

# **“Build That Relationship”: Supporting Preservice Teachers’ Engagement With Families**

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## **Abstract**

Getting to the strong home–school partnership students and families deserve requires teachers who are prepared to engage with caregivers human-to-human, not just teacher-to-caregiver. In this study, we analyzed survey responses, coaching transcripts, and pre- and post-coaching transcripts from 19 preservice teachers’ (PSTs) simulated parent–teacher conferences to understand how PSTs respond to sensitive disclosures and how their responses shift following coaching. We found that without support, even well-intentioned novices may respond to disclosures of family challenges in potentially relationship-harming ways. During coaching, PSTs expressed concerns about whether and how to respond to disclosures and how to balance being responsive with respecting the family’s privacy and facilitating a productive meeting. When PSTs were able to discuss their concerns during coaching, their responses to the disclosure shifted, with more engagement and empathetic statements. We conclude with concrete ideas and insights from our research on how teacher educators and policy-makers can prepare novices for partnerships.

**Key Words:** parent–teacher conferences, teacher preparation, family engagement, mixed-reality simulations, difficult conversations, building relationships, preservice teachers, practices, coaching

## Introduction

Students and their families deserve teachers who are prepared to form the strong connections between home and school that have been shown to benefit students academically and behaviorally (Ma et al., 2016; Wilder, 2014). When teachers and families have open communication, mutual respect, and strong relationships, students do better (Epstein, 2018; Ma et al., 2016). In recognition of the importance of strong relationships between families and teachers, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) mandated the involvement of caregivers in schools, defining involvement as “the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities” (ESSA, 2015, §1010.4(d); note: like Graham-Clay, 2024, we understand the terms caregiver, parent, and family to include all adults who might interact with a teacher about a child’s progress at school). The type of communication uplifted in ESSA is also the type of communication caregivers describe as building their trust in teachers and schools (Adams & Christenson, 2000). That meaningful, two-way communication, however, is often missing for families, especially Black and immigrant families, who too often feel shut out of schools, judged by staff, or silenced in meetings with teachers (D’Haem & Griswold, 2017; Matthiesen, 2016; Wagner, 2021; Wanat, 2010).

One of the most common opportunities for two-way communication between caregivers and teachers are schools’ annual or semi-annual parent–teacher conferences. During these “essential conversation[s]” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. xxiii), skillful teachers replace the “sting of enmity” with “empathy” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. 243), forging tighter connections between home and school. These teachers are often experts who have spent years building their craft, sometimes one mistake at a time (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). Novice teachers often enter the classroom with little conference experience and limited training on building relationships with students’ families (D’Haem & Griswold, 2017; Graham-Clay, 2024; Walker & Legg, 2018). Some novices find conferences daunting or even scary, likening them to being “on the edge of a knife” (Tveit, 2018, p. 240). Preservice teachers (PSTs) often frame their caring about families as an innate disposition rather than something enacted by engaging in dialogue and responding sensitively (Goldstein & Lake, 2000). Trust and caring between teachers and caregivers, however, is often built incrementally through interactions, like when a teacher compliments the student to their caregiver, greets them, or allies with the caregiver to persuade or reassure the student during a conference (Bilton et al., 2017; Goldstein & Lake,

2000; Pillet-Shore, 2012; Walker & Legg, 2018). These are skills that can be taught and, when PSTs are offered training in domains like communicating with families or perspective taking, they show growth on paper-and-pencil assessments (Gerich et al., 2017; Smith & Sheridan, 2019).

To build PSTs' conferencing skills, some teacher educators have begun offering PSTs more practice and feedback opportunities through low-stakes simulations. Because these opportunities are newer, we are still learning how PSTs respond to feedback in simulations and what questions they have about issues they encounter during practice. Our goal in this study was to learn more about how PSTs respond to sensitive disclosures during simulated conferences and how their responses are shaped by feedback, with the ultimate goal of learning how we can better support PSTs in building a partnership toolbox for family engagement.

### **Theoretical Framework**

At the heart of family engagement is the relationship and the trust between the teacher and the caregivers (Mapp & Bergman, 2019; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Trust is what allows caregivers to believe teachers are working to support their child and are partners in their child's education (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Relational trust is built in everyday interactions between teachers and families as the teachers show competence, engage in respectful interactions, prove that they can be trusted, and show caregivers that they are valued and cared for as individuals (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Mapp & Bergman, 2021). Trust and relationships are also inherently complex; to be successful, teachers need an entire "portfolio of ways" (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 26) to respond to caregivers and build partnerships.

