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Investigating Preservice Teachers' Sense of Reading Efficacy

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Learning to read is a complex linguistic achievement, and teaching reading is a multifaceted process that draws upon an extensive knowledge base and vast repertoire of strategies. This study was designed to investigate the impact of differing field experiences in amount, type, and context on elementary preservice teachers' efficacy in the domain of reading. With the established link between teachers' self-efficacy and student learning, the results of this study have significant implications for the design of teacher education programs and the support of preservice elementary teachers in their mastery of teaching reading.

While the most effective methods to teach reading have been debated for decades, the recent focus of teaching reading has centered upon tailoring the teaching of the five essential components--phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000)--to the needs of individual students. It is not uncommon, however, for beginning preservice teachers to view learning to read as simply a decoding process without much regard for the remaining critical components (Smith, 2012).

In teacher preparation programs, preservice teachers are working to learn both the theory of teaching reading, as well as how to apply research-based best practices. Like the best way to teach a child to read, the best methods of preparation for providing competent reading instruction is also surrounded by debate. As a result, colleges and universities with approved licensing programs employ diverse approaches to preparing elementary teacher candidates with the expertise needed to teach reading. This process, however, typically occurs through methods courses in the theories and pedagogy of teaching reading, coupled with field experiences wherein teacher candidates are asked to apply their learning in public school classrooms under the tutelage of mentor teachers. Regardless of the specific approach, identifying the abilities needed to be an effective reading teacher and understanding preservice teachers' beliefs regarding these abilities is of utmost importance for reading teacher educators.

Theoretical framework

Teacher Efficacy

Efficacy beliefs have long been associated with the work of psychologist Albert Bandura (1997), who defined self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). As a social cognitive theory,

self-efficacy conceives a set of beliefs about teachers' capacity to have a positive influence on their students' learning (Henson, 2002).

The value and power of teachers' sense of efficacy has been well established in the literature (Knoblauch & Hoy, 2008; Putnam, 2012). Teachers who have confidence in their own teaching abilities (i.e., a greater sense of self-efficacy) provide a greater academic focus in the classroom (Gibson & Dembo, 1984), are more likely to try innovative practices (Sparks, 1988), and engage in a greater degree of ongoing staff development programs (Gersten, Chard, & Baker, 2000) than their peers with lower expectations concerning their ability to influence student learning. Additionally, a strong sense of efficacy "can pay dividends of higher motivation, greater effort, persistence and resilience" (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998, p. 238). Further, teacher self-efficacy has a direct link to students' performance (Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990) and is considered a powerful influence on teachers' overall effectiveness with students (Pendergast, Garvis, & Keogh, 2011). Graham, Harris, Fink, and MacArthur (2001) assert that teachers' efficacy is "one of the few teacher characteristics that reliably predicts teacher practice and student outcomes" (p. 178).

The observation that teacher education programs play an important role in the development of teachers candidates' self-efficacy and identity (Pendergast, Garvis, and Keogh, 2011) makes the topic of preservice teacher efficacy of particular importance to teacher educators.

Preservice Teacher Field Experiences

The results of research investigating the link between field experiences and preservice teacher efficacy have been varied (Haverback & Parault, 2008). Gunning and Mensah (2011), along with Ebrahim (2012), suggest that the types of teaching experiences offered within a methods course are valuable for increasing the self-efficacy to teach science of preservice elementary teachers. In contrast, Plourde (2002) found that classroom experience did not have a significant effect on preservice student teachers' self-efficacy in teaching science. Gao and Mager (2011) found that preservice teachers in an inclusive teacher education program exhibited a higher perceived sense of Personal Teaching Efficacy in more advanced phases of their preparation. Similarly, Lancaster and Bain (2010) reported that preservice teachers who completed a field experience working with students who had special needs demonstrated increased teacher efficacy following the experience. In regard to reading teacher efficacy,

Nierstheimer, Hopkins, Dillon, and Schmitt (2000) reported increased efficacy for elementary preservice teachers participating in a corrective reading methods course and pre-requisite tutoring practicum. Likewise, Haverback and Parault's (2011) investigation of two field experiences, tutoring and observing, on elementary preservice teachers' self-efficacy showed that both groups reported growth in reading teacher efficacy.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of two preparation programs on elementary preservice teachers' efficacy of teaching reading. Specifically, the study sought to determine if there was a difference in candidates' efficacy for teaching reading in a teacher education program that merged standards and increased field experiences for a dual certification in elementary and special education, as compared to a traditional elementary education program that offered candidates the opportunity to earn the elementary teaching certificate only.

Methodology

Participants

Participants were 54 elementary preservice teachers (53 females and 1 male) at a southeastern university classified by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools as a Level VI institution and by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as a Doctoral/Research Intensive University. All participants were seeking an elementary teaching certificate through either the Elementary Education ($n=31$) or K-6 Teacher Education ($n=23$) program. It should be noted that the concurrent presence of participants in these two separate programs represented a period of transition resulting from recent institutional changes rather than typical program offerings.

The primary difference between the programs was that candidates in K-6 Teacher Education were meeting all state department of education mandates (minimum standards and field experience/internship requirements) to be recommended for dual certification in both Elementary and Collaborative Teaching upon successful completion of the program and satisfactory PRAXIS II test scores. As a result, the program for K-6 Teacher Education majors contained significantly more special education content in coursework and field experiences, while the total number of credit hours remained at 128 for both programs. A specific listing of required courses for both programs appears in Table 1.

Further, the total number of field experience hours prior to internship doubled (increasing from 235 to 470 clock hours) for K-6 Teacher Education majors with candidates evenly splitting their time between regular and special education settings. The increase in content covered without an increase in credit hours resulted in increased responsibilities along with the increase in clock hours (see Table 2).

