referring to the children in her class with special needs, shared her concerns about dealing with unexpected cases. She said, "Actually, I didn't know how [to] treat them. Even the activities, I don't know how I can [do them] with them." Participant C said, "[It] was a very challenging experience, as I had boys. One student was always getting bored and I was always fighting with him. I didn't know what to do with him. I sent him to the library."

In their portfolios, a few participants wrote about challenges with classroom management. Participant D wrote, "...Implementing my strategies...felt...challenging because they [the students] were not yet use to it." Another participant, Participant E, wrote, "...I faced hard time to control them when we mixed the both classes [with children with ADHD] I spent 15 minutes to made them calm then I started to teach." Another participant, Participant

F, also wrote, "At times, I felt I did not have what it takes to discipline the students, and time management was the main challenge..."

Other preservice teachers shared that the internship had been an opportunity to learn and implement class management skills. Some participants wrote about success in areas of classroom management. Participant G mentioned that she "learned how to be ready for the next lessons by building a plan... I learned to make plan B activities." Another participant, Participant A, wrote, "Also I learned how to deal if I have a technical problem."

### Concerns about Communication

Preservice teachers were asked, in the questionnaire, about concerns regarding communication (Table 2). While 19 participants responded with worry about failing to communicate with students effectively, 22 participants responded with having the fear of being unable to use body language to communicate effectively with students. The majority of participants, 26, responded with concerns about answering student questions sufficiently and using English in a correct way.

**Table 2: Preservice Teachers' Concerns about Communication**

Statement	No (%)	Yes (%)
I worry about giving insufficient answers to the questions of students.	9.7	90.3
I worry about the thought that I fail to establish effective communication with the students.	38.7	61.3
I am concerned about using English in a correct way.	10	90.1
I experience the fear of not being able to use body language effectively.	29	71

Preservice teachers also spoke of concerns about communication during the interview. Participant C said, "I am academically prepared to teach the three subjects (English, Mathematics, and Science), but my English language is still a problem. I make language mistakes orally and in writing." A second participant, Participant F, said:

When I start to read the Reading Time book for the Grade 5, and also the science book for the Grade 5, I know all those information but I feel that I can't transfer this information to the students who are also second language (learners of English).

Finally, Participant H said, "English lessons... I have a problem making questions... English not my first language and I have problems in English."

When participants wrote about challenges with communication in the portfolio, reference was made to the difficulty faced teaching in English or having

students with low levels of English proficiency. Participant F wrote about the challenge of "dealing with low level students who do not understand English at all." She also wrote, "I had a lot poor English speakers in the classroom so they were struggling and they needed more support."

### Concerns about Instruction

When preservice teachers were asked, in the questionnaire, about concerns regarding the planning of instruction, all participants responded with feeling irritated when an adequate amount of resources related to teaching the subjects of English, mathematics, or science could not be found, but only 13 responded with concerns about finding methods or techniques appropriate for teaching these subjects. With regard to concerns about the implementation of instruction, 28 responded being upset when the students could not be motivated about the lesson. Encouragingly, all but one preservice teacher believed in their ability to teach in an effective and amusing way (Table 3).

**Table 3: Preservice Teachers' Concerns about Instruction**

Statement	No (%)	Yes (%)
I get irritated when I can't find an adequate amount of resources related to the topic that I'm teaching.	0	100
*I don't believe that I can teach in an effective and amusing way.	64.5	35.4
*I have concerns about finding methods and techniques appropriate for the topic.	29	71
I get upset when I cannot motivate the students about the lesson.	6.5	93.6
I fear that I cannot keep the attention of students.	19.4	80.7

\*Indicates a reverse-coded item

During the interview, several participants spoke about the utility of the practicum experience in fostering positive beliefs about abilities to teach. Participant I, "...I had the opportunity to develop and extend my pedagogical practices and beliefs." Another, Participant C, said, "This year, it did change a lot of things as I feel more confident and I know now that I can become a teacher..." Yet Participant I said, "As I am emotionally ready to be a teacher, I will be effective classroom teacher and leader." Another participant, Participant B said, "I feel confident. I feel I can manage the class. I can teach. I can explain any concept. I can do lesson plans..."