Part of that portfolio is learning to listen to caregivers and to engage in meaningful, two-way communication (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Doing that can require "undiluted attention" and "empathetic listening" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, p. 105). Listening with empathy, according to Lawrence-Lightfoot (2004), does not mean sentimentality, but instead "seeing the world from the other person's vantage point" (p. 243). Empathy in conversations includes verbally or nonverbally acknowledging the feelings of others and taking others' perspectives (Bouton, 2016).

Every time a caregiver shares information in a conference, teachers choose how to respond. There is no one right way to respond. Instead, there are many ways teachers can respond that show empathy, engagement, or a desire to collaborate (Khasnabis et al., 2018; Walker & Legg, 2018). Teachers have to make judgment calls on how to respond—nuanced and complicated calls that, we believe, are easier if teachers have a toolkit of

responses to draw on. Our belief in the importance of relational trust and the complex skills required to build it in moment-to-moment interactions underpin this study.

### **Balancing Empathy and Time in Conferences**

In parent–teacher conferences, which can be as brief as five minutes, teachers are juggling competing priorities (Lemmer, 2012). They are supposed to build rapport, elicit information, manage the flow, problem solve, and respond to challenges that arise during the meeting without going over on time (Lemmer, 2012; Walker & Legg, 2018). One of the most significant balancing acts that teachers face is in getting through the agenda of the meeting while still being empathetic (Gerich et al., 2017; Walker & Legg, 2018). This balancing act is so challenging that even experienced teachers can struggle with responding to unexpected or personal disclosures in conferences (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). While novices can, at times, engage with or build on disclosures in conferences, they often instead ignore even positive or school-related disclosures and struggle to find the balance between moving through their agendas and showing empathy (Khasnabis et al., 2018; Walker & Legg, 2018). Another balance that can be challenging for PSTs is between sharing information and inviting the caregiver to share information (Khasnabis et al., 2018; Walker & Legg, 2018). Our knowledge, however, comes primarily from observations of PSTs or PSTs’ paper-and-pencil responses to questions. We still know little about the types of questions that PSTs have about responding to disclosures or finding their balance in conferences.

### **Providing PSTs With Skill-Building Practice Opportunities in Family Engagement**

Parent–teacher conferences are brief, high-stakes, and infrequent; as a result, many preservice teachers are not able to practice parent–teacher conferences during their field placements (D’Haem & Griswold, 2017; De Bruine et al., 2014; Epstein, 2018). In response, some teacher educators have looked to approximations of practice to provide PSTs with more practice opportunities (Dotger et al., 2008, 2011; Walker & Legg, 2018). Approximations of practice are low-risk, low-complexity opportunities for PSTs to try on small parts of complex skills, like facilitating conferences (Grossman et al., 2009). These approximations have included having PSTs run simulated conferences with highly trained live actors who act as a standardized caregiver similar to a standardized patient in medicine (Dotger et al., 2008, 2011). In addition to live actors, some teacher educators have begun using

digitally mediated simulations with animated avatars to provide PSTs with low-stakes, repeated practice opportunities (Luke & Vaughn, 2022).

During simulated conferences, PSTs are able to practice clinically or instructionally important scenarios ranging from meeting with a caregiver who does not trust the teacher to look out for her son to speaking with a caregiver who is frustrated about the content the teacher is covering in class (Dotger et al., 2008, 2011; Walker & Legg, 2018). The teacher educator is able to dictate what the caregiver discloses and how they respond to the PSTs, calibrating the difficulty level of practice while providing shared experiences and repeated practice opportunities for the PSTs (Dotger et al., 2008; Luke & Vaughn, 2022). What is still not clear, however, is how or if PSTs grow in their skills from simulated practice opportunities.

### **Building PSTs' Skills Through Feedback**

Helping PSTs master conferencing skills often requires more than just practice. Many PSTs also benefit from feedback on their skills (Gerich et al., 2017; Smith & Sheridan, 2019). One of the most impactful ways to provide teachers with feedback is through individualized coaching (Kraft et al., 2018). Individualized coaching often begins with the coach watching the novice teach (Kraft et al., 2018). Then the coach provides feedback, including examples of what the novice did well, specific guidance on where they could improve, opportunities for guided practice, and models by the coach of what the target teaching practice should or could look like (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010).

