



## First-Year Teachers' Perceptions of Pre-Service Wellness and Physical Activity Integration Coursework and the First-Year Transition

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### Article Info

### ABSTRACT

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First-year teachers face a plethora of challenges as they enter the education profession. In addition to transitioning frameworks of pedagogy to real-world application, teachers are also learning to collaborate with colleagues and adjust to required curricula. Though pre-service teacher training can help mitigate some of the initial challenges for those who are entering the classroom for the first time, it is important that the training is effective and comprehensive. Teacher preparation coursework should address both subject-area pedagogy and supports that are available during first-year challenges in order to yield the best outcomes for its graduates. The present study aimed to explore the impacts of a wellness and physical activity endorsement program on first year teachers' preparedness and pedagogy as they entered the classroom. Using a phenomenological approach, the researchers utilized a focus group to measure first-year wellness and physical activity endorsement teachers' perceptions of coursework and its impact on pedagogy, preparedness, and usefulness of the endorsement program during the first year teaching experience. Following data analysis, three themes emerged as follows: (a) feasibility of putting it into practice; (b) sharing and collaboration; and (c) preparation is in the details. These findings suggest that the components of this wellness and physical activity endorsement program may help prepare and increase the self-efficacy for first year teachers, and could be applied to other programs in order to mitigate the challenges first year teachers encounter.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Teacher attrition across the globe has emerged as a major concern over the past decade, with nearly a third of all newly-hired teachers leaving the profession within the first five years (National Education Association, 2022; Whalen et al., 2019). Promising young teachers are leaving the profession at an alarming rate due to the expectations of carrying out the same tasks of an experienced teacher with limited support while learning new and complex parts of their daily routine: school environment, policies, curriculum, testing, and time-management (Barnum, 2023; Diliberti et al., 2021; Sözen, 2018). Subsequently, challenges during the transition from pre-service to first-year teacher can cause teachers to view their work as frustrating, unrewarding, and difficult, leading to an increase in resignations from the profession (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; National Education Association, 2022; Varghese, 2022).

### **First-Year Teacher Challenges**

Common challenges for teachers include time constraints, classroom management, and a robust curriculum. However, Sözen (2018) proposes that a first-year teacher's challenges emerge when they are not provided access to an effective mentor teacher and/or there is a lack of dedication to professional development. First-year teachers have also reported a lack of support from colleagues with regard to discipline and instructional practices (Cakmak et al., 2019), leading to feelings of isolation and even the loss of a first-year teacher. When a lack of instructional support is present teachers are less likely to utilize student-centered and innovative methods, which have been directly linked to improved student behavior, interest, joy, and responsibility for learning (Silva et al., 2021).

#### ***Lack of Instructional Support and Autonomy***

It is common for teachers to have minimal autonomy over the curriculum they are required to teach. This lack of autonomy coupled with limited availability of supplies, time, space, content knowledge, and self-efficacy tends to discourage first-year teachers from investing time into the implementation of innovative pedagogical approaches (Johnson & Dabney, 2018). Compounding this issue is a lack of professional autonomy regarding teachers' abilities to explore new teaching strategies, such as collaborative learning or student-centered methods. While first-year teachers may have been exposed to innovative pedagogy during their time in teacher preparation programs, the constraint over instructional autonomy may inhibit new teachers from transferring learned pedagogies during pre-service coursework to their classrooms (Whalen et al., 2019).

### **Addressing First-Year Transition Challenges**

#### ***Providing Support Mechanisms***

While there are a multitude of challenges first-year teachers encounter as they transition from pre-service teaching to a classroom of their own, administration and veteran teachers can ease this process through the use of collaboration. Collaboration may be stimulated by providing planned teacher collaboration days, relationship building opportunities (i.e., welcome clubs), and visiting other teachers' classrooms with clear intentions. When collaboration occurs, first-year teachers gain a sense of acceptance in their new environments, which helps foster their sense of belonging (Sözen, 2018). Beyond collaboration, Whalen et al. (2019) suggests providing opportunities for first-year teachers to observe peer teachers and then teach the lesson they observed to better understand and improve upon different teaching strategies and methods applicable to course content. Although this idea may resonate well in theory, first-year teachers report feeling anxiety and stress around seeking alternate sources of guidance and assistance from mentors or veteran teachers for instructional support (Dias-Lucy & Guirguis, 2017).

