

The Psychosocial and Emotional Impact of Classroom Community Building in Teacher Candidates:

A Holistic Approach

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Received May 2023

Accepted for publication August 2023

Published May 2024

Abstract

The present study investigated the effects of classroom community building (CB) on the psychosocial and emotional domains in 38 teacher candidates, enrolled in an arts-integration-across-the-elementary-curriculum methods course. The interplay between arts-based content knowledge, interpersonal experience, and self, had multiple benefits across both domains. A thematic analysis indicated a positive impact on five major psychosocial skills. Participants also gained metacognitive understanding of their emotional engagement, improved mental health and self-awareness. Implications of a curriculum model integrating course content and CB in teacher education programs are discussed.

Keywords: *classroom community building, teacher education, preservice teachers, social and emotional learning, holistic education, arts integration*

The present study investigated the effects of classroom community building (CB) on the psychosocial and emotional domains in 38 teacher candidates (TCs), enrolled in an arts-integration-across-the-elementary-curriculum methods course. The student-centered curriculum provided a holistic approach that integrated arts-based content knowledge, self-reflection, and interpersonal engagements, through which

classroom CB was experienced and expanded throughout a semester-long course.

Statement of the Problem and the Socio-Political Context

TCs are typically young adults, who fall within the age range of 18-22. The study's focus on the psychosocial and emotional domains of TCs was

triggered by alarming reports indicating that young adults, also identified as Generation Z (Gen Z), have experienced a heightened increase in mental health problems and a rise in suicide rates as compared to previous generations (American Psychological Association, 2018).

The 12th Annual Stress in America Survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) in 2018, reported that among the top causes for the mental health crisis affecting youth ages 18-21 was the concern for the state of the nation, including mass shootings and general gun violence, racial tension, as well as the social and political unrest. Other factors identified in the APA's report included increased concern regarding global warming, and stress caused by debt and work uncertainty.

The popularity of social media use among Gen Z and its detrimental effects on youth's mental health have been extensively reported. Findings corroborated across multiple studies indicate a correlation between the many hours Gen Z spend online and feelings of isolation, less time cultivating meaningful relationships, and frustration over comparing their body image and lives with those of others, all of which are causes leading to depression and anxiety (Alonzo et al., 2021; Annie E. Cassie Foundation, 2023; Berryman et al., 2018; Nesi, 2020).

The Covid-19 Pandemic significantly worsened mental health problems among this population world-wide. According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO) (2022), youth ages 18-22, was one of the demographic groups worst affected by the pandemic. This age group showed a staggering 28% increase in depression and 26% increase in anxiety (Santamauro, 2021). Moreover, these mental health challenges had a noticeable impact on student academic

performance, especially among racial minorities and those living in vulnerable environments (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). In fact, the pandemic's emotional toll has not waned, and the WHO (2022) has publicly made a call to expand the modes of mental health support.

Responding to the WHO's Call

Higher education institutions have a responsibility to respond to the present mental health crisis affecting young adults. Indeed, most colleges and universities already offer their students psychological services and extra-curricular activities, which can be conducive to improved mental health. Notwithstanding, integrating other types of interventions that promote psychosocial and emotional well-being in the classroom setting could reach students who may be struggling or otherwise not receiving the services their institutions provide. The present study emerged as an attempt to respond to the WHO's call to expand the modes of mental health support, particularly within the context of the teacher education classroom.

Despite extensive research documenting the many benefits of classroom CB on children (e.g. Hass, 2020; Morcom, 2014; National Association of Young Children, n.d.; Watson et al., 2019), including the effect on their cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional development (Schaps et al., 2004), recent research involving CB in higher education is minimal. The scant studies, mostly conducted during or post pandemic, may indicate limited application of such practice at this level.

It is worth noting that although classroom CB is quite popular in the elementary grades, somewhere along the schooling experience, it becomes less visible. By the time students reach higher education, CB has been practically erased

from the curriculum and superficially understood for *what it is not*: Usually a one-time, often frivolous, icebreaker (Bersh, 2021).

