

Teaching, Feeling, Becoming: Emotional Intelligence Embedded into Critical Reflection

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Introduction

Critical reflection is used as a deliberate pedagogical tool to help teacher candidates (TC) make sense of their emerging practice and professional identities (Phillippo et al., 2018). Furthermore, when used as a pedagogical tool, reflective practice can move beyond surface-level description toward deeper sense-making that shapes decisions, identity, and professional growth (Nagro, 2020). In school-based agricultural education (SBAE), reflections are a common pedagogical tool in teacher preparation for understanding successes and failures (Parker et al., 2025), yet failure can leave TC feeling stressed, anxious, and isolated (Bowling et al., 2025). While the reflective pedagogical tool has been used to identify *what* TC reflect on, further exploration is needed to understand personal development at the intersection of emotional intelligence (EI) and personal growth (Phoenix et al., 2025; Tanasyah et al., 2022). This study explores how teacher candidates identify and reflect on emotions during their fall clinical placement.

Conceptual Perspective

We utilized Driscoll's (2006) structured reflection which describes reflection within a central pattern of What? (describing the event), So What? (exploring the significance), Now What? (setting goals and understanding implications). Furthermore, we utilized Plutchik's (2001) psychoevolutionary theory of emotion, aligning with stressors and successes related to teaching.

Methodology

This study used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to explore EI reflections among 2025/2026 Cal Poly-SLO teacher candidates. The population comprised 13 Cal Poly-SLO teacher candidates during their fall clinical experiences from September to December 2025; 12 agreed to participate. Using five prompts, participants submitted weekly reflections ($n = 118$) over 10 weeks, integrating the What?, So What?, Now What? reflection protocol (Driscoll, 2006) and Plutchik's (2001) emotion framework. Data were analyzed using an inductive three-step coding process Saldaña's (2021). Furthermore, the research team engaged in reflexive memoing, maintained an audit trail, and presented methods and findings transparently, upholding the trustworthiness and credibility of qualitative rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Findings outline patterns within prompts: What?, So What?, and Now What?

What? Journal entries reflected on challenges, successes, and observations relating to their clinical placement and university preparation program. Reflections provided a description of the event, activity, and or circumstance the TC was choosing to reflect on. Challenges focused on classroom management or misalignment of teaching practices. For instance, TCs expressed frustrations with student behavior management, pedagogy that lacked engagement, and low efficacy in building relationships with students. Furthermore, journal entries highlighted successful experiences, such as observing students succeed in class and at FFA contests, creating engaging lessons, and high student engagement in the classroom. Lastly, reflections described general observations. This included university coursework, personal development, and the realization of the teacher workload.

So, What? Building upon the “what,” journal entries focused on task milestones, rewarding experiences, and a deeper understanding of what it means to be a teacher, thereby conceptualizing the significance of each reflection. Many reflections explored the identified emotions, highlighting their significance and the reasons for feeling them. TC experienced firsts, participant two stated, “...this was my first time ‘in the classroom’... demonstrating how to prune. I felt excited to be finally in front of students.” a video for reflection, giving direction sets, or co-teaching with their cooperating teacher. Reflecting on the significance of an experience allowed TCs to move beyond simply describing the event and toward deeper sense-making. This process encouraged them to connect the experience to their own beliefs, values, and emerging views of teaching. As a result, reflection became not just a recounting of what happened, but an opportunity to interpret the meaning of the experience within their developing professional identity.

Now, What? Moving forward, teacher candidates identified goals, adjusted their mindset, and sought more opportunities to engage in the classroom and with colleagues. Participant 11 stated, “I know not every week will be amazing. I’m here for the long run and will adjust my mindset and routines so students can be themselves and grow with me through this process.” This reflection aligned with many others, suggesting a forward-thinking approach for TC as they progress through the teacher preparation program. Furthermore, candidates continued to seek additional opportunities to engage in classroom and collegial activities. The forward-thinking process emerged as a challenge for some teacher candidates to seek out experiences they know will prepare them to teach. This included taking on a more established teaching role, consistently seeking to build rapport with students, and reflecting on their ability to teach a variety of content and methods in diverse environments.

Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

We recognize that generalizing beyond the sample population may be limited; however, transferable findings may inform other teacher preparation programs as they consider how the intersection of reflection and EI emerges. TC started to view the teaching profession differently as they immersed themselves in the classroom, reflecting on their general observations, challenges, and successes (Parker et al., 2025). Challenges often elicit frustration and disappointment, motivating a desire to make changes to future interactions. These difficulties frequently manifest as efforts toward identity development, in which individuals aim to become the teacher they envision.

Using a reflective protocol that allows space for autonomy in responses is crucial for professional development (Tanasyah et al., 2022). However, if teacher preparation programs choose to implement a tool like this, they must provide intentional prompts and meaningful feedback to effectively support growth and development. Developing EI should not be used as a disposition check or a gatekeeping tool. The emotional state of young adults must be carefully considered when examining how novice teachers develop. Many young people are still learning to regulate and understand their emotions, which can sometimes feel unstable or fragile. Because of this, educators and mentors must approach EI development with sensitivity and care (Plutchik, 2001). Rather than judging emotional responses, we should create supportive environments that acknowledge emotional growth as a process, not a fixed trait. Further research should expand on aligning types of reflections with emotions and longitudinal explorations of EI development.

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