#### ***Cultivating Relationships***

Before first-year teachers can begin to overcome challenges regarding curriculum, Sözen, (2018) notes that school administrators should work to cultivate an environment that supports the development of healthy

social and professional relationships between colleagues. Fantilli and McDougall (2009) suggest administrators should promote and create a sense of schoolwide culture by developing a resource model. Within this model, teacher leaders are easily accessible to first-year teachers and can help mitigate the anxiety and stress first-year teachers may encounter soliciting assistance on their own. Additionally, providing first-year teachers with professional development on orientation programs that brief teachers on the curriculum and expectations regarding it can help to bridge the gap between pre-service and curriculum, mentorship, and overall expectations for first-year teachers.

### **The Role of Teacher Preparation Programs**

While the challenges for first-year teachers emerge once they have autonomy in their classroom, it has been suggested that core curriculum within teacher education programs should better address support mechanisms for the first-year teacher transition (Sözen, 2018). One way that teacher educators can better prepare first-year teachers is through the facilitation of discourse surrounding curriculum, research-based approaches to teaching, and new educational theories (Douglas, 2017). Cakmak et al. (2019) support this notion by stating that countries such as Turkey and Norway have begun to require more coursework regarding discourse around research-based, subject-specific methods.

The coursework on new and innovative pedagogies that pre-service teachers receive during teacher preparation is critical, as first-year teachers bring innovative and transformative approaches to teaching at their new schools (Whalen et al., 2019). However, it is not unusual for first-year teachers to be unable to share such pedagogies, as the barriers that they encounter can interfere with their capacity to reach beyond the minimum of just getting through daily tasks expected of new teachers. Despite these challenges, with administrative support, autonomy of curriculum and professional development, instructional support, and mentorships, new teachers may be able to utilize learned innovative methods in their classrooms, and even beyond into other facets of their new school (Sözen, 2018).

### **Developing Support Mechanisms Through a Wellness and Physical Activity Pre-Service Coursework**

The challenges of first-year teachers can certainly be consuming and if not addressed, such variables can inhibit growth in a teacher just beginning his/her career or even prompt a teacher to resign. However, if teacher preparation programs can cultivate programs and corresponding curricula that aim to promote the overall success of the first-year teacher transition, then such challenges might be successfully mitigated. One program that aims to both provide innovative pedagogy while also supporting first year teachers in navigating common challenges was instated in 2015 in a teacher education program at a University in the Southeastern United States. As an add-on to an elementary or special education teacher's license, a four-course teaching endorsement in wellness and physical activity integration (see Appendix A) was developed in 2014 and approved by the state's board of education in 2015. To our knowledge, this endorsement is the only one of its kind in the United States within a teacher education program.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The premise of this endorsement was to systematically design four scaffolded courses through a constructivist approach to provide pre-service teachers with the capacity to effectively create and implement an integrated standards-based curriculum consisting of all academic areas alongside wellness and physical activity (e.g., health and physical education standards). Simultaneously, the endorsement coursework provides students with effective tools to combat the challenges present during their first year of teaching as outlined in the literature above. These factors are taught and discussed within each course and students are provided opportunities to practice the skills learned through peer teaching, by developing an active classroom management plan to implement for daily tasks and routines once in student teaching, and an opportunity to develop and teach a fully integrated unit plan during their last semester with support from their mentor teacher, university supervisor, and the endorsement course teacher. This shift in developing assignments from a purely cognitive understanding to enacting the learned practices provides a theoretical lens of practice-based teacher education through which pre-

service teachers are asked to embody the pedagogy as opposed to being passive consumers of information (Hurlburt & Krutka, 2020).

