

# Rehumanizing Clinical Practice Experiences in Teacher Credential Programs

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on education, creating a variety of challenges for educators and students alike. The pandemic's effects, particularly on preservice educators and their experiences as they attempted to become credentialed educators amid a global pandemic, have yet to be considered. In addition to the personal challenges many experienced during the pandemic, preservice educators had the difficult task of navigating coursework and displaced clinical practice experiences despite the crumbling world around them.

Many preservice teachers experienced a profound sense of isolation while going through their credential programs due to school closures and social distancing protocols. Additionally, the pandemic highlighted discrepancies present in educational settings, including those between Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) students and their White peers with respect to academic outcomes and access to resources (Shin,

2022). While appreciable data support these trends in K–12 settings, how these trends also appeared in higher educational settings is less discussed.

In many ways, the isolation experienced during the pandemic dehumanized the credential program processes, eliminating physical access to classroom spaces and consequently diminishing the ability to create and foster strong personal bonds between students and faculty members (Shin, 2022). Although the difficulties and long-term effects of educating preservice teachers during the pandemic are still mostly unknown, our university is committed to recognizing the challenges that credential candidates have faced in the last few years and to strengthening systems of support in an effort to rehumanize the teacher credentialing process by centering human experience and connection in a post-COVID-19 world.

The Center for Transformational Educator Preparation Programs (CTEPP) at California State University Bakersfield is an improvement-science, research-based committee dedicated to strengthening efforts to recruit, prepare, and retain BIPOC educators to diversify the educator workforce. Recognizing the equity gaps made visible by the pandemic, the CTEPP team is committed to investigating the systems of support available to BIPOC candidates to strengthen them and cultivate a safe, welcoming environment for potential BIPOC credential candidates.

By examining existing structures and practices, the CTEPP team identified the clinical practice components of their educator preparation programs as the site to create a high-leverage point within the teacher credential program through which to enact change. The research described here recounts the process in which the team engaged to provide more inclusive and equitable practices to better support BIPOC candidates. The tools used to design equity-centered, antibias/antiracist training and the methodology used to collect information are described and explored.

## Equity in Teacher Preparation Programs

As classrooms continue to diversify exponentially, teacher demographics remain stagnant (Education Trust, 2022; Skepple, 2014; Snyder et al., 2019). The many efforts to recruit and retain BIPOC teachers to diversify the educator workforce have not yielded the desired results (Kohli, 2021). BIPOC educators make up only a small percentage of classroom teachers across the country. As a result, many students do not see and engage with teachers who reflect their culture, identities, and ways of being (Education Trust, 2022; Kohli, 2021; Muhammad, 2020; Skepple, 2014; Snyder et al., 2019).

While many factors contribute to the lack of growth in the number of BIPOC teachers in the educator workforce, the CTEPP team has focused primarily on

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recruiting, preparing, and retaining BIPOC credential candidates. Recognizing that a safe, inclusive environment is a critical component for enhancing recruitment, preparation, and retention efforts, the CTEPP team is committed to analyzing and refining current practices to ensure that the credential program environment and processes are safe and inclusive for all prospective and current credential candidates, particularly those who identify as BIPOC.

Kohli (2021) argued that “in teacher education programs, where the majority of teacher candidates and teacher educators are White, curriculum and pedagogy tend to neglect the experiences and perspectives of teachers of Color” (p. 12). Although the goal of teacher education preparation programs is to support candidates’ acquisition of best pedagogical practices in the field of education, many programs often prioritize the acquisition of skills reflective only of the dominant culture (Marks et al., 2022; Marks & Sandles, 2021; Muhammad, 2020). Regrettably, as Kohli (2021) recounted, “teachers of Color have been navigating the racial climates of schools since they were students and continue to confront racism in their professional lives” (p. 28).

The “denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism” (Love, 2019, p. 2) often leads to the *spirit murdering* of BIPOC candidates in educational spaces. To combat this and “sustain a diverse teaching force, teacher education programs, schools, and districts must first acknowledge the entrenched systems of oppression that make school a hostile place for people of Color” (Kohli, 2021, p. 28). Delpit (1988) asserted that structural inequities are often present in educational spaces, directly impacting the interactions between educators and their students. This complex reality often leads to alienation and misunderstandings, contributing to a “silenced dialogue” (Delpit, 1988, p. 281).

