

“I Wished I Could Have Higher Scores” Guided Study Groups to Prepare Prospective Teacher Candidates for High-Stakes Teacher Licensure Exams

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Abstract

Preparing for high-stakes licensure exams can be daunting for teacher candidates and particularly intimidating for aspiring teachers who speak English as a second language, those with exceptionalities, and members of historically marginalized communities (Petchauer, 2015; Nettles et al., 2011; Tyler, 2011). University-based teacher educators are well positioned to support teacher candidate populations enrolled in or seeking to enroll in teacher education programs. This study explored preservice teachers' experiences engaging in study groups within a supportive learning community. The study groups were facilitated by university-based teacher educators leveraging socio-cognitive strategies to help preservice teachers navigate a high-stake licensure exam. The findings show students who engaged in these study group sessions reported higher affect levels, found the study group structure relevant, and articulated specific strategies for navigating the test in the future.

Keywords: licensure exams, preservice teachers, study groups

Intentional practices to recruit and retain undergraduate and graduate students who bring racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity to the field of education serving children birth through grade 12 demands consistent attention and a multifaceted approach. The U.S. Department of Education (2016) continues to chronicle a predominately White (82%) workforce serving student populations that are increasingly more diverse. Numerous systemic structures act as barriers for Students of Color seeking to become teachers (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Wynter-Hoyte et al.,

2020). The literature references teacher licensure exams as a persistent obstacle for prospective teachers (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Previous studies show that there were distinctive gaps in teaching licensing test scores and the passing rate among the racial group including Latinx, African American, and White preservice teachers (Bennett et al., 2006; Nettles et al., 2011). Underperformance on high-stakes licensure exams summarily screens out preservice teachers of color who could be effective teachers (Petchauer, 2012, 2015, 2018). Therefore, attending to practices that support preservice teachers' (PSTs') successful navigation of high-stakes licensure exams remains an area of critical importance (Petchauer, 2018).

Preparing for the licensure exams remains intimidating for many and particularly challenging for students with exceptionalities, those who speak English as a second language, and teacher candidates from other historically minoritized and marginalized communities (Petchauer, 2015; Tyler, 2011). Focused qualitative case studies documenting preservice teachers' experiences with teacher licensure exams provide insight into the challenges diverse student populations confront as well as strategies teacher educators may integrate into practice to better support students seeking to pass licensure exams (Petchauer et al., 2015; Petchauer, 2018; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2020). Research documents students' emotional stress when they believe the test results did not accurately represent their abilities as future teachers (Bennett et al., 2006, Graham, 2013). Similarly, research also continues to document historically minoritized students report licensure exams were unfair and culturally biased (Bennett et al., 2006; Petchauer, 2012). Bennet et al. (2006) underscores the language used throughout the reading portions of the exams remains a challenge for preservice teachers of color as they report they are not familiar with Eurocentric language permeating the test instructions and content (Bennett et al., 2006). Navigating unfamiliar language patterns requires students to take more time to complete each

passage and impacts their motivation to read and engage with the materials (Bennett et al., 2006). Students' internalized fear of failure frequently leads PSTs to put off taking these exams and leaving them with less time to adequately prepare for licensure tests (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2020).

Teacher educators are well-positioned to implement dynamic systems of support for Black students and other historically marginalized teacher candidate populations enrolled in or seeking to enroll in teacher education programs (Graham, 2013). Petchauer's (2012) work engaging with prospective educators attending historically black colleges and universities argues for embracing a "solution-oriented stance to empower Black teacher candidates to pass licensure exams en route to becoming licensed teachers" (p. 253). Teacher educators working alongside students interested in pursuing teacher licensure report students are capable of success with intentional mentoring and study sessions (Petchauer, 2018; Williams & Lewis, 2020).

Interested in supporting students' experiences preparing for a state licensure exam, we initiated a pilot study group program in the summer of 2021. Accordingly, this study examines PSTs' experiences engaging in study groups designed to help students navigate a critical licensure test within a supportive learning community. The purpose of this article is to share our process creating and implementing the study groups and communicate emerging insights. Specifically, we asked the following questions:

1. How do PSTs articulate their feelings regarding their capabilities to successfully complete the licensure exam?
2. Which study group components and strategies do PSTs identify as beneficial?