Additionally, the endorsement provides a platform for pre-service teachers to transition smoothly into a classroom where they have been prepared to meet the social, physical, emotional, cognitive, and environmental needs of all students. Research indicates that when children's needs are met in the classroom, their academic and behavioral performance improves (Diamond, 2010). During the first two courses of the endorsement, students learn, develop, and enact standards-based wellness and physical activity integrated activities and lessons. This integrated and innovative approach to the elementary curriculum provides ample opportunities for pre-service teachers to not only learn the wellness and physical activity content but also to share it with teachers and implement it during their student teaching and receive real-time feedback. Ultimately, the underlying constructs of the wellness and physical activity integration courses aim to pair new and innovative methodologies in courses alongside support tools to aid pre-service teachers in bridging the gap of instruction, mentoring, management, and daily routine tasks from pre-service to in-service teaching.

## **METHOD**

### **Design**

In order to determine first-year teachers' perceptions of the four-course endorsement on their preparedness, ability to transition during their first year of teaching, impact on pedagogy, the usefulness of coursework, and student learning, a phenomenological approach was utilized. Phenomenology is a qualitative method that asserts humans can formulate meaning from the world around them through their personal experiences (Husserl, 1931; Hourigan & Edgar, 2020). More specifically, a phenomenological approach was employed through the lens of a focus group, in order to elicit more understanding than may be reached through individual interviews. Ultimately, leading to increased knowledge surrounding the teachers' lived experiences as it related to the impact of the endorsement courses on their first year of teaching. Thus, first-year teacher graduates of the wellness and physical activity endorsement participated in a focus group wherein the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: What are first-year teachers' perceptions of the wellness and physical activity endorsement coursework as it pertains to their pedagogy and students' learning?

RQ2: How do first-year teachers perceive the wellness and physical activity endorsement courses regarding their preparedness for their first year of teaching?

RQ3: What are first-year teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of the wellness and physical activity endorsement coursework as described through their first-year teaching experiences?

### **Research Instruments and Procedures**

All participants were first-year elementary teachers across Mississippi who had graduated with a wellness and physical activity endorsement from a teacher education program at a University in the Southeastern United States in May 2021. A recruitment email (see Appendix B) was sent to all 12 graduates of the wellness and physical activity endorsement who were currently teaching in their first year in Mississippi in April 2022. Thus, a convenience sample was utilized, as all possible participants had been part of the wellness and physical activity endorsement graduating class of 2021.

The focus group began at 4:45 p.m. Central Time and lasted for approximately 1.5 hours. It was both audio and video recorded via Zoom with verbal participant permission. Before the start of the focus group the researcher, who acted as the facilitator, read a script (see Appendix C) that shared the purpose and goals of the study with participants as well as the protocol for the focus group. As suggested by Stewart and Shadmasani (1990), all questions were developed so that they moved from general to more specific and were chronologically ordered with the most important foci of the research agenda first.

**Table 1**  
*First-Year Teacher Demographics*

Teacher	Grade	School District	Race	Gender
Yuri	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade	Oxford School District	African American	Female
Brianna	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade	Madison County School District	White	Female
Katie	2 <sup>nd</sup> Grade	Lafayette County School District	White	Female
Kayley	2 <sup>nd</sup> Grade	Lee County School District	White	Female
Sara	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade	DeSoto County School District	White	Female
Karina	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade	DeSoto County School District	African American	Female

### ***Focus Group***

A focus group was utilized for this research study to garner rich understandings of participants' perceptions and beliefs regarding their experiences as they pertained to the wellness and physical activity endorsement courses and their first year of teaching. Focus groups are employed by researchers to garner in-depth insight from participants regarding the topic under study (Morgan, 1998). There was already a level of comfort between the participants as they had previously taken coursework together. These prior relationships created a dynamic in the focus group that Jarett (1993) notes is beneficial in regard to self-disclosure. All participants openly shared their real-world experiences in alignment with the questions asked within the focus group. The use of group work played an important role in this research, as the focus group provided a unique platform for group members to clarify and express their views and perceptions more clearly, which would be much less accessible in a one-on-one interview (Kitzinger, 1995).