While coaching can be delivered over long time periods, it can also be provided in short sessions, including between two rounds of simulated practice (Cohen et al., 2020; Kraft et al., 2018). These short sessions of coaching have been shown to improve how PSTs respond to simulated, off-task students (Cohen et al., 2020). With in-service teachers, individualized coaching by trained professionals has been shown to help build teachers' family engagement and conferencing skills (Smith & Sheridan, 2019), but less research has been done on how coaching shapes PSTs' responses in practice conferences. On paper-and-pencil measures, PSTs' self-confidence, attitudes about family engagement, and knowledge all improve with feedback from peers, training, class discussions, and opportunities to respond to case studies (Brown et al., 2014; Gerich et al., 2017). Less is known about how PSTs' responses shift or how such shifts map onto the feedback they received.

## Research Purpose and Questions

In our research, we studied what happens when PSTs are given individualized feedback on how they responded to a sensitive disclosure during a digitally mediated, simulated conference. Our goals were to understand how PSTs' responses to the disclosure evolved following coaching and how PSTs' responses mapped onto their goals for the conference and what happened in coaching. Specifically, we set out to understand these two questions:

1. How do preservice teachers respond to personal disclosures by a caregiver in a simulated parent–teacher conference before and after coaching?
2. How do their responses map onto their goals for their conferences, their coaching conversations, and their comments on coaching after their simulations?

## Methods

To understand both PSTs' responses to a personal disclosure and the patterns in their responses, goals, and coaching experiences, we drew on qualitative data from 19 PSTs. Each of the PSTs answered questions about their goals for a simulated conference and then participated in two rounds of a conference, with coaching in between and a reflection afterwards. For this study, we drew on PSTs' responses to pre- and post-survey questions as well as their session and coaching transcripts. By drawing on multiple sources of data for each PST across time, we were able to gain insight into the PSTs' thinking and actions and how those shifted or did not shift, given practice and feedback.

## Participants

While more than 19 PSTs participated in the simulation, the 19 in this study were the ones who both had coaching sessions where the father's personal disclosure was at least briefly discussed and who consented to participate in this IRB-approved study. Of the 19, 11 were enrolled in an elementary credential program and eight in a secondary program at Oak University (all names are pseudonyms), a traditional teacher preparation program in the Southeastern United States. The PSTs were predominantly female (89.5%), White (63.2%; other participants included 10.5% Latino/a, 5.2% Black, 5.2% Asian American, and 15.8% Other), and from English-speaking homes (73.7%). While less diverse than students in United States schools, the PSTs in this study were slightly more diverse than American teachers who, in 2017, were 89% female at the elementary level

and 80% White (Ingersoll et al., 2021). The PSTs' ages ranged from under 20 to over 30, although 68.4% were between 21 and 23. A slight majority (52%) described the high school they had attended as middle class.

### **The Simulation**

All of the PSTs participated in two rounds over Zoom of a simulated parent–teacher conference using the Mursion platform. In Mursion simulations, a live actor remotely controls cartoon avatars. PSTs see and interact with a cartoon character in an animated classroom, but that character is being controlled by a puppeteer who can respond to the PST in real time. The two puppeteers in this study, a White man and a White woman, participated in over five hours of training for the scenario, learning the backstory of the father avatar, who was a college educated technology worker, and participating in practice simulations to learn some scripted lines and build consistency. The avatar was racially ambiguous and male, which presents ethical complexities and is a limitation of simulation work.

Prior to the simulation, PSTs were given background information on a fictional student in their third or ninth grade class (depending on their program of study) whose family they had interacted with previously over the phone. They were told that the purpose of the conference was to: “Create and maintain a positive rapport with Katie’s father,” and to “Begin a family conference that will culminate in a plan to support Katie’s social interactions.” Towards the end of every seven-minute conference, the father disclosed problems at his workplace. He began the disclosure by saying, “There’s a weight on my shoulders,” and later added, “There are challenges at work.” In many conferences, the father specified that the company was doing layoffs.

During the first round of simulations, PSTs had an opportunity to respond to this and other lines by the father and then received five minutes of individualized coaching from one of four highly trained doctoral students. During coaching, PSTs had an opportunity to share their perspective on the conference, and then the coaches shared positive and growth-oriented feedback. Coaches focused on what they saw as the PST’s key need, whether that was responding to the caregiver questioning their expertise as a teacher or responding to the caregiver’s work-related disclosure. Coaches also included time to respond to concerns shared by PSTs and to connect the focal skill to other aspects of the conference. For example, a coach might focus on why it was important to gather information from the caregiver and then give the father’s work disclosure as an example of an opportunity to gather information. In those situations, PSTs often had limited time

to engage with the coach about the caregiver's disclosure. After coaching, PSTs repeated the simulation and completed a post-survey.