Theoretical Perspectives

Socio-cognitive conceptions associated with self-regulated learning provide essential frameworks for exploring the individual and social factors influencing PSTs' experiences preparing for state licensure exams. Early work examining self-regulated learning processes underscore the triadic reciprocity of personal, environmental, and behavioral influencers (Zimmerman, 1989). Usher & Schunk (2018) explain self-regulation is, "the process of systematically organizing one's thoughts, feelings, and actions to attain one's goals" (p. 19). Self-efficacy, defined as one's beliefs about their ability to accomplish a specific task or goal, is recognized as a key component influencing self-regulation practices (Efklides et al., 2018; Panadero & Alonso-Tapia, 2014; Schunk, 1995; Zimmerman, 1989). Self-efficacy perceptions are strong predictors of an individual's future performance (Pajares, 1997). While visualizing successful simulations are positively correlated with efficacious future enactments, Bandura (1989) cautions, "Those who judge themselves as inefficacious are more inclined to visualize failure scenarios and to dwell on how things will go wrong. Such inefficacious thinking weakens motivation and undermines performance" (p. 729). Fortunately, low self-efficacy perceptions are not fixed; rather, efficacy perceptions are susceptible to a variety of "social and enactive experiences" (Zimmerman, 1989, p. 335). For example, modeling, verbal and social persuasions, mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, metacognitive rehearsals, goal setting, strategy application, and self-reflection practices are recognized as effective practices for enhancing students' self-efficacy (Usher & Parjares, 2008; Usher & Schunk, 2018; Zimmerman, 1989).

Therefore, attending to self-efficacy perceptions may be particularly relevant for PSTs entering into high-stakes testing environments, as low self-efficacy perceptions regarding one's ability to pass the exam may have a profound impact on their performance (Petchauer, 2012).

Based on 6 years of personal experience, Petchauer (2012) details a socio-cognitive theoretical frame for preparing Black preservice teachers for state mandated licensure exams. The theoretical and practical practices described by Petchauer (2012) inform our work designing the pilot study and draws on the socio-cognitive components associated with self-regulated learning. Specifically, Petchauer (2012) identifies two theoretical lenses, self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997; Usher & Pajares, 2008) and sociocultural theory (Nasir & Hand, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978) to understand preservice teachers' licensure exam experiences and to suggest practices that would help them complete the exams successfully. Petchauer (2012) reasons, "Self-efficacy mediates cognitive, affective, motivation, and selective processes (Bandura, 1997), each of which is specifically central to academic achievement broadly and teacher licensure exam preparation and performance" (p. 255). Grounded in self-efficacy theory and his previous teaching experiences with Black preservice teachers, Petchauer (2012) suggested integrating (a) mastery experiences, (b) vicarious experiences, (c) verbal and social persuasion, and (d) nurturing students' physiological and affective states. Collectively, Petchauer found these intentional experiences bolstered PSTs' self-efficacy and encouraged them to believe in their own capabilities to pass the exam.

In a complementary way, Petchauer (2012) advocates for embedding socio-cultural components to shape PSTs' experiences preparing for licensure exams. These experiences include (a) providing supportive and relevant material resources (e.g., accurate testing information, study guides, and practice test materials), (b) relational resources (e.g., interactions with peers and teacher educators wherein students learn about the exam), and (c) ideational resources (e.g., test-taker identity and beliefs about their ability to pass the exam). Metacognitive

activities are also suggested to encourage PSTs to perceive their efforts to learn and improve their performance on the tests (Petchauer, 2012).

In this study, we focused on three practices: (a) structuring for mastery, (b) structuring for vicarious experience and relevant social interaction, and (c) developing positive test-taker identity through ideational resources. Structuring for mastery experiences included inviting PSTs to complete singular exam items or small sets of items, rather than completing entire practice tests in one setting. In doing so, PSTs are less likely to interpret the practice test items as failure experiences. Vicarious experiences and relevant social interactions work to increase PSTs' self-efficacy and create positive test taker identities. From a socio-cognitive perspective, PSTs need to have models who have completed the licensure tests through much effort (e.g., coping models). Through the focused vicarious experiences and social interactions, PSTs have the opportunity to gain specific test taking advice and learn strategies for navigating the exam learning "that one can improve with effort and that skill is neither fixed nor inherent" (Petchauer, 2012, p. 26). Finally, teacher educators can use verbal persuasions in the social learning environments to help PSTs develop positive test-taker identity with ideational resources. It is important for teacher educators to help PSTs understand their test performance does not provide any indication of their inherent qualities. By telling them, "the test can't change who you are," educators help PSTs internalize the idea making students less susceptible to stereotypes and identity threats (Petchauer, 2012). Another ideational resource is encouraging PSTs to believe they can work under pressure and that there is no test they cannot pass. Openly sharing with students accurate passing scores and encouraging PSTs to take the exam "one question at a time" encourages students to feel the weight of the whole exam does not depend on their response on each test item thereby helping to mitigate unnecessary pressure (Petchauer, 2012). It is against

this backdrop we worked to develop a series of study group sessions for early childhood PSTs seeking to pass a literacy focused state licensure exam.