Out of the 12 participants invited to participate in the focus group, 6 participants (see Table 1) signed up for the focus group online and attended on May 10, 2022, via Zoom. Demographics of the participants consisted of 67% White and 33% African American. Zoom was chosen as the platform for data collection to make it accessible to all participants, as the teachers were still finishing up the school year in various geographic locations across Mississippi. After participants signed up for the focus group, a consent form approved by the University's Institutional Review Board was sent to each participant to sign and return to the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

The focus group data were first transcribed verbatim. During the transcription process, all participants were identified through the use of pseudonyms provided by the participants during the focus group. During the next phase of data analysis, the transcript was coded with a word or short phrase identifying the content of a sentence or paragraph utilizing MAXQDA, 2022 software (Qualitative Analysis Software, 2021) by the researcher and a graduate research assistant. This coding process enabled the researchers to make the raw data more sortable and thus provided a platform for examining and describing all data (Punch, 2013). After coding, the researcher and graduate research assistant met to compare and contrast their findings. Subsequently, the codes were synthesized for commonalities and categorized for further analysis to determine the underlying themes that emerged from the focus group.

### **FINDINGS**

Once the transcript was analyzed and data were coded, three underlying themes emerged from the focus group. These three themes were categorized as follows: a) feasibility of putting it into practice; b) sharing and collaboration; and c) preparation is in the details.

#### **Feasibility of Putting it into Practice**

##### ***Integrated Activities, Transitions, and Management Strategies***

As teachers reflected on how they had implemented what they learned through the wellness and physical activity endorsement courses different takeaways were shared regarding what they had been able to immediately



implement with ease during their first year of teaching. This theme is connected directly to research question one regarding first-year teachers' perceptions of the wellness and physical activity endorsement coursework as it pertains to their pedagogy and student learning.

Some teachers focused more on small strategies used in their classrooms, while others shared their ability to adapt activities, lessons, their own pedagogy, and tools learned during the endorsement courses. One outcome noted was the connection to academics, as teachers shared how they implemented integrated activities throughout the focus group. One teacher noted, *I haven't figured out how to implement everything yet, but my kids love when we do the ABC movement activity where we touch our shoulders for consonants and our toes when we say the vowels.* Another activity shared by a teacher was how she *used music and movement activity videos to get students engaged... It was a money dance where students would move and show the value of cents with their hands. My kids aced their math test that week.* Another integrated activity learned during the endorsement courses and put directly into practice by a first-year teacher was described as follows:

*We have vocab every week and I have hashtags that go along with our vocab that we do. At the beginning of the school year I created a hand motion for them to do, we stood up, and then went over vocab and I created the motion for them to do to go along with the word. As the year went on, I put them in groups and they created the motion for them to remember the word. I think that was very good for them. It helped them learn the word but it also got them up and moving so I think that they were able to you know sit there and take the test and then go, oh we did this and this helps me remember what this word means. So, I think that it definitely does help with their learning and just to get them up. I think that's the main thing!* (Katie, 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher)

Beyond instructional activities and lessons, one teacher mentioned the importance of some of the different movement activities utilized as transitions and management strategies learned during the endorsement coursework. Two teachers specifically noted their ability to feasibly implement brain breaks into their daily teaching routine. One teacher shared that she uses brain breaks as an opportunity to also reiterate what the students are learning:

*I make sure to do brain breaks in between different things and then for example, if we're learning something big, like we learned measurement, and I use their bodies for that. When we learned about money I had them use their hands and stuff for that so, all the things that they're using that they're able to touch and feel they love!* (Yuri, 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher)

Brain breaks were also noted as a tool for students to "regain their attention" during or between instruction as noted by the following teacher's comment:

*I do a lot of brain breaks. If I notice that they're getting sleepy or tired or they're not really paying attention I'm like okay, get up! And they're like [startled look]. They wake up a little bit and then we do a few things, but I think that brain breaks are the biggest thing for me.* (Sarah, 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher)

Another strategy that emerged during the conversation was the use of the "movement box," which is a strategy learned during the third endorsement course, EDWP 342, as a management tool for providing personal space in the classroom for students to move within. The following statement describes how one teacher introduced the movement box to her students at the beginning of the year and how she continues to use it:

*I just showed them what a music box is at the beginning of the school year. So every time we do anything physical, they know to get behind their chairs and get in their music box. And I also use it for brain breaks and different things like that. Oh, and I also have one student that cannot stay in her seat, so as long as she's in her music box, she's fine. But they definitely work, and it has helped with my patience as well.* (Yuri, 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher)

### **Flexible Seating**

Another recurring theme that teachers noted they were exposed to during the endorsement courses and able to immediately put into practice was flexible seating. One teacher's observation was that *if they are able to sit comfortably then they're more attentive to you.* The same teacher also noted that *flexible seating has been the*

*biggest thing I've implemented this year.* This notion was iterated by her experience with flexible seating during her first year of teaching as noted below:

*I've used a lot of flexible seating. And that has been beneficial for a lot of students. I have one kiddo that can't sit still whether he's on the floor or in his chair, anywhere it doesn't matter where he is, he can't sit still. So, at times the flexible seating has been good for him. So, it's kind of just going day by day to figure out what works for him, but overall, the class enjoys getting up and moving and being able to sit in something other than just a regular chair.* (Katie, 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher)

Flexible seating that was mentioned throughout the focus group were wobble chairs, stools, balance ball chairs, and floor cushions. While one teacher mentioned that she used "floor cushions" for her "reading center," another teacher noted that she used "round stools at her teacher table." Concerning students' reactions to flexible seating, one teacher noted the following:

*The kids like the ball chairs the best. It's neat to see them use those because they haven't had that in kindergarten or first grade and I'm teaching second grade. So, when they walked in and saw them on the first day of school, they were like oh my gosh what is that?* (Katie, 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher)

Although the students' reactions to the use of flexible seating were positive as noted by 4 of the 6 teachers in the focus group, one teacher noted her challenges with the use and implementation of flexible seating during her first year of teaching:

*I have four wobble chairs, I have the four stools, and then I had five bouncy ball chairs and somebody took a pencil to the side so I have four now. And then five of those cushion seats that I showed you, so 13 options. I think that if the school could, or any school was able to supply these things it might be a little easier that way everybody could have something and then the teacher could say 'hey this one works for so and so' and then you do it that way. And then you wouldn't have a problem of well he gets it and she doesn't and vice versa.* (Brianna, 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher)

### **Social-Emotional Tools and Teachable Moments**

Another component built into the endorsement courses are social-emotional wellness and tools for teaching social-emotional skills. This is an area that all of the teachers shared they had intentionally worked on throughout the school year. While some of the social-emotional instruction was required by their schools, much of it was in direct alignment with ways they had opportunities to practice it in the endorsement courses. One teacher noted that she used *books in the very beginning to talk about social-emotional skills*. A particular book and how the teacher aligned the activity to it is described below:

*We used I Promise which is a Lebron James book to come up with our own class promise. For example, I promise to be kind, I promise to respect others, I promise to help others, I promise to listen, I promise to take care of our classroom, and we promise to work hard, and we promise to have fun. So, I think that allowing them to help create those 'rules,' I don't like to call them rules, but just a promise that we follow was very fun for them in the beginning.* (Katie, 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade)

Beyond utilizing literacy to teach personal responsibility as a social-emotional skill, another teacher noted that *social awareness and how students speak to one another* was something she had to work on with students during her first year. This teacher also noted she had conversations with students about how *what we say with our words is important* and she described a kind words and compliment activity she implemented wherein students had to *write something nice about their classmates throughout the week and place them in a mailbox*. After students placed their positive compliments in the box, she noted that she told the class, *you see we have so many nice things, and a lot of times that's not our first reaction*. Another teacher noted that a lot of teaching social-emotional skills comes from *what we learned in your class.... Even just stopping to talk to them when they come up to me mad or frustrated and asking them why they are feeling that way*. The teacher went on to say that for students who have difficulties with self-regulation, she will *stop them and ask them to backtrack to have a conversation about why it escalated and what problem-solving we can do to move forward*. A final comment

about developing social-emotional skills was about affirmations, which are practiced throughout the endorsement courses.