### **Supervising BIPOC Teacher Candidates**

The mentoring relationships between university supervisors and their respective credential candidates within teacher credential programs have proven to be a critical component in the development of effective, confident educators (Marks et al., 2022). This relationship is essential, as university supervisors often serve as a supportive bridge between the university and the K–12 setting in which credential

candidates develop their skills and craft (Marks et al., 2022).

Although university supervisors are well positioned to address the research-to-practice gap, their classroom experience is often several years removed, resulting in a lack of awareness of current culturally responsive pedagogy (Griffin et al., 2016). Additionally, supervisors should be able to foster and improve the culturally responsive practices of their teacher candidates and their ability to effectively enact such practices in their classrooms (Griffin et al., 2016; Swartz, 2003; Zozakiewicz, 2010). This recognition is noteworthy because “like teacher candidates themselves, many supervisors come to the diverse classrooms in which their teacher candidates are placed with little or no prior knowledge and understanding of diversity or individuals who are culturally, racially, and/or linguistically different from themselves” (Griffin et al., 2016, p. 4).

### **Challenges in Clinical Practice During the Pandemic**

The pandemic highlighted many of the inequities built into the education system, creating equity and access issues for many students. This was particularly true for historically marginalized groups of students. While school closures during the pandemic drew national attention, “much less widely discussed, but important all the same, have been the pandemic’s effects on the preparation of tomorrow’s teachers” (Choate et al., 2021, p. XX). As school doors shuttered and learning shifted to a virtual space, teacher education preparation programs also had to adjust. In particular, the clinical practice element of teacher preparation programs was greatly hindered and affected by school closures and other pandemic-related policies.

The clinical practice component of teacher preparation programs is crucial for candidates’ preparation to become fully credentialed and equipped to work with students in their own classrooms. Anderson and Stillman (2013) described clinical practice as the key, if not most critical, component of preservice teacher preparation. Thus, during the pandemic, teacher preparation programs had to become creative in creating access to classroom spaces for credential students.

The pandemic created a slew of obstacles and challenges for teacher preparation programs. Most profound was losing access to students, mentors, classroom environments, and, consequently, interpersonal relationships. Owing to the pandemic and

the shift to virtual learning, teacher candidates’ exposure to students and in-person classroom environments diminished, creating barriers to credentialing. Despite best efforts, partner school districts were unable to provide space for preservice educators to hone their skills in physical classrooms. Furthermore, once learning shifted to a virtual setting, due to the stress and challenges of adapting to new educational technologies, districts and universities had difficulty finding mentor teachers willing to continue to host and support credential candidates, further limiting access and opportunities for many preservice educators. Unfortunately, the consequences were dire for credential candidates, resulting in missed opportunities to interact directly with students and receive feedback from mentor and cooperating teachers (Choate et al., 2021).

Recognizing that the clinical practice component of teacher preparation programs is crucial, losing access to classrooms, students, and mentor teachers had a profound impact on traditional teacher preparation programs. As Choate et al. (2021) argued, “teacher candidates need to have that direct contact with students to manage a classroom and plan lessons according to specific student needs when in a classroom” (p. 55). The shuttering of schools during the pandemic created missed opportunities for teacher candidates to have these critical teaching experiences prior to program completion.

Similarly, preservice educators’ relationships with their university supervisors and faculty members were hindered. Reduced to virtual settings, the interpersonal relationships that have historically been an essential component of the overall success of the credentialing process were limited during the pandemic years. The relationship between university supervisors and their credential candidates has often been described as bridging theory and practice, as credential candidates are supported in both the university and K–12 settings. Support from university supervisors is critical for credential candidates, as it improves candidates’ ability to foster safe learning environments, build relationships with students, and implement culturally responsive and sustaining practices (Griffin et al., 2016).

Through interviews, observation, and informal discussions with credential candidates, our research team found that many candidates had difficulty conceptualizing new content and developing their

teacher identities and ideologies because of the lack of direct (in-person) access to students, mentors, and university supervisors. This deep sense of isolation and disconnection from in-person experiences had a traumatic effect on students at all levels. Now more than ever, there is a significant need for empathy and understanding in the process of reconnecting those critical relationships.