Methods

This exploratory pilot study uses qualitative methodologies to gain insight into PSTs' experiences engaging in a series of study group sessions designed to prepare candidates for the Virginia Communication and Literacy Assessment (VCLA), a state mandated licensure exam. Specifically, this work seeks to document PSTs' articulated attitudes regarding the VCLA and their experiences preparing for the test within a community of learners designed to scaffold, guide, and develop personally meaningful strategies for completing the test in the future.

Designing the VCLA Study Group Sessions

In conceptualizing the pilot program for the VCLA study group sessions, we considered a number of variables, including timing, place, and facilitation strategies.

Timing

We timed the study group sessions to occur after the summer session final exam period and before the start of the fall semester. This timing also aligned with internal college deadlines that require students to submit passing licensure exam scores before they complete the application process for their student teaching experiences. We offered five 90-minute sessions that met from 6:30 to 8:00 in the evening, to accommodate student work schedules. To maintain momentum, we spaced the study group sessions across a 2-week time span.

Location

At the time, universities in Virginia were beginning to offer more events in person and instructors began transitioning from the online spaces imposed by Covid-19 restrictions to face-to-face learning contexts. In an effort to honor students' preferred learning contexts, we offered

the first session in a hybrid format. Students joined us either virtually, via Zoom, or in a classroom space on campus for session 1 and virtually for the subsequent sessions (session 2 through session 5).

Study Group Session Purposes and Facilitation Strategies

Across a 2-week time span, we provided five study group sessions each with a different purpose. The first study group session invited students to be active members of the learning community, provided an overview of the VCLA, ensured the PSTs acquired access to the free online preparation program provided by the university, and immersed students in small groups to complete a sample reading passage. Session 2 examined the reading multiple-choice section of the VCLA. Session 3 emphasized the writing multiple-choice section. Session 4 focused on composing short summary responses and the final session focused on developing students' capacities completing the longer composition response on the VCLA.

We used interactive Google Slides to facilitate all study group sessions. Students retained access to the slides after each session. To promote students' active and reflective engagement, we embedded links to Jamboard, Google Forms, and Google Docs throughout the Google Slides. For each session, we used a combination of whole group and small breakout group sessions to promote a community of learners, establish safe spaces for study group members to work through test questions together, and provide opportunities for individualized small group instruction. The first three authors co-facilitated each session. For the second and third sessions, we focused on the multiple-choice sections of the VCLA. Three additional doctoral students joined the study group session at this time to guide small group reflective conversations. This ensured no more than four PSTs were in a breakout room and afforded facilitators time to model

test-taking strategies, offer explicit instruction to correct misconceptions, and guide students to articulate effective test-taking practices.

Structuring for Mastery Experiences. Each session targeted a different part of the test to focus their attention and chunk it in a way that made it more approachable. As the PSTs completed the practice tests for sessions 2 and 3, we asked them to complete a reflection guide as they worked through the test items. This process was intentional to promote feelings of preparedness and confidence as well as to build students' metacognitive practices. The reflection guide prompted them to pause to consider the questions they grappled with and to think about why they selected each response. The reflection guide also encouraged conversation between PSTs seeking to understand the nuanced differences between test questions and possible responses.

Each study group session began with an opening reflection survey inviting students to consider their experiences completing the practice test homework and ended with a reflection survey asking students to identify how they were feeling about completing the VCLA after the study group session. Then, co-facilitators presented the agenda and introduced relevant information for that day. Students and co-facilitators then broke into smaller groups where they worked through sections of the test together. The co-facilitators opened the discussion to the students and asked them what sections they would like to prioritize and then they worked through the material together. During this time, the PSTs returned to their reflection guide to unpack questions with their facilitator and group members and articulate strategies they could use in the future when confronting similar test items. This process served to demystify test structures and empower PSTs to make informed and intentional decisions when selecting responses.

Relevant Social Interactions. Students were invited to openly speak about their experiences with and feelings toward the test in small and large groups. The sharing of their thoughts, experiences, and feelings opened spaces for the co-facilitators to offer counternarratives. The open discussions allowed the PSTs to recognize that their experiences were not uncommon. It also opened a space for us to underscore how much they had already accomplished in their program of studies already and that they were capable of passing the exam. The co-facilitators also encouraged students to be resilient even if they had not passed the test the first time. The prevailing message and tone communicated that the students were not alone in this endeavor and through our study group sessions we would learn new strategies, push forward, and consider different ways for approaching the test.