The research reported herein, investigated the effects of consistent and purposeful classroom CB on the psychosocial and emotional domains on a sample of TCs. This was a holistic approach to advance the goal of expanding the modes of mental health support for this population. The study is significant in contributing to the recent emerging research in this field, specifically as it relates to holistic practices in teacher education.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding the study were:

Research Question 1: What were the TCs' perceptions of the psychosocial effects of participating in consistent CB activities in a semester-long, arts integration methods course?

Research Question 2: What were the TCs' perceptions of the emotional effects of participating in consistent CB activities in a semester-long, arts integration methods course?

Literature Review

This section discusses the body of research that sets the theoretical grounding for the present investigation. The review of the literature covers the following themes: 1) Classroom community building: Definitions, psychosocial and emotional benefits, and CB in higher education and teacher education; 2) Social emotional learning: Definitions, the CB-SEL connection, and its value in teacher education; 3) 21st century learning and its relevance to the study; and 4) Theoretical framework for the course's CB model design.

Classroom Community Building

Definitions

Rand and Snyder (2021) define *classroom community* as "(...) a distinct group of individuals coming together with common learning goals (...) shared experiences and social space" (p. 144). Adams and Wilson (2020) describe it as creating a space within the classroom, in which students and instructors are committed to sharing learning goals through frequent social interaction and collaboration. Lai (2015) expands the concept of a learning community to one in which both students and instructors engage in collective inquiry and provide each other with academic and social support.

Psychosocial and Emotional Benefits

The multiple benefits of CB cannot be underestimated. Research shows that when students feel they belong to their classroom community, they experience acceptance (e.g. Hass, 2020; Morcom, 2014; National Association of Young Children, n.d.; Watson et al., 2019). Moreover, the research corroborates that this sense of belonging allows them to care for and count on each other for cognitive, academic, social, and emotional support. Accordingly, this leads to an increased reflective and participatory engagement, resulting in higher levels of both students' responsibility toward their own learning and academic achievement (Berry, 2019; Bush et al., 2010; Watson et al., 2019).

Hass (2020), Howard (2020), and Steele and Cohn-Vargas (2013), emphasize that the most important duty of teachers is to learn who their students are. Classroom CB authentically informs educators about their students' identities and cultural backgrounds, what issues are important to them, and what are their individual strengths and needs. In short, classroom CB can be seen as a

strategic tool, which enables educators to attain a more holistic and comprehensive view of their students.

As active participants of their classroom community, students feel more visible, sense that their voices are being heard, and develop a sense of belonging (e.g. Hass, 2020; Luetkemeyer, 2021; Williams-Duncan, 2020). They also experience safer classrooms (e.g. Rand & Snyder, 2021; Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013), where positive relationships among peers and within the teacher-student dynamic are cultivated (Hass, 2020; Luetkemeyer, 2021; Lanas, 2017; Rand & Snyder, 2021; Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013).

This collection of feelings is directly connected with psychosocial and emotional well-being. In fact, O'Keefe (2013) reported that students who perceived an overall higher level of belonging in their classrooms had better psychological outcomes than those who did not.

Classroom CB promotes students' ability to interconnect identity awareness and making meaning. It sets the social environment to construct and share learning, and to develop social emotional learning (SEL) (e.g. Hass, 2020; Rand & Snyder, 2021; Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013). The very nature of CB activities nurtures a healthy exchange of students' and teachers' cultures and beliefs, which leads to advancing intercultural competence, equity, and social justice (Bersh, 2021; Hass, 2020; Lanas, 2017; Steel & Cohn-Vargas, 2013; Williams-Duncan, 2020).

As previously mentioned, classroom CB is commonplace in many elementary schools. The National Association of Young Children (n.d.) identified that this practice is especially important in the early grades, as children become socialized into the academic environment. For example, Hass

(2020) has built classroom communities with his kindergarten students, which has resulted in developing respect, increased student participation and ownership of their own learning. CB has elicited curiosity in further exploration of topics that are of interest to them, are relevant to their lives, and engage them in cross-cultural understandings. Hass's CB experience has supported his students' development in their cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional domains, as well as advancing an impressive multicultural competence, quite remarkable for these very young students.