As we transition from pandemic to endemic, questions remain about the effects of the rapid shift to virtual learning within teacher education programs and, consequently, the impact on the teacher educator pipeline (Choate et al., 2021). Our university is committed to rehumanizing the resulting educational experiences by creating additional layers of support for credential candidates. These layers include discussions regarding revising current practices, training university supervisors with a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), creating an early intervention program, and processes for regularly connecting with students to provide additional support.

Through the use of improvement science, the present study explores the following essential questions: (a) After providing supervisor training and support, how did supervisors feel about their ability to support BIPOC candidates? (b) How did supervisor training and support impact “no credit” (NC) grades and the implementation of improvement plans for BIPOC teacher candidates?

## Methods

### Sample

During the 2022–2023 academic year, our university had 28 supervisors (8 male, 20 female) supporting multiple- and single-subject credential candidates. Of the pool of supervisors who participated in the study, 77.8% identified as White, 5.6% identified as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 5.6% identified as North American Indian or Alaskan Native, 5.6% identified as Southeast Asian, and 16.7% declined to comment on their race/ethnicity. Prior to implementing change, approximately 94.5% of the university supervisors initially expressed confidence in their ability to support instructional practices. However, supervisors’ confidence levels declined when asked questions related to DEI work with credential candidates.

### Study Design

The qualitative study described here sought to identify an area within clinical practice supervision that could be improved by implementing specific support for BIPOC credential candidates. The critical first step was to analyze current practices and processes to better understand the experiences of past and current BIPOC candidates. Our research team designed and implemented a backward-design model of inquiry utilizing improvement science methodology to identify areas of potential improvement within the credential programs and revise these elements to create a more inclusive and safe space where BIPOC candidates could thrive.

Within this model of inquiry, the research team first analyzed EdQ completer data sorted by credential program and candidate demographics to identify any discrepancies in program completion and found that BIPOC candidates were not completing the program at the same rates as their counterparts. Based on the preliminary data, we developed the following problem statement: *Credential student support systems are not meeting the needs of BIPOC students.*

To better understand why BIPOC candidates were not completing the credential program at the same rate as their White peers, we began analyzing the current intervention processes and tools available to program faculty. By examining these processes and tools more closely, the team found that improvement plans, in particular, were severely underutilized, having been previously developed and implemented inequitably (Marks et al., 2022). Improvement plans are an intervention tool designed to support credential candidates who demonstrate a need for additional support.

Although these improvement plans were severely underutilized across demographic groups of students, we found that BIPOC candidates had fewer improvement plans than other candidates. We cross-referenced improvement plan data with non-passing grades issued during the 2 years preceding the start of the study to identify how often intervention practices were initiated and implemented when candidates demonstrated a need for additional support. A strong correlation to the clinical practice component of the credential program led us to survey university supervisors to gain a preliminary understanding of their comfort and competence levels in identifying issues pertaining to DEI

practices, their ability to mentor candidates through a culturally responsive and sustaining lens, and their ability to create and enact additional layers of support for candidates who demonstrated a need for support.

In addition to identifying the areas where supervisors might need additional assistance to better support their respective teacher candidates, we found variable results when measuring supervisors’ confidence and comfort in developing and implementing improvement plans to support credential candidates. Program data from the previous 2 years confirmed that improvement plans were severely underutilized, often related to the low confidence university supervisors demonstrated on the preliminary survey.

We acknowledge that these 2 years of data reflect the time during the pandemic. However, the lack of intervention processes during a time when arguably many students struggled is revealing and calls for further analysis and deeper understanding. Recognizing that lower confidence levels among university supervisors resulted in lower perceived efficacy in developing and implementing improvement plans and additional support, we next considered how often supervisors and faculty utilized any existing intervention and support tool to better support credential candidates.

Our research team began to revise and design tools to better equip university supervisors with the means to support credential candidates (Marks et al., 2022). We revised the improvement plan document utilized by the educational preparation programs at another university, created a process map tool for university supervisors to help determine when candidates needed an improvement plan, developed necessary training materials and modules for university supervisors, and developed simulation-based training materials to use with university supervisors in an initial effort “to refine our intervention process and strategies to better support credential candidates” (Marks et al., 2022, p. 92).

Our team was intentional about this transformational work. We determined that the improvement plan process and the university supervisor training about improvement plans would be the first areas in which to enact change. The design intended to revise the improvement plan process and template and to provide scaffolded materials, including a process map and simulation-based training for university supervisors.