*I guess motivational things like for social and emotional before we take the test, we say I'm smart, I know this material, and I will ace this test! That's definitely helping them just build their confidence, and assessments have definitely gone up. (Karina, 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher)*

### **Sharing and Collaboration**

Another theme that emerged from the teacher focus group was the capacity to share learned ideas from the endorsement courses and collaborate with team teachers. One teacher noted, *I share everything that I learned during the endorsement courses, and whatever I come up with I make sure to share it with my pod teachers.* This theme connects directly back to research question two and the usefulness of what the teachers learned during the wellness and physical activity endorsement. This teacher went on to elaborate and provided a detailed example of how she uses what she learned during the endorsement courses to collaborate with her team teachers:

*So, I'm in purple pod. I have taught them about the music boxes and also the physical activity as far as like, we were doing the butterfly life cycle. I remember in class [endorsement course] that it was a book that we read and then we had the shoes and we had all of the instruments that go with everything to tell the story. So, I was thinking let's do it with the butterfly life cycle and my kids got to reenact the butterfly life cycle and we had the butterflies so they had the whole nine. And then one of my pod teachers was talking about how they didn't do plays so I was like let me make this into a little play. Our kids loved participating in that lesson and collaborating with my pod was great! (Yuri, 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher)*

During the process of sharing about lesson development and management, the same teacher noted the following:

*I provided an example, so what it [my dance sequence] was supposed to look like, well I call it a little eight count and I just made sure that they knew the eight count. As far as the management for grouping and creating the movements for the life cycle, I matched them in groups like you did in the endorsement class and everyone got a prop to use for their part of the life cycle. I also made sure I didn't put friends together, and I made sure that they were thinking... we made it work and the teachers and kids had fun! (Yuri, 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher)*

In addition to sharing instructional ideas, one of the teachers shared that she had been able to provide ideas regarding flexible seating to her partner teacher and was able to learn alongside her partner teacher as a “trial and error kind of year.”

*I showed my partner teacher these [balance balls] and then she ended up getting some ball chairs too. She told me before she left today because I told her what I was doing this afternoon, she said 'You know I don't know that I used these correctly this year.' She was like 'I wish I would've done it a little differently.' She's had a very rough class and they don't mix very well and so at first, she tried to use it as a “good” behavior chair, and I was like that's not going to work. So now, she wishes she would've used it for the kids who needed it based on their behavior not necessarily because they were good and they deserved it. So, that was neat to watch happen and help her be able to kind of trial and error with the flexible seating this year. (Karina, 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher)*

Another teacher mentioned a simple strategy of playing music as students entered into the classroom that she had shared with her Clinical Instructor during her student teaching and how the Clinical Instructor had picked up on how well it worked getting students into the classroom quicker and quieter. She shared her experience below:

*You know last year in student teaching as the kids were walking into the classroom their to-do list was on the board and I always had music playing in the background. I like that myself, it helps me work. I might sit there and sing a little bit with it but, it's not distracting to me, but I know it can be distracting to some. So just playing music, I like to do that and the kids love it and my Clinical Instructor still does it in her classroom to this day after I shared it with her. (Brianna, 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher)*



### **Preparation is in the Details**

Teachers also shared anecdotes regarding how the coursework set them up for success in different areas during their first year of teaching. This theme underpins research question three which alludes to the first-year teachers and their preparedness for their first year of teaching. One teacher mentioned the following in regard to being prepared:

*I felt very prepared. On a scale of 1-10 I'd say probably a 9. I say that because of all the details we were asked to put into our lesson plans in the endorsement courses and all of the great discussions we had in class and I was able to have with my Clinical Instructor during student teaching. And even though where I'm at now doesn't require that much detail in my plans, I still make one similar to what we did in the endorsement classes because it just helps when I teach the lesson. (Sara, 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Teacher)*

Adding to the teacher's comment above another teacher outlined how the courses helped her to transition into her first year below:

*I definitely felt very prepared for my first year and like she [Sara] said even lesson planning, we don't lesson plan here either, but knowing how to do that helped me feel like my foot was in the door in regard to the curriculum and instruction and how I'm supposed to be and am expected to teach the material. I feel like I learned not just how to teach, but also how to manage in the courses. The endorsement courses taught real-life lessons in what to expect and what we're getting into. Because of this I feel like my transition into my first year of teaching has been so much easier than some of my friends who are first-year teachers and did not take the courses. (Kayley, 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher)*

The word "details" emerged several times during the focus group, as one teacher shared that *we were asked to put so much detail into our lessons, and that did prepare us for our first year and the expectations of teaching so much curriculum*. Another teacher went on to share the following about her perspective on the endorsement courses and feeling prepared.