Williams-Duncan (2020) discussed cross-cultural CB strategies explaining their benefits in improving interpersonal interactions within diverse educational settings. Promoting cross-cultural communication through CB activities afforded opportunities for both students and teachers to 1) increase self-awareness and awareness of others, and 2) develop empathy and active listening, which validated the voice of the speaker. These benefits in the psychosocial and emotional domains reinforced positive relationships and feelings of inclusivity, necessary for "students' well-being and academic achievement in growing multicultural school communities" (p. 21).

Morcom (2014) focused on classroom CB as a student-centered, socio-cultural approach, resulting in participative decision-making and increased collaborative skills, calling attention to the critical role of emotions and relationships in cognitive development.

A general conclusion about classroom CB can be drawn from this section: The evidence identifies multiple benefits of this practice, not only in the psychosocial and emotional domains. Additional benefits extend to the cognitive domain, academic achievement, and advancing intercultural

competence, equity, and social justice. Given the limited recent publications about this topic in higher education, most of the references cited above pertain to the CB effects on elementary students. The following section discusses the recent review of the literature regarding classroom CB in higher education, specifically as it homes in on teacher education.

CB in Higher Education and Teacher Education

Murphy and Levinson's recent publication (2023) highlights classroom CB as one of the best current practices in higher education, both in online and face-to-face class formats. According to the authors, CB promotes student-centered learning environments that not only nurture students' sense of belonging and emotional well-being. It also facilitates inclusive collaboration among college/university students, engaging them in cooperative learning and increasing student participation.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, as the pressing issue on how to continue youth's education arose, the online classroom became a practical solution (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). In higher education, an emerging interest in including CB experiences into online classes stood out in the review of the literature. Several studies exposed the diversity of these CB experiences, as they aimed at responding to students' different needs according to their educational level and field of study (e.g. Adams & Wilson, 2020; Berry, 2019; Venkatesh et al., 2021).

Specifically in teacher education, CB activities integrated into online classes during the pandemic, led to safe and positive environments, in which trust was developed between TCs and with their instructors (Luetkemeyer, 2021; Rand & Snyder, 2021). Luetkemeyer (2021) reported that the inclusion of online classroom CB resulted in

TCs experiencing a sense of belonging, mutual care, and respect. Moreover, TCs' participation became more enthusiastic, as they "expressed their personal and professional concerns (...) and commiserated over shared experiences" (p. 157). Finding the CB's holistic benefits on her students, Luetkemeyer made the case for integrating this practice in both online and in-person settings.

Incorporating SEL principles was the online CB strategy Rand and Snyder (2021) applied to address TCs' socio-emotional needs. This approach promoted supportive and engaging educational environments, which fostered positive behavioral and cognitive development.

A conclusion can be drawn from these recent examples of CB integration in higher education, and especially in teacher education: The cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional benefits of this practice in young adults mirror those found in younger students. This is a noteworthy observation that underscores the positive impact classroom CB has on students at all educational levels.

Social Emotional Learning

Definitions

Weissberg et al. (2015) and Osher et al. (2016) define SEL as the process of developing and implementing goal-setting competencies, learning how to manage emotions, and developing effective intrapersonal and interpersonal skills.

According to Osher et al. (2016), these competencies involve developing self-awareness, awareness of others, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Additionally, Yoder (2014) asserts that these SEL competencies can be taught through self-reflection, self-assessment, and cooperative learning.

CB-SEL Connection: The Value in Teacher Education

CB practices are included in the SEL curriculum in many elementary schools producing consistent positive results in children's development across cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional domains (Schaps et al., 2004). Therefore, TCs need to learn about SEL to be able to transfer these skills to their own students. Perhaps more importantly, they need to experience SEL to understand its value as it relates to their own holistic development. Moreover, Venkatesh et al. (2021) claim that providing holistic support to students in higher education generates well-being, can reduce anxiety, and promotes retention. In teacher education, Rand and Snyder (2021) emphasize the value of a holistic instructional approach as it models teaching the whole child.