## Data

The data in this study includes both of the PSTs' responses to the father's personal disclosure, transcripts of PSTs' coaching sessions, and PSTs' pre- and post-survey responses. The simulations and coaching sessions were recorded and digitally transcribed. Each transcript was manually cleaned and segmented so that only portions of the transcripts related to the father's disclosure were included for analysis. We also analyzed PSTs' pre-survey responses to four open-ended questions: In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a strong family conference? How will you begin the conference? How will you build and maintain rapport with the family member? List two goals for the family conference. Finally, we analyzed PSTs' responses to two post-survey questions: What was the most useful aspect of the coaching you received today? How, if at all, did the coaching today change your approach to the scenario?

## Data Analysis

We engaged in multiple rounds of coding, first generating inductive codes within each data source and then looking for patterns across the data (Miles et al., 2014). During initial coding, we used in-vivo codes to help us stay close to the data (Miles et al., 2014). Each data source was coded at the whole excerpt level and could receive multiple codes. For example, a PST's response to the question on characteristics of a strong conference of, "I think that they are positive, organized, and move towards a more concrete plan for the future," was coded as *moving towards a plan* and *positive tone*. In the second round of coding, we looked for patterns within each data source, testing each code against data for that source and allowing new codes to emerge (Miles et al., 2014). For example, the code *positive tone* for characteristics of a positive conference became broader, part of a code named *climate* as we grouped related codes together.

The patterns we identified varied by data source. When we looked at session transcripts, for example, we noted that some PSTs ignored what the caregiver said, going right back to the student, while others affirmed the father as a caregiver, and others were explicitly empathetic, often saying, "I'm sorry." Similarly, when we looked at coaching transcripts, we noted that some PSTs had shared questions and concerns about the disclosures while others did not. When we analyzed post-survey responses, we noticed that some PSTs gave detailed responses on how coaching helped them

while others gave broad or generic responses like, “The encouragement!” In pre-survey responses, we noted how many of the PSTs focused on building a relationship with the caregiver. Each of these patterns reflected what was happening in that particular data source.

After finishing pattern coding within each data source, we began to look for themes across data sources, focusing on the experiences and responses of each PST. First, we created vignettes for each of the 19 PSTs. Each vignette included summaries and excerpts from the PST’s pre- and post-coaching responses to the disclosure and their coaching session, as well as from their conference goals and coaching reflection. The vignettes helped us synthesize data from all five data sources for each PST. For example, for one PST the vignette included:

[PST] had a goal of, “build a good relationship.” Coach brought work up, and the PST said, “I usually go into that detail,” but that “I figured we’re on a tight schedule....” The coach responded about the balance in conferences “between being really productive, but also setting a really warm climate.”

The vignettes helped us make sense of how PSTs’ goals related to their responses to the disclosure, and their discussions in coaching to their later reflections and disclosure responses.

To better understand emerging themes around the relationship between PSTs’ coaching experiences, their reflections, and their responses to the disclosure, we created a matrix with the full data set for each PST (Miles et al., 2014). We color coded the matrix, with PSTs whose responses shifted following coaching shaded one color and those whose responses did not shaded another. We then color coded coaching transcript excerpts as well to create visual patterns that would help us make sense of the data for each PST across all sources. As we looked at the full data set for each PST and our color coding, we explored our emergent themes on the relationship between coaching discussions and post-coaching responses, as well as patterns from the second round of coding in the variation in types of responses to the disclosure and the similarity in conference goals across PSTs. We continued to write analytic memos throughout data analysis to further explore the themes and patterns.

As themes emerged, we tested each against the data, looking for disconfirming evidence and revising the themes as needed, using the five data sources to triangulate our findings. To build credibility, we created a research database, triangulated multiple sources of evidence, and shared drafts of findings with colleagues, iterating, revising, and sharing with colleagues again as we received feedback (Yin, 2018).

## Researcher Reflexivity

As qualitative researchers, we cannot be written out of the research process. Who we are shapes what questions we ask and what we see in the data. We are current and former teachers who, based on our research and our time teaching, believe that family engagement is a learned skill and that strong partnerships between families and schools are essential to students' success. We also believe that the foundation of any relationship is trust and that trust is built through repeated interactions. These personal beliefs shaped our decision to work on parent–teacher conferences as well as what we were predisposed to notice during data analysis. While we took care to stay close to the data, to confer with expert colleagues, and to attend to our own biases, our own “assumptions, interest, and theoretical commitments” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 167) inevitably informed our conceptual framework and shaped what we found in the data.