Only one participant, Participant J, expressed concerns related to instruction in the portfolio. She wrote, "I worried about students trust, because how I going to teach them wrong things!" Contrastingly, other participants wrote about their success with planning and implementing instruction. Participant H wrote, "I

learned how to deal with different levels in the class, how to add the fun to my lessons, to know if student need help." Another, Participant F, mentioned that she "...learned how to be ready for the next lessons by building a plan... I gained skills using different learning styles strategies."

**Concerns about Evaluation**

When asked about concerns regarding evaluation, many preservice teachers responded, in the questionnaire, with concerns related to being evaluated by both the school mentor and college mentor. Regarding the school mentor, 26 preservice teachers had concerns about receiving a negative evaluation. Pertaining to the college mentor, 25 preservice teachers responded feeling discomfort when college mentors found performances to be inadequate, and 27 responded feeling negatively when college mentors' evaluations were not objective (Table 4).

**Table 4: Preservice Teachers' Concerns about Evaluation**

Statement	No (%)	Yes (%)
*I am negatively affected if the students are disrespectful to me.	77.4	22.7
I am concerned about my school mentor's negative evaluation of my performance.	16.1	84
I feel offended if my school mentor is uninterested and distant from me.	29	71
I feel offended if my school mentor criticizes me in front of the students.	23.3	76.7
*I get unmotivated if my school mentor is disrespectful to me and does not regard me as a colleague.	93.5	6.4
I feel discomfort when my college mentor finds my performance inadequate.	19.4	80.7
I feel discomfort when my college mentor acts strictly and intolerantly to me.	19.4	80.8
I feel offended if my college mentor does not make an objective evaluation.	12.9	87.1

\*Indicates a reverse-coded item

Several preservice teachers interviewed discussed how negative and unspecific feedback from school mentors affected practicum experiences. Participant I said, "Several times she provided the HoF (head of faculty) with negative feedback on my performance. She disliked me, and I was not happy being placed with her." Participant I said:

She was negative and critical. I know I was not great. Her negativity was discouraging me. I was confident when I started the internship experience, but every day I was telling myself that I shouldn't be teaching...At the beginning I felt sad. I thought maybe she [was] disappointed in me. I

feel I didn't want any more to teach because of her negative feedback.

Other participants spoke about what was missing from the school mentor's feedback. One preservice teacher interviewed, Participant F, said, "Instead of sharing knowledge and experiences, she used the evaluation to exert her power over me." Participant H expressed similar concerns saying, "She was always criticizing my practices. She used to say broad things - which did not help. She did not address any of my weaknesses."

Regarding evaluation by the college mentor, only one preservice teacher interviewed said that she

“felt misjudged.” Participant G, however, spoke positively about the evaluation received from her college mentor saying, “The college mentor’s constructive feedback during the debriefing meeting used to make me feel I was doing a good job. That motivated me to go further.”

Preservice teachers who wrote about evaluation in the teaching internship portfolios did not mention any concerns. Instead, participants wrote about the positive impact the school mentors had upon practicum experiences. A few preservice teachers highlighted what were thought to be important qualities which helped foster a good relationship with the school mentors. Participant E wrote, “I had a very professional school mentor.” Participant F wrote, “My school mentor was very helpful and kind with me.”

## **DISCUSSION**

Our results were aligned with previous research on preservice teachers’ concerns about teaching in areas such as classroom management [15], content knowledge [24], and being evaluated [9]. Regarding classroom management, some of the issues mentioned by the participants in this study were related to motivating and disciplining students, managing time, and dealing with unexpected cases in the classroom. Participants in this study had limited content knowledge about implementing effective classroom management techniques. The cohort of preservice teachers included in the current study was not offered coursework in class management. The curriculum was later changed to include classroom management strategies. Across the four years of the B.Ed. program, preservice teachers only teach classes independently and in full control during a period of four weeks.

The lack of coursework in classroom management, and the fact that the development of classroom management skills takes time, might help explain the large number of participants in this study expressing concerns related to classroom management [25]. Furthermore, participants expressed challenges with the management of students. In the UAE education system there is a policy of inclusiveness for classrooms. To clarify, students with special needs, typically developing students, and other diverse learners are placed in the same classrooms. Research has shown that managing classrooms with diverse characteristics can be challenging for even the most experienced teachers [26], let alone preservice teachers.