21st Century Learning

Kereluik et al.'s model for 21st century learning (2013) identified essential humanistic skills, including, among others, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, such as emotional awareness and cultural competence. In this model, meta knowledge, including communication and collaboration, is also a top requirement for success in today's world. More recently, Chalkiadaki (2018) compiled a systematic literature review of 21st century skills and competencies implemented in different countries, which mostly overlap with those included in Kereluik et al.'s model. A prominent finding in Chalkiadaki's research was pinpointing *creativity* as one of the most discussed intrapersonal skills. The author also identified *playfulness* as an essential intrapersonal and interpersonal skill.

The inclusion of SEL in CB is, therefore, a practical strategy to address multiple 21st century skills.

Considering its significance, it may serve as a holistic model to apply in higher education. This is especially important in teacher education, as TCs need to learn about and transfer both SEL and 21st century skills to their own students.

Theoretical Framework for the Course's CB Model Design

The development of the classroom CB activities in the present study merged course content with SEL, 21st century skills and arts-based CB models in higher education. The model's design integrated frameworks from Hod and Ben-Zvi's learning communities (2018), grounded on Carl Rogers's person-centered therapy and education theories (1961); Mreiwed et al. (2017) drama-based CB; and Chappell & Chappell's model (2016) framed within critical arts-based pedagogies.

Hod and Ben-Zvi's holistic CB model (2018) for students in higher education, integrated course content, humanistic knowledge, and a person-centered approach, which resulted in academic improvement among the students. Mreiwed et al.'s (2017) drama-focused CB model for TCs, was rooted in the social, postmodern notion of community that fosters a sense of belonging, trust, and safety. The implementation of this model provided an optimization in inclusivity, collaboration, and TCs' self-knowledge.

Chappell & Chappell's model (2016), framed within critical arts-based pedagogies, promoted social inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse students in higher education, through various art forms. In this model, students engaged in activities of academic depth and complexity, resulting in expanded self-awareness in affective domains, relational knowledge, and arts-based inquiry. This group of students learned through multiple modalities and literacies. As was the case

in previously cited models, these students broadened their perspectives and increased problem-solving skills.

Methodology

Institutional Profile

The research was conducted at a highly ranked university located in the mid-west. Currently, there are over 15,000 students enrolled in more than 200 academic programs. The university has a diverse student body with 18% students of color and more than 1,175 international students. There are 1,600 faculty and staff, including 700 teaching faculty. The university is increasing on-line programs to extend educational accessibility across and outside the state, and expand opportunities, especially for non-traditional students.

Participants

The 38 TCs who participated in the study were enrolled in their last semester prior to student-teaching in the Elementary Education Program. All participants were traditional students, ages 20-22. Table 1 summarizes the participants' gender and race/ethnicity demographics.

Table 1

Table Showing the Distribution of Participants' Gender and Racial/Ethnic Identification

Gender		Racial Identity	
Female	31	White	35
Male	7	Black	1
		Latinx	1
		American Indian	1

Course Description

The CB experience took place during the 2022-2023 academic year, in an undergraduate methods course, *Integrating Creative Arts and Physical Education into the Elementary Classroom*. This course is also designated as *writing intensive*. It is one of three culminating core courses in the Elementary Education Program, leading to teacher licensure. TCs take this course during the semester prior to student-teaching.

The course met for 16 class sessions, each lasting three hours, and 25 minutes. The sessions were spread out twice a week during eight weeks throughout the semester, intertwined with eight weeks TCs spent in the field. This format allowed TCs to apply what they learned in their core courses with students in public elementary schools through a variety of assignments.

The course followed a predictable thematic module structure (see Appendix for modules' themes). Given the value the university places on cultural diversity inclusion, and the College of Education emphasizes integration of anti-racist education, these were tenets embedded across the course's curriculum.

The module structure opened with CB activities, followed by written reflections, warm-ups, short lectures, videos, group discussions, extension application activities, and collaborative small peer group (SPG) work. Additional CB activities were often integrated into these class segments. The module structure was sporadically modified to include TCs' presentations and mini lessons.