With the ultimate goal of improving systems of support for credential candidates, particularly those candidates who identify as BIPOC, we aimed to increase the number of improvement plans to minimize the number of NC grades given. We used improvement science methodology to develop PDSA (plan, do, study, act) cycles (Langley et al., 2009; Marks et al., 2022) to measure growth and improvement after introducing the revised improvement process, process map tool, and university supervisor simulation-based training sessions.

Utilizing preliminary data, we developed training sessions for university supervisors to address revisions in the improvement plan document and process. We also identified areas of need based on the preliminary data collected from the survey given to supervisors. After each training session with university supervisors, we sent out a survey to measure the effectiveness of the training sessions, identify additional areas of improvement and concern based on supervisor feedback, and document changes in supervisor confidence and competence regarding the improvement plan process for supporting credential candidates. This information was used to inform future training sessions.

Accordingly, we tested the following research questions through the initial PDSA cycle:

1. Will university supervisors feel more competent to implement an improvement plan when needed?
2. Will university supervisors feel more confident implementing an improvement plan when needed?
3. Will the number of improvement plans increase?
4. Will the number of NC grades decrease?
5. Will more supervisors complete improvement plans?

Preliminary results from implementing the process map tool, redesigning the improvement plan template, and simulated-based improvement plan training were used to identify areas for further improvement and implementation.

While the present study reports the findings of Phase 1, the work is ongoing and includes the implementation of Phase 2. This second phase of work will begin focusing on issues pertaining to DEI practices. The university supervisor meetings and training sessions in Phase 1 embedded a scaffolded approach for

understanding DEI issues. Our research team intentionally designed these meetings and training sessions to incorporate DEI practices with the improvement plan process to better meet the needs identified in the preliminary supervisor survey results.

Similar to the structure of the study's first phase, the second phase utilizes improvement science methodology to develop PDSA cycles focused on these identified change goals (Langley et al., 2009). The PDSA cycles designed for the study's second phase were created to understand the effectiveness of DEI training elements within university supervisor training sessions. The goal of this PDSA cycle is to increase the confidence and competence of university supervisors in identifying issues pertaining to DEI practices in their work with credential candidates.

### Findings

To rehumanize practices and cultivate a safe, inclusive environment in which BIPOC candidates can thrive, our research team analyzed preliminary data from current systems of practice to align practices and identify areas for refinement to enhance students' experiences. Preliminary data revealed lower program completion rates for BIPOC candidates. Also reported are the initial university supervisor survey results about supervisors' confidence in supporting credential candidates in their clinical practice experiences.

The results from these preliminary inquiries led to two PDSA cycles that implemented a supervisor tool and supervisor training. Phase 1 findings reflect the changes in improvement plan implementation for BIPOC candidates who needed additional support, as well as how supervisors felt about their ability to support BIPOC candidates after providing supervisor training and support.

### Preliminary Findings

Consistent with other achievement gap research, we found that only 46% of BIPOC credential candidates completed the credential program at the same rate as their peers (Marks et al., 2022). These data are consistent with sentiments shared by Kohli (2021), indicating that recruitment efforts on their own are not enough to diversify the educator pipeline and increase the presence of diverse educators in the workforce.

As Kohli argued, "To understand and address the diversity crisis of the teaching force, it is necessary to move beyond discussions of racial representation" (p. 4). Marks et al. (2022) stated, "In addition to recruitment and retention efforts, we must look at the ways in which we prepare teachers—particularly teachers of color, and critically examine the supports put in place to ensure successful completion of program requirements" (p. 90). Based on preliminary data and as part of our study design, our research team developed the following problem statement: *Credential student support systems are not meeting the needs of BIPOC students.*

Survey data revealed that 72.2% of university supervisors felt confident in their ability to promote critical perspectives and practices to support DEI efforts and initiatives, but only 55.6% of those supervisors felt confident in their ability to help candidates learn about students' cultural wealth. Similarly, our research team found that 66.7% of supervisors felt confident in their ability to draw student teachers' attention to inequities in their classrooms, and 64.7% felt confident in their ability to notice and comment when racial biases may be impacting candidates' instructional decisions.