## Findings

Overall, in their first practice sessions, PSTs varied in how they responded to the caregiver's work-related disclosure. Many answered empathetically but didn't follow up; others ignored what the caregiver shared or responded in ways likely to harm their relationship with a real caregiver. Regardless of how they responded to the disclosure, many PSTs had concerns that they shared during coaching about how, or if, they should respond to the caregiver's disclosure. When PSTs had time in coaching to engage with their coach on responding to disclosures, they often shifted in their responses, engaging more fully with the disclosure during their second practice session. When PSTs had less time in coaching to discuss the disclosure, they often continued to respond in potentially harmful ways. To understand how PSTs responded to the caregiver across the two simulations—and how their responses mapped onto their survey responses and coaching conversations—we share findings from three groups of PSTs: those who continued to have difficulties responding to the caregiver after coaching; those whose responses shifted following coaching; and those who started and stayed empathetic in their responses.

### **“I Don't Know. I Don't Know”: PSTs Who Needed More Support**

The most common goal that preservice teachers set for the conference was to build a relationship with the caregiver. For four PSTs, however, their responses to the caregiver's disclosure across both practice rounds was unlikely to strengthen that relationship. While most PSTs in this study had

coaching sessions focused on the disclosure, a few PSTs had coaching sessions focused on other skills, sessions where the disclosure was only briefly discussed. After those coaching sessions, PSTs continued to experience challenges in responding to the father. Leeanne is one of those PSTs. Prior to the simulation, Leeanne had written that one of her goals was to “maintain a positive relationship with [the student’s] dad.” She had also written that she wanted to, “Start by continuing to establish a good relationship with her dad, getting to know him on a more personal level.” When the father shared about work, however, Leeanne struggled to respond, saying, “So are you...it seems like you know your daughter well. You know what she likes.”

During Leeanne’s coaching session, the coach primarily focused on how Leeanne responded to the father’s sharing of his worries about his daughter. At the end, the coach connected possible responses to the caregiver sharing his worries about his child to possible responses to the caregiver sharing a workplace challenge, saying, “When he says something like...‘I’m afraid of being laid off,’ what you can do is just simply say, ‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ or ‘Would you like to share more?’” Then the coach gave Leeanne a very brief chance to practice: “Just really quickly because we’re just about out of time. ‘I’ve got a huge weight on my shoulders. I’m worried about losing my job?...How might you respond?’” Leeanne responded, “I don’t know. I don’t know.” Time for coaching was up, however, so the coach was not able to respond. Then, during the second round when the father disclosed that he might be getting laid off, Leeanne responded, “And I understand that after school might be difficult with your schedule, so that’s why I wanted to check in,” demonstrating that she was still unsure how to respond. In her post-survey, Leeanne only shared broad comments about coaching, like that it was, “Very beneficial in my approach to the meeting.”

Megan also was not able to share questions or concerns about the disclosure with her coach. Prior to the conference, she had written that one of her goals was to “build rapport with [the student’s] father.” During the first session, however, when the father disclosed his challenges, Megan responded, “It’s been difficult for me personally...because she doesn’t talk as much to know what she is interested in.” Megan’s coaching session focused on the importance of gathering information from the caregiver, which the coach briefly connected to the disclosure saying, “He...started to share some of the...personal stuff...That would be a space for you to maybe get some more information from him.” The coach then asked a question about how Megan could gather information from the caregiver at a different moment of the conference, not leaving Megan time to respond to the disclosure advice. During the second simulation, when the father shared about work,

Megan responded, “I’m just trying to think of ways to get her to share and to be more...I guess, less reserved in the class,” demonstrating little change from the first simulation. In her post-survey responses, Megan shared how coaching helped her in the focal area that they had worked on and in, “Having feedback immediately to put into place.” Like Leanne and other PSTs whose coaching focused on other skills, Megan did not get to share concerns or engage in coaching focused on the disclosure and went into the second round still unprepared to respond to the caregiver’s disclosure.

### **“Build That Relationship”: PSTs Whose Responses Became More Empathetic**

In contrast, a second group of nine preservice teachers ended their coaching session more sure how to respond to the caregiver. During the first practice round, these PSTs had often either ignored the disclosure or said something that might harm the teacher–caregiver relationship, such as by saying, “Well, you know, life happens, and sometimes it throws curveballs, but we just need to keep on going,” or, “So I will not ask you to have too much of a burden with regards to [your daughter].” Many of these PSTs had stated before the conference that their goals were to “form a positive relationship with [the student’s] father,” or “keep a positive relationship;” goals that many were not realizing in their initial responses. These PSTs all had time during coaching to engage with their coaches on how to respond to personal disclosures during conferences. Then, following coaching, when the father disclosed his work challenges, these PSTs responded with statements such as, “Just so you know, I’m always here, available via phone and email if you ever need something,” and, “I’m very sorry to hear that. I’m sure that’s definitely...a tough thing to go through.”