CB Activities

The opening CB activity set the tone for the class session. CB activities were predominantly arts-based to align with the module's theme.

Others involved team games, creative writing, collaborative SPG creative explorations or in-class project-based learning, and mindful practices, such as yoga and meditation. The activities were developed according to the model designed for this purpose, merging each theme's content with SEL, related 21st century skills, and arts-based CB models described in the theoretical framework. See Appendix for full list of CB activities as aligned with each module's theme, CB prompts or purpose, and CB modes of engagement.

Data Collection

The study used archived data from the 38 TCs' self-reflections written at the end of the course. These reflections were guided by a semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire. For the purpose of the present study, the data were extracted from the responses that addressed the effects of CB, specifically related to the participants' psychosocial and emotional domains. The guiding questions were:

- 1) What were the benefits (or not) of the CB activities in this course?
- 2) How have (or have not) CB activities impacted you in the psychosocial domain?
- 3) How have (or have not) CB activities impacted you in the emotional domain?

Data Analysis

This investigation was grounded in qualitative methods, specifically inductive thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017). This method uses a data-driven approach to generate codes and develop themes based on the words that describe the participants' experiences, understandings, and social processes.

The analysis followed the semantic coding process in inductive thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017).

To minimize the influence of the researcher's subjectivity, codes were drawn from the word frequency in the data. Following, the codes were categorized according to semantic relevance to generate preliminary sub-themes, which were further categorized into broader themes. Coding and theme development were guided by the study's research questions for validity purposes.

To ensure reliability, a graduate student-worker, who supports faculty in their research work, verified the frequency of the codes, and provided input regarding the validity of the preliminary sub-themes and the broader themes (interrater reliability).

Findings and Discussion

The findings focused on the most salient themes and sub-themes identified by the highest frequencies and categorized by semantic relationships (Terry et al. 2017). Combining the findings and the discussion seemed appropriate given the nature of thematic analysis.

Section 1 discusses the findings regarding the psychosocial effects, followed by Section 2, which discusses the findings regarding the emotional effects. Each section includes: 1) A table summarizing the findings; 2) a summary of conclusions from the data analysis as they corroborate previous research or expand on it; and 3) excerpts from the raw data that support the themes and sub-themes.

Section 1: Psychosocial Effects

Table 2 summarizes the 5 main themes and their corresponding sub-themes indicating the TCs’ perceived benefits in the psychosocial domain.

Theme 1 Collaboration and interaction	Theme 2 Learning environment	Theme 3 Relationships	Theme 4 Connecting	Theme 5 Development of social skills
Learning from each other	Feeling like a family	Getting to know peers	Feeling heard and validated	Communication
Sharing: Ideas Feelings	Community support	New relationships	Connections with peers and professor through: Instruction	Respect
Experiences about course work	Belonging	Feeling closer	Action	Empathy
	Caring and trust	Socializing outside of class	Discussion	Acknowledging differences and different perspectives
			Reflection	

Theme 1: Collaboration and Interaction

Congruent with Mreiwed et al. (2017), *collaboration and interaction* were the most salient psychosocial effects. The TCs valued learning from their peers, and exchanging ideas, feelings, and experiences about course work.

Excerpt 1:

Doing variations or art together helped us bond and grow closer (...) It gave us a chance to talk about our own ideas free of judgment. We knew we could count on each other and were accountable to each other’s contribution to building a classroom community and peer group work.

Excerpt 2:

“We all got to collaborate with one another, we got to hear other/new ideas, we gave each other

praise when we liked an idea, and we became a little family.”

These psychosocial gains may indicate that CB is a strategy that can be used to teach collaboration and interaction, which are 21st century skills (Kereluik et al., 2013).

Theme 2: Learning Environment

In accordance with prior research (Luetkemeyer, 2021; Rand & Snyder, 2021; Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013), the TCs reported satisfaction within the *learning environment*, describing it as safe and welcoming. They reported feeling like a family, a sense of belonging, caring and trust.