Small breakout groups were utilized to promote relevant social interactions. To build trust and promote a sense of community in a virtual space, students were asked to turn their cameras on and get to know each other while engaging in the small group sessions. Through this forum and the scaffolded process used to consider each practice question, we encouraged students to participate more and take more risks amongst their peers. Following the small breakout groups, the PSTs shared their thoughts with the larger group. The final sharing was designed to help PSTs recognize the intentional thinking and strategic problem-solving each group went through to more fully understand the different test questions and strategies for discerning the correct answers.

Throughout this time, the co-facilitators were intentional about their interactions with students including reinforcing positive affirmations. Across time, the facilitators framed the test so students understood why they were required to take the test, provided relevant background to reshape initial impressions, and collaboratively worked with PSTs to demystify test structures.

Participants

Invitations to participate in the study groups sessions were sent to all early childhood education students. Forty-five students responded to the registration survey, four students indicated they were not able to attend the study sessions during the summer; however, these students indicated they were interested in participating in future study group sessions. Of the 41 students enrolled in the study group sessions, nine students completed the informed consent process. All of the participating PSTs were enrolled in an early childhood teacher education program at a large university in Virginia. Table 1 presents participants' self-identified demographic details.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Characteristics

Demographics	Participants
Gender	
Female	8
Male	1
Education	
Associate degree	3
Bachelor's degree	5
Master's degree	1
Race/Ethnicity	
Asian/Pacific Islander	2
Black/African	1
American	
Hispanic/Latino	2
White/Caucasian	4
Primary Language(s)	
Cambodian	1

English	6
Spanish	1
Vietnamese and English	1

Data Sources

Data sources included an initial demographic survey and five sets of reflective surveys completed before and after each session to gauge PSTs' feelings toward the exam and their thoughts about the study group experiences. All study group participants completed the demographic surveys, reflective surveys, and homework experiences regardless of whether they agreed to share their data as part of the research study. Accordingly, all of the study group members' reflections were used by the co-facilitators as formative assessments throughout the experience to inform the structure of subsequent study group sessions. However, only the nine participants who completed the informed consent are included in the analysis of data.

Data Analysis

Analysis of survey responses included simultaneous coding using emotions coding and in vivo coding to document PSTs' feelings completing the mandated licensure exam (Saldaña, 2009). We used emotion coding to gain an understanding of PSTs' affective states in relation to the VCLA. We focused specifically on PSTs' reflective responses to the opening and closing survey question, "How are you feeling about completing the VCLA?" We used structural coding to understand aspects of the study group the PSTs recognized as supporting their learning. We also used structural coding to gather an understanding of the literacy test taking strategies the PSTs articulated as meaningful when responding to, "What test taking strategies will you use in the future to help you prepare and complete the VCLA?"

We created coding charts and worked to consensus utilizing the commenting tool available in Word to negotiate and confirm participant statements and document how many participants reported similar ideas. This consensus process created a visible and concrete audit trail of the coding process. The in vivo coding process allowed us to remain close to the participants' words, mitigating preconceived interpretations or assumptions we held as study group facilitators and served to enhance the trustworthiness of our findings (Rodham et al., 2015). Accordingly, throughout the findings section, we integrate participants' quotes to transparently illustrate PSTs' affective articulations, study group experiences, and test taking strategies reported by the PSTs on the opening and closing surveys.

Findings

In the findings we examine shifts in participants' self-reported affective states. We then consider elements participants reported as potentially beneficial study group experiences.

Considering PSTs' Evolving Affects

Upon entering the VCLA study group, PSTs' self-articulated feelings around the VCLA indicate a low self-efficacy regarding their capabilities to pass the exam. Out of nine participants, six PSTs articulated they had already completed the test at least once and needed to retake the exam to obtain passing scores. Specifically, three PSTs indicated they were nervous about completing the exam; of these, two PSTs had already completed the exam and needed to retake it and one PST was getting ready to take the exam. Illustrating their concern, one PST explained, "I am nervous about the writing part of the VCLA but I am hoping this test preparation will better prepare me." Three PSTs who had already attempted the exam described the VCLA as "hard." As one PST articulated, "I dislike the writing portion... It's hard and confusing for me." Two PSTs stated they were not good test takers, and one who had not yet completed the exam said

they did not yet know how they felt about it. Overall, the PSTs' responses offered on the opening survey suggest a pessimistic affective state.