Overall, we found that supervisors' confidence was high when thinking about or identifying issues pertaining to broad-ranging social justice-oriented themes (i.e., identifying racial biases or ability to discuss DEI social justice-oriented topics). However, confidence levels dipped when questions were specifically geared toward working with diverse students, such as helping candidates learn about students' cultural wealth to infuse their funds of knowledge into the classroom. Moreover, when supervisors were asked about their ability to identify a need for a student improvement plan and create one that supported students, initial supervisor confidence was low.

To summarize, preliminary findings show lower supervisor confidence regarding addressing DEI practices than supporting general pedagogical practice. However, confidence levels dropped even further as our question prompts moved away from theory and into direct practice with students. For example, 72.2% of university supervisors feel confident in their ability to promote critical perspectives and practices to support DEI efforts, but when the same supervisors were asked about their confidence in being able to help candidates learn about students' cultural wealth, confidence dropped to 55.6%.

These preliminary data are consistent with research regarding supervisors' exposure to and confidence in identifying and implementing culturally responsive pedagogical practices (Griffin et al., 2016). Our data reveal that although supervisors understand and are familiar with DEI and social justice issues in education, their confidence levels in addressing and infusing these issues into their practice are low.

### **Phase I Implementation and Findings**

Before our team created the PDSA cycle based on preliminary data, the improvement plan process needed to be revised. Training modules were created and implemented with university supervisors starting in the spring 2022 semester. The university supervisors engaged in two training sessions regarding the improvement plan revisions and process, thus allowing researchers to complete two PDSA cycles.

At the end of the first semester of implementation, university supervisors identified 21 students who needed additional support to be successful. Of those identified as needing an improvement plan, 14 candidates were able to utilize the support provided by the improvement plan process and complete course and clinical practice expectations, avoiding an NC grade at the end of the semester.

Our university saw a success rate of 66.7% within the first semester of implementing revisions to the improvement plan process. When we broke down the data for further analysis, we found that 4.7% of improvement plans were created for BIPOC candidates, and 47.6% were developed for candidates who were either interns or teachers of record. We found that during the spring 2022 semester, six different instructors/university supervisors initiated improvement plans, and overall, 42.9% of improvement plans were generated by credential program administrators.

At the conclusion of the semester, these data were cross-referenced with the number of NC grades given during the semester. We found that seven NC grades were given across both the single- and multiple-subject credential programs. However, only one of these candidates had an improvement plan, demonstrating a need to continue improving this early intervention practice to better support credential candidates.

We also surveyed university supervisors at the end of the semester to

measure confidence and competence regarding identifying credential candidates needing support and initiating improvement plans to better support them. We found that 100% of supervisors who engaged in the improvement plan training sessions post-survey found the improvement plan scenario discussions helpful. When asked if they used the process map and/or the supervisor checklist during candidate meetings to determine potential improvement plans with their current candidates, 50% of supervisors indicated that they used these new tools. Although only 50% of supervisors used these tools to identify potential candidates who needed improvement plans, 75% of supervisors had a student who potentially needed one.

Our research team continued this work in the fall 2022 semester when we began integrating elements from the study's second phase by infusing a DEI lens into the university supervisor training sessions regarding improvement plans. This lens was added to the improvement plan simulations with which supervisors practiced, prompting fruitful discussion regarding working with diverse populations of students and helping credential candidates identify and work through issues regarding DEI in their respective clinical practice spaces. After the second semester of this work, we found that nine improvement plans were implemented to further support credential candidates, with a success rate of 55.6%. Of the total improvement plans created for students this semester, 22.2% were for BIPOC candidates.

Looking at all improvement plans created during the fall 2022 semester, our team found five different supervisors identified a need and initiated an improvement plan to help support candidates. Of the nine improvement plans generated, 33.3% were developed and implemented by credential program administrators. When cross-referencing these data with NC grades for the semester, we found that six NC grades were given between the single- and multiple-subject credential programs and, three of these students had improvement plans. Four of the total number of improvement plans generated in the fall 2022 semester were rolled over into the following semester as candidates continued to work toward improvement plan action items and goals to complete program requirements successfully. Faculty and program director support remained

ongoing until candidates successfully met their program requirements.