Excerpt 3:

“I was able to share and hear others share, which is great for learning. I was able to hear where others are coming from (...) I feel is more like a

community, or a family, instead of just another class”.

Excerpt 4:

“There was always a safe and caring classroom environment. The professor always asked us if we felt comfortable doing something before we did it.”

Theme 3: Building Relationships

The TCs perceived building relationships as another major psychosocial benefit; a finding that coheres with previous research (e.g. Hass, 2020; Luetkemeyer, 2021; Lanas, 2017; Rand & Snyder, 2021; Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013). Getting to know their peers and developing new relationships that extended to out-of-class social gatherings, generated feelings of closeness.

Excerpt 5:

“Getting closer to my peers and comfortable with them allowed me to open up and build relationships [...] At times when I felt alone in the stress, I had my peers around me to get through it and I know that I was not alone in the process.”

Excerpt 6:

“As we became closer with each other, we started doing things together outside of class (...) to study at a peer’s apartment [...] We went out to eat at a restaurant and out on a day trip! I feel true friendships were built.”

After two years of isolation due to the pandemic, building in-person relationships with peers was a benefit the TCs highly valued.

Theme 4: Connecting

As relationships deepened, the TCs felt a strong connection, not only among their peers, but also with their professor.

Excerpt 7:

“Trustworthy friendships with my peers helped me build stronger connections with them.”

The participants also reported feeling heard and validated (Hass, 2020; Luetkemeyer, 2021; Williams-Duncan, 2020).

Excerpt 8:

“If there was not any community building in this class, it would have been just another stressful anxiety-ridden class. We built connections with both our peers and professor, and I strongly feel having a connection with a professor is a rarity. Overall, I felt comfortable, heard, energized and valued. I truly enjoyed this class.”

The data revealed that TCs developed connections through instruction, action, reflection and discussion. This finding is significant as it validates the CB’s value in integrating arts-based content knowledge, self-reflection, and interpersonal engagements.

Theme 5: Development of Social Skills

Evidence exposed TCs’ metacognitive insights regarding their development of social skills. This finding highlighted the importance of SEL in developing interpersonal competencies, as defined by Weissberg et al. (2015) and Osher et al. (2016). An increase in communication skills stood out; a gain that further develops this essential skill in 21st century learning (Kereluik et al., 2013).

Excerpt 9:

“I noticed I became a better communicator with my group as we worked together often. Bouncing ideas off each other helped me better understand the content and helped us all succeed.”

Excerpt 10:

“I realized that as I became more comfortable with CB, I also became more comfortable speaking and giving ideas or alternatives to my classmates without fear of judgment.”

Furthermore, the TCs realized having a greater sense of respect and empathy towards their peers and their professor (Luetkemeyer, 2021).

Excerpt 11:

“I developed empathy towards my peers and we all gained a deeper respect for each other.”

Excerpt 12:

“[When our professor] shares her own life stories, thoughts and feelings with us students, this helped build respectful and meaningful teacher-student relationships in her class.”

Alongside these areas of growth, the TCs attained a positive perception of the individual differences and diverse perspectives within the group.

Excerpt 13:

“Hearing stories from others that have not had the same background as yours increased my learning and cultural understanding.”

Excerpt 14:

“I was paying attention to what the speaker was saying and taking my thinking outside the box. I was also able to learn new perspectives of art from my peers and different cultures. This made me realize that art has different meanings for different people and cultures.”

This finding coheres with Chappell and Chappell’s findings (2016) and was an important gain as TCs need to develop intercultural competence (e.g.

Kereluik et al., 2013; Sandell & Bersh, 2021), given the increasing diversity among school-age students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Unintended Findings:

A significant unintended finding was that as TCs recognized the positive effects that CB had in their psychosocial development, they were able to reflect on the value of transferring this practice to their own classrooms.

Excerpt 14

“Creating things through art would be beneficial in my classroom as students could explore new materials, cultures and content. Community building can integrate different skills I can teach to my students.”

Excerpt 15:

“I can use what we learn in this class and apply it to our own students. CB is crucial for teaching the whole child, which I think is so important.”