*I would say that these endorsement classes prepared me for the classroom more than the other teacher education classes that we had to take. Because of how in-depth we were asked to be, which I greatly appreciate that looking back. I'm so glad I took these courses because I can now see the difference in a kid, you know sometimes they just need to be standing up or sometimes they just need to sit in a chair that's not the chair that has been given to them and you figure that out as the year goes on but I think that we were definitely prepared after taking the endorsement courses in terms of curriculum, how to seek help and collaborate, how to manage, and most importantly how to truly provide for the needs of the children in our classrooms. (Katie, 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Teacher)*

One last anecdote was shared by a teacher in regard to early immersion into the classroom and how it benefited her confidence in managing the classroom, instructional capacity, as well as developing relationships. She shared the following:

*Within the endorsement courses, we had so many opportunities to practice and reflect on our skills in the actual classroom. Even though we had class on campus, we were asked to create and apply our assignments in the field during our junior year and also through our senior year of student teaching. I always felt like I was creating and implementing in collaboration with my Clinical Instructor and not just doing what my Clinical Instructor asked me to do. This is because of the expectations and assignments in the endorsement courses. Because of this I was able to have a lot more "real" classroom experiences, which has made my transition into my first year of teaching so much more seamless than I thought it would be and for that I am grateful! (Brianna, 1<sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher)*

### **DISCUSSION**

Results from the present study indicated that first-year teachers who completed all four wellness and physical activity endorsement courses were able to immediately translate many aspects of what they had learned into practice, share and collaborate with team teachers on ideas learned within the endorsement coursework, and identify how the coursework had prepared them for the realities of teaching and an easier

transition into their first year of teaching. In congruence with the literature, all teachers noted that they were able to bring with them different aspects of what they had learned during their pre-service coursework into their classroom (Glogger-Frey et al., 2022; Whalen et al., 2019; Yang, 2012). While some teachers shared specific strategies, methods, or lessons they had translated from pre-service to in-service teaching, others noted that one of the biggest things they brought with them was the ability to implement flexible seating to support their students' needs. Several teachers also identified the immediate benefits of using flexible seating, such as "increased attention" and higher levels of "focus" and "engagement." This is important to note, as pre-service teachers in the endorsement courses have ample opportunities to discuss, research flexible seating, present on it in class, while some even experiment with it during their student teaching. Additionally, several of the learning spaces that the participants had classes in during pre-service endorsement coursework mirrored that of elementary classrooms with flexible seating, wherein they were provided opportunities to test out several types of flexible seating while learning. Franklin and Pleis (2022) note that if the college environment that pre-service teachers learn within is to be relevant, then the setup should mirror real-world elementary classroom settings. While there is minimal research surrounding college and elementary classroom design and the enhancement of pre-service teacher learning, these findings might suggest that when provided the opportunities to have discourse and practice new ideas and strategies, self-efficacy increases, and first-year teachers are more apt to implement them once in their classroom (Douglas, 2017; Nelson et al., 2015; Pepper et al., 2012).

Due to the practice that teachers were able to garner during their pre-service wellness and physical activity endorsement coursework, a majority shared that their self-efficacy had increased regarding integrating wellness and physical activity into their daily routines. In alignment with the research, this self-efficacy is critical to the translation of learned best practices in teacher education programs into the field. Johnson and Dabney (2018) note that a lack of self-efficacy can dissuade beginning teachers from implementing innovative pedagogical approaches. All of the teachers shared their self-efficacy of wellness and physical activity integration through the many ways they had turned what they learned into practice. This underpins one of the biggest pre-cursors to first-year teachers' abilities to expand and share their knowledge on integration beyond their classroom through collaboration. Collaboration is noted in the literature as a key support factor for first-year teachers that provides a sense of acceptance and belonging (De Jong et al., 2019, 2022; Sözen, 2018). This sense of belonging through collaboration is at the cornerstone of the development of the wellness and physical activity endorsement courses. As noted by one of the teachers, "I was able to collaborate with my Clinical Instructor instead of just doing the given curriculum." These opportunities assisted the first-year endorsement graduates not only in becoming more self-efficacious, but also knowing "how" to work alongside and with their first-year team of teachers, which can lead to higher levels of job satisfaction (Whalen et al., 2019).