After the fall 2022 semester, our research team again polled university supervisors to document changes in ideology and processes. When asked how they had changed in their approaches to supervising after receiving training throughout the semester, we found that the majority of supervisor feedback was overwhelmingly positive. One supervisor stated,

I have changed my mindset to think first [about] what support I can give that candidate. Many of my students have so much on their plates, and it is challenging for them to juggle work, school, family, etc. Because of this, my first thought now is how can I better support them? How can I make it work for them and be more flexible while holding my expectations? It has been very helpful.

Another supervisor stated that they appreciated being guided through a more thoughtful and objective approach. Additionally, numerous comments indicated an interest in the new process, appreciation for the clarity of the improvement plan process, and provided reflections on candidates' needs.

These data demonstrate that the first year of the study has been successful in increasing the number of improvement plans to minimize the number of NC grades given. Figure 1 displays the improvement plan data from the previous 2 years and the first year of the study. In the first semester of the study, Figure 1 shows a substantial increase in the number of improvement plans developed. Although the second semester, fall 2022, showed a decrease in the number of improvement plans, the number of improvement plans was still higher than it had been in the previous 2 years. Cross-referencing NC grades over the same period supported the researchers' hypothesis that an increased number of improvement plans would yield fewer NC grades, as shown in Figure 2.

### **Discussion**

In the first year of the study (Phase 1), our research team found the revised improvement plan process and corresponding university supervisor training sessions to be successful, as supervisor confidence and competence in identifying candidates needing support and developing improvement plans had increased. Data from university supervisor surveys have indicated thus far that the revision process and the corresponding

improvement plan training sessions have increased competence and confidence in implementing improvement plans for credential candidates when they demonstrate a need for additional support.

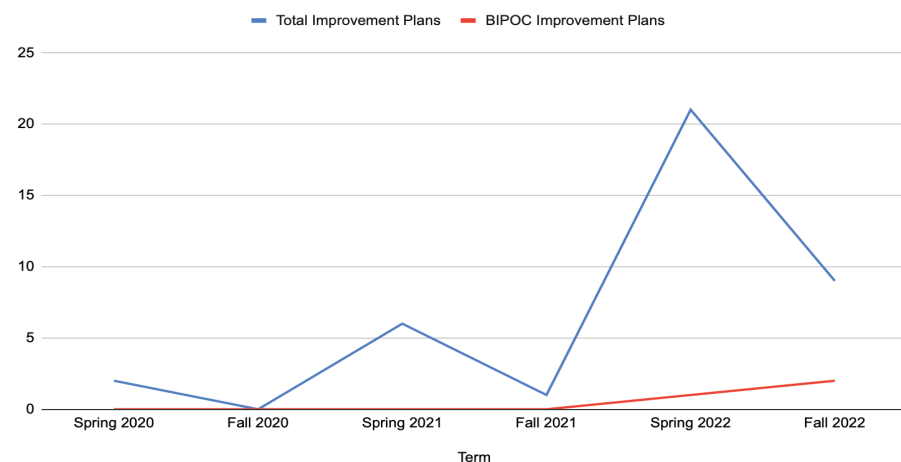
When we looked at the number of supervisors who identified and initiated an improvement plan during the first year of the study, we found that nine different supervisors created at least one improvement plan, representing 32% of supervisors. We also found that 30% of these improvement plans were developed by a credential program administrator.

Although NC grade and improvement plan data illustrate that there is still work to do to effectively intervene when candidates demonstrate an area needing improvement, our research team finds the preliminary data from the first year of the study promising. For instance, we found that the number of improvement plans developed to better support candidates increased from previous years, while the number of NC grades decreased. When cross-referencing these data with the number of NC grades given, we found that although the number of students who received an NC grade was very low for both semesters of the study, none of the students had an improvement plan during the first semester, and 50% of the students who received an NC grade had an improvement plan the second semester. From these data sources, we have concluded that although the number of improvement plans has increased, demonstrating a greater level of support for credential candidates, some students' needs are still being missed, and they are not receiving these additional layers of support.

While we are not yet where we would like to be, these initial data demonstrate that the improvement plan revisions and implemented training have had a positive impact on both students and faculty. Data support claims that improvement plans can assist in scaffolding an approach toward student improvement and success when candidates demonstrate a need for additional support. Although the preliminary goal was to increase support for credential candidates through the development of improvement plans, we found that the support provided through the improvement plan process also worked to rehumanize aspects of the program and interactions with candidates by acknowledging the social and emotional needs of candidates in addition to their academic needs.