These examples provide evidence of the metacognitive processes in which some of the TCs engaged. While they experienced CB as students, they were also thinking as teachers and how this practice could benefit their own students.

No negative effects pertaining to the psychosocial domain were reported.

Section 2: Emotional Effects

Table 3 summarizes the 4 main themes and their corresponding sub-themes indicating the TCs’ perceived benefits in the emotional domain.

Table 3

Table Summarizing Themes and Sub-Themes Related to the Emotional Domain

Theme 1 Mental health	Theme 2 Well-being	Theme 3 Confidence and engagement	Theme 4 Self-awareness
Improved mood	Happy to be in class	Expressing feelings and emotions	Identity
Self-esteem	Having fun	Expressing creativity	Connection with and reflection on self
Outlook on life	Feeling relaxed	Stepping out of comfort zone	Understanding emotions
Feeling calm	Feeling comfortable	Emotional engagement with course work	Connecting with life
Decrease of stress and anxiety		Motivation	Breathing
		Participation	

Theme 1: *Mental Health*

Interestingly, *mental health* was the most outstanding theme within the CB’s emotional effects. Several TCs disclosed needing support in coping with mental health problems, and reflected on how engaging in CB activities had that effect. This is noteworthy, given the study’s attempt to respond to the WHO’s call (2022) to expand the modes of mental health support.

Excerpt 16:

“I have been able to really reflect on my mental health through the community we built in class. It has been a very positive learning environment where we have been encouraged to reflect on our own thoughts and needs [...] Overall, my mental health improved.”

The TCs also acknowledged an improvement in their mood, self-esteem, and outlook on life. They also recognized feeling calm, with a concomitant decrease in stress and anxiety.

Excerpt 17:

“There were times I came into class in not the best mood but working with my peers and building a community together put me in a better mood.”

Excerpt 18:

“The activities we did helped me cope with my own mental health problems. They really helped with my depression as I had a better outlook on life.”

These excerpts illustrate the impact CB had on the TCs’ mental health improvement and highlight the value of this practice as a strategy to support young adults’ mental health in higher education.

Theme 2: *Well-Being*

TCs felt happy in class, being aware of laughing and having fun, and feeling relaxed and comfortable.

Excerpt 19:

"I found myself laughing and smiling a lot in community building activities which were mostly a lot of fun."

Excerpt 20:

"Feeling comfortable around peers and not feeling embarrassed to put ourselves out there, allowed confidence to grow."

These findings concur with studies such as Venkatesh's et al. (2021). They reify that providing holistic support to students in higher education generates well-being and normalizes their day-to-day challenges, reducing anxiety.

Theme 3: Confidence and Engagement

The results indicated TCs' increase in their confidence expressing their feelings and emotions and were resolute in expressing their creativity through different art forms. TCs' valued exploring their creativity through different means. This is a noteworthy skill, which is a top 21st century intrapersonal skill (Chalkiadaki, 2018).

Excerpt 21:

"There was a constant flow of new ideas and creativity within group work."

Excerpt 22:

"I have been pleased to see how well some of my projects turned out and truthfully it makes me feel good about myself [...] I gained confidence in expressing my thoughts, emotions and artwork."

TCs were also less reluctant to take risks by participating in activities that led them to step out of their comfort zone. This development led to a deeper emotional engagement with the course, higher motivation, and a more enthusiastic participation (Luetkemeyer, 2021).

Excerpt 23:

"Stepping out of our comfort zones was something that a lot of us needed. Taking the risk of trying something new together made us feel more relaxed and increased my motivation."

Theme 4: Self-Awareness

In accordance with previous research (Mreiwed et al., 2017; Osher et al., 2016; Williams-Duncan, 2020), results revealed an increase in TCs' identity and emotional awareness, which also addressed intrapersonal skills in 21st century learning (Kereluik et al., 2013).

Excerpt 24:

"I felt that I had my own identity from everyone else that made me feel special and I trusted I wouldn't be judged."

TCs also expanded self-knowledge by becoming mindful of their breathing (e.g. Garner, et al., 2018).