Clara, an elementary PST, is an example of a PST whose response shifted following coaching. During the first simulation, she replied to the father’s disclosure by saying, “Well, I think that the best thing that we should do is...let [your child] know how much we care for her and support her...if we’re both there for her, she won’t even realize any of this negative energy.” During coaching, Clara brought up the disclosure, telling the coach that, “I feel like the hardest part for me was when he was talking about losing his job—how much are you supposed to ask about that?” Her coach told her,

But yeah, the part about him losing a job—it’s absolutely okay to acknowledge that, like, “I’m really sorry to hear that.” And you can ask follow-up questions. It’s tricky, because you’re in this parent–teacher dynamic, but you’re both humans.

Clara then clarified, "I like the follow up questions, because sometimes I don't know how much to ask." Her coach responded, "I think if someone is willing to offer a piece of information...say like, 'Okay, I hear what you're saying,' and follow up... it's just sort of that...I want to acknowledge you as a human." During her second round of practice, Clara responded to the caregiver's disclosure by saying,

I'm so sorry to hear that...Well, just know that we're here for you.  
We're here for [your daughter]. So if there's anything that I or the  
school can do to help you guys in any way, don't hesitate to reach out.

After practice, Clara wrote that the coaching she received helped her "focus on [the caregiver]," and "approach the father's personal life in a respectful manner."

Like Clara, Kim, another elementary PST, also shared that she was unsure whether she should have engaged with the disclosure. Kim's coach is the one who brought up the disclosure, telling her, "Despite the fact that...you're there for [the student], a lot of parents, they also...need you to be there for them...and to build that relationship." Kim then asked, "So...I should have engaged with that conversation?" When the coach affirmed, Kim followed up, asking, "But what are you supposed to—am I supposed to propose a solution for [the student]?" The coach then clarified, "Yes, you should absolutely develop a plan for [the child]....But you can...develop a plan while making the parent feel like you care and you're supportive of them." During the second round, when the caregiver shared about his work challenges, Kim responded with a follow up question and told him, "You always have support here." In her post-survey, Kim wrote that the coaching helped her, by "Telling me to validate the parent's experience and to treat the conference with as much care as I would a student conference."

Other PSTs as well had questions for their coaches about how and if to respond to the caregiver's disclosure. One asked her coach, "[He] said something...like, work can be really challenging, isn't it? And then do I...I didn't know if I should, how I should comment or...respond to [that]." Another PST told his coach, "I wasn't quite sure what to do when the caregivers start talking about...their job." Like Kim and Clara, these PSTs had time to discuss their concerns and had stronger responses to the disclosure during the second round of practice. PSTs in this group wrote that the coaching helped them realize that "I don't need to always bring it back to the child, and that I can acknowledge how the caregiver is feeling and listen to them more," and that "Just getting a reminder to be considerate of the parent's concerns in addition to showing compassion for their situation"

was helpful. Given guidance on how and why to respond, these PSTs' responses to the disclosure shifted and became more empathetic.

### **“What You Said Was Completely Valid”: PSTs Who Started and Stayed Empathetic**

A final group of six preservice teachers responded empathetically to the caregiver during both rounds of the simulation. Many of these PSTs, however, still brought up the disclosure during coaching, with concerns about how to respond, how to transition back to the student, and when it was prying. One secondary PST responded to the disclosure by telling the caregiver, “I’m sorry to hear that,” and affirming his strength as a caregiver. When coaching started, the PST brought up the disclosure, asking the coach, “When the dad said, ‘I will lose my job next week.’ [How] should I react?” The coach affirmed her initial empathetic response, saying, “I think what you said was completely valid,” and then gave some additional language she could use. Another secondary PST brought up concerns about how to transition back from the disclosure to the meeting. She had also been empathetic to the caregiver, telling him that she was “sorry to hear that,” and understood “how that could be really stressful,” but when the coach asked how the simulation went, she replied,

At that moment, it was like, there was this conversation going on about this guy’s job, and trying to be...empathetic, but also recognizing that we have to wrap it up was weird...because I wasn’t really sure how to get back to the conversation about [the student]...and so that part...was the most challenging.