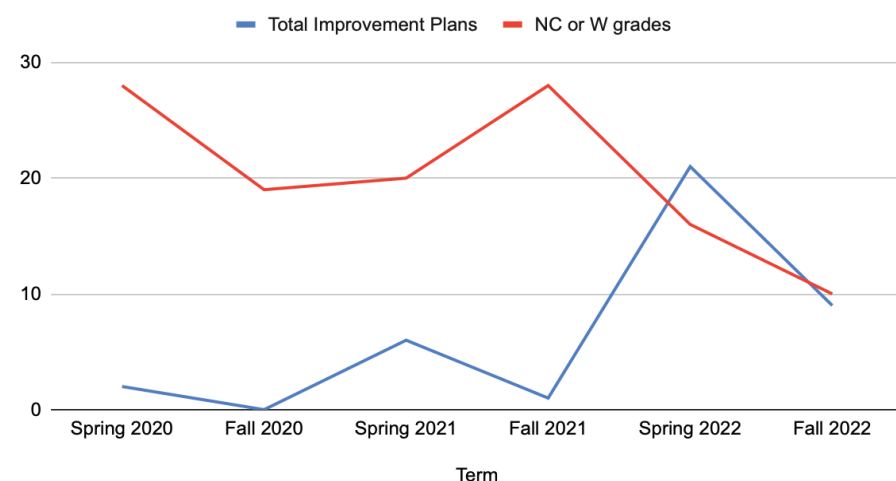
**Figure 1**

Improvement Plan Data for Multiple and Single Subject Credential Programs



**Figure 2**

Total Improvement Plans and NC or W grades



Along with the structural revisions to the improvement process and the additional DEI training sessions for supervisors to work toward more effective and equitable practices with credential candidates, the program director made a conscious effort to rehumanize the process further by checking in with candidates both academically and otherwise and by building a co-constructive element into the development of improvement plans.

As a result, all initial meetings with the candidate, university supervisors/faculty members, and the program director start with checking in with the student. Although this may seem simple, asking candidates how they are doing—academically and otherwise—has helped establish a more caring, supportive environment before

discussing concerns and areas of improvement.

Once the program director has discussed concerns and drafted action items with the student, the candidate can suggest additional action items and methods of support that they might find helpful. After all parties have agreed upon action items and other embedded support, the improvement plan is enacted, and a follow-up meeting is scheduled to discuss progress. These check-in meetings continue until the candidate demonstrates that they no longer need the support in place.

In this initial phase of the improvement plan process, students indicated that they were struggling with some components of their clinical practice experiences, frequently aligning with the concerns of their university supervisors.

By starting the meetings asking candidates how they are doing academically and otherwise, we have found that candidates are often aware of which areas they need to improve but are unsure how and where to get support. This has been an interesting emerging theme in working with credential candidates with improvement plans.

Understanding that most candidates' undergraduate college experience had been virtual for 2 years with little direct, in-person communication with faculty and staff, our research team hypothesized that candidates had become accustomed to being independent and disconnected from university faculty and staff due to the pandemic and potentially unaware that they could reach out for assistance when needed or were uncomfortable doing so.

While some candidates indicated the steps they attempted to take to rectify the obstacles they were encountering, the majority of the candidates felt stuck and unsure of where to get assistance to move forward on a path toward success. Many of the candidates who were identified as needing an improvement plan could self-identify that they were having difficulties in the program, but the majority of these candidates indicated that they were unsure of their next steps.

This was particularly evident among candidates categorized as interns or teacher-of-record credential candidates because they were hired as classroom teachers while simultaneously going through the credential program. Recognizing this emerging pattern, we returned to the data to see the percentage of candidates with improvement plans who were interns or teachers of record. We found during the first semester of the study, 47.6% of candidates with improvement plans were interns or teachers of record. During the second semester of the study, 22.2% of candidates with improvement plans were interns or teachers of record.

These data are significant because interns and candidates who are teachers of record have very different experiences in the program, given the amount of time they spend in the classroom and handling corresponding classroom responsibilities. It is our hypothesis that these candidates are stretched thin; they are both full-time teachers and full-time students and thus have less time to fully immerse themselves in the credential program and connect with faculty. This data and study component should be revisited

and analyzed further to improve the experiences of interns and candidates who are teachers of record.