Preservice teachers in the current study were confident in their overall ability, or potential, to become teachers. However, the same confidence was not reflected when discussing the ability to deliver content. The parameters of the current study were limited and cannot explain the reasons why there was such a

disparity between global confidence and confidence in the ability to implement instruction.

Preservice teachers also expressed concerns about being evaluated by school and college mentors. Several possible factors may help explain the concerns. The preservice teachers who expressed concerns expected, and relied greatly on, the guidance provided by mentors. When guidance did not meet expectations, a lack of motivation, concern, and even offence were displayed. Preservice teachers’ concerns about evaluation may come from their concerns about what was perceived as negative appraisal from mentors. Participants in the current study may have feared that negative appraisals may have led to failing the internship, which would delay their graduation from the college and subsequent entry into the job field.

Preservice teachers’ concerns about evaluation may also play a major role in performance, which includes the ability to effectively manage classrooms, plan and implement instruction, and communicate with students. Evaluation is one of the factors that contributes to the stresses of the teaching internship experience [27]. Stress may have contributed to the lack of confidence mentioned by some of the participants, which in turn may have affected performance during the internship. According to Beck and Kosnik [28] and Cherian [29], strengthening dialogue, communication and trust between preservice teachers and mentors would help overcome some of the issues mentioned by the participants in the current study.

Preservice teachers’ concerns about evaluation may have been due to cultural differences. Work by Berg and Smith [14] indicates that consideration of culture and context are important in regard to preservice teachers’ concerns about teaching. None of the mentor teachers in the current study were Emirati, while all of the preservice teachers were Emirati nationals. The concerns preservice teachers in the current study had about evaluation may have been due to the diversity of cultures, which as Bandura [30] posits, may often lead to differences in attitudes and expectations.

Finally, language proficiency was another concern mentioned by the participants in the current study. Despite experience with English instruction in the B.Ed. program, many participants still lack enough confidence in the ability to use English as a medium of instruction. Notably, the participating cohort of students had limited English medium instruction before attending the B.Ed. program. The limited exposure to English language instruction in primary and secondary education may have contributed to preservice teachers’ concerns about communication in the classroom during the internship. Additionally, limited exposure and experience may have led to lower confidence and ability to deliver lessons in an effective manner.

Education colleges training preservice teachers (who are second language English speakers) to teach in English might do well to provide them with longer and more intense exposure to courses delivered in the English language.

## CONCLUSION

The current study aimed to answer two research questions related to Emirati preservice teachers' internship experience:

- (1) What concerns about teaching are expressed by preservice teachers after the final teaching internship?
- (2) What are the characteristics of positive and negative experiences of preservice teachers during the teaching internship?

Most of the participants perceived the final internship as an important opportunity to have a real experience of what will be expected in the future. Many concerns about teaching were expressed by the preservice teachers that participated in the current study. Some of the aspects mentioned include managing the classroom, dealing with students with special needs, the need to be prepared to deal with the unforeseen, preparing lesson plans, and using teaching strategies learned during the undergraduate program. Though the range of teaching concerns presented by the participants was broad, most of the concerns were focused on four categories: classroom management, communication, planning and implementing instruction, and evaluation.

Participants in this study shared both positive and negative experiences about the final teaching internship. Regarding the characteristics of positive experiences, most were related to the communication and collaboration processes between preservice teachers and mentors. Another positive experience mentioned was the opportunity to practice in a "real world" environment. Concerning the more challenging experiences mentioned by participants about the internship, teaching load, English proficiency, and teaching diverse learners were factors mentioned.

Since the current study was a preliminary study, additional research is needed to further explore the underlying issues presented in the results. One main issue of focus is the personal relationship between preservice teachers, school mentors and college mentors, and the affective aspect of these interactions. There is not a one-size fits all model for how teacher training colleges should prepare new teachers for future careers. However, in summary, three critical considerations must be taken into account by programs wishing to train prospective Emirati teachers for inclusive classrooms in the UAE: (1) assuring language proficiency if prospective teachers will be teaching in a language which is not the native language, (2) having classroom and behavior management skills in the

curriculum, and (3) exposure to diverse practicum experiences. Our results could be used to add to the available knowledge on the subject of education systems in which the operative language is English and neither the teacher nor the students are native speakers of that language. Although our findings are not that surprising to the wider teacher education community, they are unique to this context.

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