Knowing how to traverse the first year of teaching in the real world can be challenging. Lack of instructional support, mentoring, time constraints, and behavioral management can all impact a first-year teacher's success (Cakmak et al., 2019; Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017; Hornstra, 2021). However, findings during the focus group diverged from the research as teachers noted that they felt very prepared going into their first year of teaching. More specifically, teachers shared that because of the endorsement coursework that asked them to collaborate with their Clinical Instructors, develop and apply management strategies, enact integrated lessons and activities for almost two years, and place ample detail into their lessons while creating units on their own from a trans-disciplinary approach, they did not waver when asked to create and implement lessons or a robust curriculum at their school. Some even mentioned that their *schools didn't require lesson plans*, but because it helped them with their *pedagogy they created them anyways*. The assignments in the endorsement were built to mitigate first-year teacher pitfalls that can prompt beginning teachers to leave the profession, such as exposing them to daily routines, expansive curriculum, assessments, classroom management, and the ability to collaborate with a team of teachers (Chambers Mack et al., 2019; Marshall et al., 2022; Sözen, 2018). Because the courses are scaffolded and provide multiple layers of support as students move from sophomore year into junior year field observations and into their student

teaching, they have a multitude of opportunities to develop and implement integrated and innovative curricula with support and opportunities for reflection and growth. This real-world experience was noted as an indicator of success by several of the participants and serves to reason that more pre-service coursework should mirror real-life elementary classroom environments, routines, and pedagogy to set first-year teachers up for success.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without limitations and the researcher recognizes that the teachers who participated in the focus group were primarily lower elementary teachers. Additionally, the focus group took place during a year when COVID-19 Pandemic measures were still being implemented, which the researcher acknowledges could have played a role in the outcomes of the study due to restrictions placed on teachers (e.g., classroom spacing, limited student interactions, and limited movement throughout the school). Lastly, a limited number of teachers were able to participate in the focus group, as the endorsement is limited to one University and only has a limited number of graduates each year.

### **Future Research**

To address some of the limitations that emerged from the study, future research may seek to include additional upper elementary teachers in data collection. Additionally, to garner patterns in the data over time, a longitudinal study that seeks to gather data from first-year endorsement graduate teachers over a period of time would be helpful. It may also be useful to examine future teachers who graduate with the endorsement outside the state of Mississippi to determine if the results are similar or if teaching in different states elicits any different findings.

### **CONCLUSION**

Teacher attrition for beginning teachers is escalating at an alarming rate. In acknowledging this, it is important to identify ways to mitigate challenges that a first-year teacher encounters during a critical transitional period. Teacher preparation programs play an essential role in cultivating teachers who are prepared for the many trials that the first year of teaching presents. This study identified several ways to provide support mechanisms during teacher preparation coursework that pre-service teachers need both during pre-service coursework and once in their classroom (i.e., collaboration, integrated and detailed curriculum development and implementation, discourse on timely organizational, behavioral, and time management, and innovative strategies and methods). While pre-service teachers were provided with the aforementioned information, what is unique to this study is that they were also given ample opportunities throughout the four-course endorsement to enact and embody the practices they had discourse on during their classes, leading to first-year teachers who were prepared and confident in their abilities to both practice and share their new and innovative ideas during their first year. When provided with such opportunities during pre-service coursework it opens the door for in-service teachers to not only be successful in their classrooms but to also collaborate with peer teachers while developing a sense of belonging and a rewarding year of teaching. Ultimately, leading to teachers who have self-efficacy in the skills needed as a first-year teacher and a desire to return to the classroom year after year.

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