The efforts to rehumanize processes and better connect with credential candidates, particularly those who demonstrate a need for additional support, have helped to change the tone and dynamics of the improvement plan meetings. This includes delegating what needs to be done to be successful and creating collaborative meetings to brainstorm ways to better support candidates needing additional assistance. Throughout the first year of the study, our research team found that the majority of the candidates actively participated in the co-construction of their improvement plans.

Not only were many of these candidates able to identify the areas they needed to improve at the start of the improvement plan meetings, but they were also willing to participate in the construction of their action items as a scaffold toward a path to success. The open-dialogue construction of the improvement plan meetings created an inclusive environment where candidates felt welcome to participate.

The director, university supervisor, and credential candidate discussed the obstacles and challenges the candidate faced and engaged in constructive dialogue to create support for the candidate. In some instances, candidates' unique obstacles and difficulties came to the surface, prompting the team to think outside the box and work with district partners to create new pathways to support the candidate's success.

This co-constructive approach to revising the improvement plan process has lent itself to students co-constructing measurable action items based on their areas of need. This allows credential candidates to take ownership of their improvement plans and has had a profound effect on the tone of the improvement plan meetings, from those that previously had a disciplinary nature to those that now involve collaborative support. Through these discussions, the triad of the program director, university supervisor, and credential candidate can discuss obstacles and challenges the candidate faces and collaboratively brainstorm ways to support the candidate and scaffold an approach toward success.

Through these collaborative efforts, the triad can think outside the box and offer personalized support for candidates. The process has worked

to rehumanize elements of the clinical practice and overall credential program experience for candidates. Candidates appreciate and demonstrate feelings of being heard as faculty and staff work together to support candidates based on their strengths and areas where they need improvement. The conversational tone and co-constructive elements built into the revised improvement plan process have yielded positive results and indicated additional areas for improvement.

## Conclusion

With the shuttering of schools due to the global pandemic, educators and students had to shift to accommodate many obstacles and barriers regarding access to education. Through the experience of the pandemic, inequities that were always present in our education system became more evident, posing immediate challenges for educators. In addition to inequities in access to technology and education, students became isolated. They suffered a void of social interaction, which catalyzed other obstacles and challenges. While much attention has been paid to the ways the pandemic has impacted K–12 education, less attention has been given to the pandemic's impact on higher education, particularly on teacher credential programs.

The Bakersfield CTEPP team is an improvement-science-based research group committed to strengthening the recruitment, preparation, and retention of BIPOC credential candidates. Acknowledging that a safe, inclusive program is the first step to fostering and strengthening recruitment and retention and recognizing the inequities that were made visible during the pandemic, our research team was motivated to critically analyze our teacher credential program to gain a better understanding of the experiences and levels of support BIPOC candidates receive.

Through preliminary analysis of program data and processes, our research team identified the clinical practice element of the credential program as a high-leverage area where we could begin to enact change. We created inquiry-based PDSA cycles to study changes that could be applied to enhance the clinical practice experience of credential candidates. Initially, we sought to increase the development and implementation of improvement plans for credential candidates and consequently reduce the

number of credential candidates receiving NC grades. When analyzing the results of the increased improvement plans, we also identified a rehumanizing element to the work taking place. Based on interactions with candidates and secondhand accounts from university supervisors, we found that the profound sense of isolation and disconnectedness that credential candidates experienced during the pandemic still exists to some degree.

The first year of the study has allowed our research team and faculty to analyze program processes and revise efforts to best support and meet the needs of diverse credential candidates. Recognizing the pandemic's impact on credential candidates and their experiences throughout the credentialing process, we hypothesized that the isolation felt during the pandemic continues to challenge candidates as they enter a post-pandemic world. Finding rehumanizing elements within the preliminary results of this study has motivated faculty to continue to identify areas in which improvement in communication and connection with students is needed to enhance credential candidates' experiences in the program.

Overall, the CTEPP is committed to pursuing this work and has moved to Phase 2 of the study while continuing to support the foundation created from Phase 1. This effort allows us to continue to better understand the needs of credential candidates to enhance program experiences. We intend to maintain this work by creating PDSA cycles as outlined earlier. It is the hope of the CTEPP team that as this work continues, we will identify further areas for improvement to enhance the experience of credential candidates, particularly BIPOC candidates, and thus will be able to recruit, prepare, and retain more teachers of color.

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