Excerpt 25:

"Since class is in the morning, I feel tired and not wanting to talk to people. But when I do a moving activity, it wakes me up, betters my breathing, and makes me more engaged in my own learning and participation."

Excerpt 26:

"One of the community building activities that impacted me the most emotionally was the yoga and meditation we did. I felt grounded and calm and more connected with my feelings and emotions."

Engaging in mindful breathing, either through yoga, meditation or interactive games that involved exercise, elicited introspection leading TCs to make deeper connections with their own lives and the immediate world around them.

No negative effects pertaining to the emotional domain were reported.

Implications and Conclusions

Consistent with the literature review, the present study revealed several positive effects of classroom CB on the psychosocial and emotional domains TCs experienced in an arts-integration-across-the-elementary-curriculum methods course. Frequent engagement in CB activities that aligned with thematic course content elicited TCs' metacognition about many of these benefits, including improved mental health. Embedding SEL in classroom CB could have implications for higher education as a strategy to respond to the present mental health crisis young adults are experiencing. Therefore, the CB-SEL connection calls for more intentional and visible ways to integrate this practice in the teacher education curriculum.

Concurrent with Chappell and Chappell's research (2016), learning with and about different art forms and involvement in CB activities impacted TCs' depth of content understanding, active engagement through multiple media and literacies, and a broader range of perspectives. Therefore, purposeful CB activities also fostered the TCs' development of several 21st century skills.

These conclusions are significant as TCs need to transfer these skills to their own students. In fact, an unintended outcome from the study exposed that TCs perceived classroom CB as a valuable pedagogical holistic strategy to do so. Consequently, a holistic pedagogical approach that authentically integrates classroom CB into course content could have implications for curriculum design in teacher education.

The results from this investigation add to the recent emerging research on the impact of classroom CB in higher education, specifically in

teacher education. Considering Murphy and Levinson's research (2023) that pinpoints classroom CB as one of the best current practices in higher education, there is a need for further research in this field.

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Appendix

This appendix displays the modules' themes, a brief description of the CB activity or activities related to the corresponding themes' content, the CB's prompts or purpose, and the CB's modes of engagement.

Module's theme	CB activity	Prompt or purpose	Mode of CB engagement
Introduction to the Arts- Visual arts	Imagery visualization: Drawing a cube Writing a poem about a color	Connect with self. Project aspects of one's personality through art elements Integrate creative writing, imagery, self-exploration and expression	SPG: Sharing poems and reflections. Whole group: Sharing personality traits.
Theories: Child development, multiple intelligences, brain research, and the arts	Multiple intelligences inventory	TCs classify themselves according to the type of intelligence with their highest score, forming subgroups	Subgroups: Discussing similarities and differences from their inventories.
Visual Arts: Media exploration	Creating a collective collage using mixed media.	Use visual arts to communicate non-verbally. Experience small group art therapy	SPG: Creating together. Whole group: Sharing insights from experience.
Dance, creative movement, P.E and health	Team game: Giants, Wizards and Elves SPG: Charades Whole group: Yoga	Integrate exercise, dramatic expression, and play. TCs represent a concept from the elementary curriculum through SPG charades.	SPG: Creating, playing and exercising together. Whole group: Sharing insights from yoga experience.
Music	Composing the soundtrack for a poem	Using simple instruments, TCs collaborate to compose a soundtrack to a given poem.	SPG: Composing together. Whole group: Sharing SPG performances and insights from experience.
Drama	Puppet show	Individual: Introduce yourself (as a puppet); Name, what you like about yourself, purpose in life. If you could help someone, who would they be? Why?	Whole group: Each TC introduces their puppet, or improvising skits between 2 or more puppets.

Arts integration: Deepening understandings	Creating and performing an original alternative Cinderella story	Integrate the arts into a collaborative original production.	SPG: Creating, composing, designing, improvising, and performing together. Whole group: Sharing SPG performances and insights from experience.
Arts integration across the elementary curriculum	Designing an integrated thematic unit for an elementary grade	Collaborate in curriculum design and development. Subject core areas must be integrated to different art forms	SPG: Designing and developing curriculum together.