The PSTs' affective responses shifted over the course of the study group session. After engaging in the study sessions, all of the participants said they found the study group "helpful." Their positive experience also seemed to bolster their overall immediate confidences regarding the exam. While PSTs acknowledged needing more practice, they also consistently articulated they felt more "confident" with the material and group activities. For example, before study group session 3, four out of eight responding participants articulated concern about the multiple-choice writing sections of the exam, one had not yet completed the practice test, and three were feeling okay about their practice test experience. After the study group session, eight out of nine respondents felt better or more confident after discussing their responses on each item with other peers and facilitators.

Considering Impactful Study Group Elements

Survey responses yielded some insight into components of the study group experience participants found beneficial. PSTs appreciated the opportunity to work in breakout groups to problem-solve specific subcomponents of the test. The PSTs' reflections revealed intentional metacognitive work occurred with study group members and facilitators as they unpacked different test subcomponents. For example, one PST expressed, "The element of the study group session I found useful was listening to other group members answer the questions and developing reasons as to why the answers were wrong or right."

Focused attention on their own thinking during the small breakout groups prompted PSTs to reflect on strategies they could use in the future. "Process of elimination" & "read questions and responses carefully" were the most frequent strategies that PSTs identified considering the

multiple-choice questions. Additionally, considering how they should approach multiple choice questions, one PST reasoned, “Highlighting the main idea, supportive ideas, and conclusion” would enhance their capabilities analyzing written passages. All of these strategies were explicitly modeled and examined within the small groups, affording PSTs opportunities to articulate ways to successfully navigate complex text.

The PSTs survey responses also provided insight into how PSTs utilized two strategic organizers designed to support their engagement. First, PSTs completed a reflective graphic organizer as they completed the practice tests to analyze the questions they missed and document why they selected their responses. Some participants found the tool supportive, as one participant explained, “I found it really helpful! It makes you look back at why you made those mistakes.” Others indicated they were unsure how to use the organizer or did not have time to complete it. The second organizer, presented to PSTs during session 4 and session 5, focused on supporting PSTs’ writing efforts. This organizer received limited but positive feedback because only three participants attended the final two sessions. Nonetheless, one participant noted, “The Graphic Organizer helps” by “breaking down the essay.” More reflective statements from future participants will be necessary before evaluating the usefulness of this writing tool.

Discussion

Examining work that explicitly demystifies and empowers PSTs toward the successful completion of high-stakes licensure tests remains a critical area of research if the field of education hopes to mitigate the marginalizing impact such tests have on communities of color (Petchauer 2012). The low self-efficacy stances articulated by PSTs in this pilot study echo findings reported across the literature examining the impact of high-stakes teacher licensure exams (Petchauer, 2012; Tyler, 2011). In response, facilitators worked to reframe PSTs’ negative

affective statements by acknowledging students' accomplishments and establishing inclusive communities of practice focused on helping students identify strategies for systematically approaching test questions in the future. Positive affirmations of PSTs' abilities are recognized as an effective tool for encouraging students to shift low self-efficacy stances and position the passing of the exam as a manageable hurdle and not an indictment on their character or effectiveness as a teacher (Petchauer, 2015).

The intentional opportunities to grapple with exam questions in study groups bolstered participants' reported feelings of efficacy, positively shifting their comfort with exam materials. Though the data remains limited, PSTs' experiences engaging with relevant material resources, including the google slides, practice test materials, and reflective guide provided a meaningful structure for the study groups sessions. In this way, the experience aligns with Petchauer et al., (2015) who reasoned,

Going through preparation activities gave students a resource to lean upon when they experienced nervous[ness] or another negative affective state. Additionally, preparation activities gave students opportunities to work through front-end negative affective states before they stepped into the real test event. (p. 187)

The PSTs in this study articulated gaining confidence in their capabilities with VCLA after discussing each item in the small group and identified specific strategies for bolstering their engagement with the exam in the future.

This study provides a foundation for this programs' work and contributes to focused discussions of experiences designed to prepare PSTs for successful completion of high-stakes licensure exams. We suggest future research further contextualize PSTs' experiences with socio-cognitive frameworks that more fully consider situated learning contexts with co-regulation and

shared regulation models (Hadwin et al., 2018). Finally, we recognize these findings are limited in that they represent the voices of nine participants. Therefore, the general statements offered by these participants need to be explored further. To this end, future work will need to follow study group participants through their licensure exam process and seek to learn from them the practices and strategies they found most beneficial as they worked to navigate testing requirements.

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