Her coach affirmed her initial response to the disclosure, saying, “You want to continue to do that, to express the empathy and the compassion for the parent.” Her coach also suggested some language she could use to transition back to the student and to wrap up the meeting, language that the PST took on in the second round when she brought up the “stress” the caregiver was likely experiencing because of work and connected it to the classroom.

Other PSTs expressed concerns about how much to “pry” during the meeting. After her coach told her, “When they tell you things like ‘Oh, I’m having a hard time, work’s not going well,’ they want you to ask, ‘What’s wrong...Do you want to talk about that?...I’m really sorry to hear that,’” an elementary PST responded, “That makes sense. Yeah. I didn’t want to be weird, to...pry.” One of the other PSTs had a similar concern, telling her coach, “Yeah, that’s what I was wondering, because I was like, ‘Oh, it’s, if it’s a conference about [the student], I don’t want to...ask too much about

him'...You don't want to be too intrusive, but okay." Both PSTs had responded empathetically to the father's disclosure but had not followed up and were unsure where the line was on being "intrusive." After being generally coached on asking the caregiver more questions, a third PST brought up on her own that, following the disclosure, "[The father] probably could have... given me some more insight into what was going on at home and...with his job situation...I probably should have let him talk more."

These PSTs then went back into the simulator and continued to respond empathetically to the caregiver and wrote comments on the post-survey about coaching giving them "ideas" and "insight," and helping them "know...how to deal with parent sharing about their own life problems," and "[make] smoother transitions." All of these PSTs had strong initial responses to the caregiver's disclosures, but they still had questions about whether or how they should respond—questions that the coaches were able to address.

## Discussion

Relational trust is often built through small interactions between teachers and caregivers (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). As teachers demonstrate respect, competence, trustworthiness, and their valuing of the caregiver as an individual, trust grows (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Mapp & Bergman, 2021). During time-constrained, agenda-focused conferences, teachers have to balance building relational trust with managing the flow of the meeting (Lemmer, 2012; Walker & Legg, 2018). Finding the balance takes skill and access to a portfolio of relationship-building strategies (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004; Lemmer, 2012; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). In this study, our goal was to find ways to better support preservice teachers in developing their own portfolio of strategies. To do this, we studied how PSTs responded to a personal disclosure by a simulated caregiver before and after coaching, and how those responses mapped onto PSTs' coaching conversations and conference goals.

We found, first, that PSTs responded to the caregiver's disclosure of challenges at his workplace in a wide range of ways, ways that did not always match the goals they had set for the conference. As other researchers have found, some PSTs in our study acknowledged what the caregiver shared (Khasnabis et al., 2018; Walker & Legg, 2018). Many of those PSTs then followed up, offered support, or just stated that it sounded challenging. Other PSTs, however, responded in ways likely to harm a relationship with a real caregiver, something that has been true in other studies as well (Khasnabis

et al., 2018; Walker & Legg, 2018). These PSTs often ignored what the caregiver shared or responded in potentially problematic ways, responses that mirror what too often happens in real conferences where caregivers can feel silenced, judged, or unheard (Matthiesen, 2016; Wagner, 2021; Wanat, 2010). Many of these PSTs had listed relationship building as a goal, but there was a disconnect between their dispositional beliefs about relationships and the actions they took in the conference when the caregiver shared about work, a gap that has been hinted at in earlier work as well (Goldstein & Lake, 2000).

The PSTs then received five minutes of coaching, coaching that, based on best practices (e.g., Kraft et al., 2018; Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010), included individualized feedback and concrete guidance. Our second finding is that, following disclosure-focused coaching, PSTs whose initial responses had been potentially problematic shifted to responses that acknowledged the disclosure, followed up, or offered support. While coaching and case studies have been shown to shift PSTs' survey responses about conferences (Brown et al., 2014; Gerich et al., 2017), our study is one of the first to show that coaching can help shape how PSTs respond to simulated caregivers and build their portfolio of family-engagement strategies. The influence of PSTs' coaching conversations was most clear in their absence. When coaches and PSTs only had time to glancingly touch on the disclosure, PSTs went back into the simulator and stayed with their initial type of response. If they had ignored the disclosure or responded in potentially problematic ways, they continued in the same vein. As others have found, practice alone was not enough to build PSTs' portfolio of responses—they need guidance as well (Cohen et al., 2020).

Our third finding is that the questions PSTs asked their coaches reflected the challenge of the task they were set. PSTs had questions about how much to pry, about how to pivot back to the agenda of the meeting, and about what was appropriate in a response. Even veteran teachers can be thrown by unexpected disclosures and unplanned conversations (Graham-Clay, 2024; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). In conferences, teachers have to balance relationship building with sharing information, gathering information, and problem solving (Lemmer, 2012; Walker & Legg, 2018)—and do all that within the context of a professional relationship. The advice that the coaches gave during the feedback sessions reflects only one way to respond to a disclosure like the one in the simulation, not a perfect way because the task was too complex for there to be one simple answer.

Real world conferences are far more complex, with many more challenging moments. To build their skills, PSTs need opportunities to practice,

to experience the challenges, and to receive feedback (Cohen et al., 2020; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Walker & Legg, 2018). Many PSTs only have limited opportunities to learn about, experience, and practice parent–teacher conferences (De Bruine et al., 2014; D’Haem & Griswold, 2017; Epstein, 2018). We believe that the questions the PSTs in this study asked and the conversations they were able to have, even if brief, highlight why opportunities to practice conferences are so important. Facilitating a conference well takes inordinate skill, skill PSTs need a chance to begin to develop (D’Haem & Griswold, 2017; Walker & Legg, 2018).

### **Implications**

Our findings have implications both for teacher educators and for teachers. For teacher educators, our findings highlight why conferences are so important to practice and show the skill building that PSTs can begin to engage in when given feedback and opportunities to practice. Our study drew on mixed-reality simulations, an expensive and, at times, challenging technology. Conference practice, however, can be much less complicated. Other studies have drawn on live, standardized actors, classroom role plays, and case studies (De Bruine et al., 2014; Dotger et al., 2008; Gerich et al., 2017; Walker & Legg, 2018). Each has been shown to have positive impacts on PSTs’ knowledge and dispositions (Gerich et al., 2017; Smith & Sheridan, 2019). Just as there is no one perfect way to respond to a disclosure in a conference, there is no one perfect way to engage in skill building. Our study also drew on highly trained coaches who were able to work individually with PSTs. Other studies have drawn instead on instructor feedback and peer debriefings; these too can support skill building (Gerich et al., 2017; Walker & Legg, 2018). Our findings illustrate the importance of practice opportunities and guidance, not the need for a particular format for that practice or feedback.

The broader issue that our findings raise for teacher educators is that relationship building in a conference is challenging. The questions that our PSTs asked about how to respond are real and important. It is likely that, to build skills and a portfolio of responses, PSTs will need multiple opportunities to practice, multiple opportunities to discuss the challenges, and multiple opportunities to begin to discern when might be a moment to engage more and when might be a moment to pivot back to an agenda.

Our findings also have implications for teachers and schools. Our goal is not to force teachers to respond in a particular way in a conference but to illuminate the range of skills teachers need to draw on in responding. Few teachers enter the profession able to handle every family partnership

challenge. Building a portfolio of relationship-building responses and understanding the nuances of when each might be appropriate takes time and work. As Mapp and Bergman (2019) recommend in their Dual-Capacity Building Framework, teachers need time to work with colleagues, opportunities to practice with families, and administrative support to build their portfolio and their skills. Just as students and families deserve teachers who are prepared to form strong connections, our teachers deserve leaders who will support them in learning to form those connections.

### **Limitations**

While our work has important implications for teacher education, it also has significant limitations. First, the caregiver in this study was simulated, so we cannot know how a real caregiver would have reacted to the PSTs' varying responses to his personal disclosures. In addition, we cannot know how these same PSTs would have reacted to a real caregiver or how coaching would have influenced their responses. Further, the technology itself is ethically complex, with puppeteers role playing individuals with differing identities than their own, a complexity that needs to be acknowledged in this work. We need more research on real conferences to understand how teachers respond to personal disclosures by caregivers, how real caregivers react to candidates' responses, and how coaching shapes PSTs' responses. Second, our findings are limited by the homogeneity of our sample and the lack of participant interviews. Third, the conference and coaching focused on many skills, not just the disclosure, and it is unclear how that impacted what we found. Finally, it is unclear if or how PSTs' learning would transfer to real conferences. Overall, we need more research on how PSTs respond to disclosures and unexpected moments in real conferences and how coaching shapes their skills to know how we can best support future generations of teachers.

### **Conclusion**

Students' success depends, in large part, on whether schools and families can work together. Our research has revealed a roadblock in the way of strong partnerships: novices might have the best of intentions for forming partnerships, but without training and support, they can commit potentially relationship-harming missteps. We need to help novice teachers build a portfolio of relationship-building strategies, strategies they can draw on to navigate complex moments in family engagement. We need to provide them with feedback and opportunities to practice their skills so that they are ready to be the partners our students and families deserve. Creating the

strong home–school partnerships our students need begins with investing in and supporting our teachers.

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