Procedures

Haverback (2007) adapted the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale developed by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk-Hoy (2001) to examine teacher efficacy within the specific domain of reading. This resulted in the Reading Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (RTSES), which was then subjected to reliability and validity procedures, and has been used and accepted in studies of preservice teachers' sense of reading efficacy (Haverback, 2007; Haverback, 2009; Haverback & Parault, 2011). Responses to "how much can you do" for each of the 16 RTSES questions use the same nine-point Likert-like scale as used in the original TSES, which lie on a continuum of 1-nothing to 9-a great deal, making 144 the highest possible total score. The RTSES was used as a posttest measure to assess teacher efficacy within the domain of reading for all participants.

The research design of this study was a posttest-only, nonequivalent control group design. A pretest was not administered to avoid testing threat, where taking a test affects subsequent testing by increasing participants' performance as a result of their familiarity with the test items rather than any actual treatment.

The RTSES was disseminated via Survey Monkey™ correspondence to a sample of 54 preservice teachers in two separate teacher education programs at the end of their semester long internship in a public school K-6 classroom. Fifty-three participants responded for a response rate of 98.1%. Respondents were evenly distributed across the two programs represented—Elementary Education ($n=30$) and K-6 Teacher Education ($n=23$).

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze data and determine if significant differences existed between the mean scores of Elementary Education and K-6 Teacher Education preservice teachers' overall RTSES scores, as well as individual item means for all 16 items. The alpha value for comparison was set at .05 with 95% as the confidence level.

Results

Independent sample *t* tests were conducted to compare reading teacher efficacy in Elementary Education and K-6 Teacher Education preservice teachers. Total scores from the RTSES revealed that there was not a statistically significant difference between Elementary Education majors' ($M = 132.83$, $SD = 12.23$) and K-6 Teacher Education majors' ($M = 131.96$, $SD = 12.45$) overall sense of reading teacher efficacy ($t(51) = .26$, $p = .80$).

Group mean scores from the 16 individual items were also compared (see Table 3) using independent-sample *t* tests. These analyses also yielded statistically non-significant results ($p > .05$). Together, these results suggest that differences within the two programs did not affect the preservice teachers' sense of reading teacher self-efficacy.

Discussion

Because differences in coursework and field

experiences within two distinct teacher preparation programs did not yield a significant difference in elementary preservice teachers' sense of reading teacher self-efficacy, the idea that multiple pathways can yield similar results is affirmed. This is yet another example of variation among programs not necessarily impacting quality. This same occurrence was noted by the International Reading Association (2003) when eight different programs all received excellent ratings in the six essential features for creating and sustaining preparation programs that produce teachers who teach reading well despite significant variations among the programs.

While Bandura's theory states that mastery experience is the most influential way to create high self-efficacy (1994), it is understandable that a limited amount of such an experience may not produce this desired effect but, in fact, result in the opposite. In this case, perhaps the increased time in classrooms allowed K-6 Teacher Education participants to more fully grasp the complexities involved in teaching reading, particularly in the area of special education. Thus, the increased experience teaching reading resulted in more realistic rather than higher perceptions of self-efficacy in the domain of reading. This finding is consistent with those of Haverback and Parault (2011), who found that elementary preservice teachers serving as reading tutors reported less change in reading self-efficacy than those simply completing classroom observations.

In addition, it should again be noted that although both programs were deemed rigorous by participants, the elementary program participants were focusing on meeting standards for one certification only, while K-6 program participants were meeting standards for both elementary and special education certification. A critical aspect to be considered was that, even with a significant increase in standards in the K-6 program, candidates were completing both programs in equivalent semester hours. The additional time in the field was implemented to help participants in the K-6 program have the opportunity to analyze the theory and apply it to practice. It is speculated, however, that the intense demands impacted their sense of efficacy, especially in the critical area of teaching reading.

An overly high sense of self-efficacy, though, may not necessarily be desirable for preservice teachers. Haverback and Parault (2011) speculate that it may be beneficial for preservice teachers to have a moderate level of self-efficacy which will result in a more realistic sense of what they will be able to accomplish as they begin their careers. As a result, they will also have a better understanding of what they still need to know. Teaching, particularly learning to teach reading, requires ongoing learning, which begs the question of whether any program of academic study can fully prepare novice teachers for this immense task. Rather, it may be postulated that teacher education programs should

focus on a beginning teacher's readiness to practice independently by providing them with the highest quality preparation program that focuses on meeting the needs of all students (Duncan, 2011).

Limitations

There are several limitations that should be considered when examining the results of this study. The primary limitation of this study was the limited sample size (n=54). A larger sample size would increase the precision of being able to generalize the findings to a larger population. Furthermore, the study site was likely not representational of all four-year colleges, as there are many variations among program characteristics at different institutions. Another limitation of the study is that program enrollment cannot be considered random selection, thus, limiting the generalizability of the study findings.

Future Research

Abbitt (2011) reminds us that "Although self-efficacy beliefs will influence decisions and behaviors, these self-efficacy beliefs are influenced by other characteristics and prior experience within a particular domain" (p. 136). Factors such as each participant's own experiences with learning to read and/or their children's learning to read experiences may influence their perceived efficacy in the domain of reading. Consequently, participants' personal attitudes towards reading in relation to their reading teaching efficacy would have provided additional insight.

As noted by Bordelon et al. (2012), preservice teachers might also benefit from students' perceptions of how efficacious they are, since feedback on efficacy from the recipients of their efforts would provide a deeper understanding of the student-teacher relationship, which exists at the very core of teaching and developing a sense of self-efficacy. Further, it is possible that preservice teachers' efficacy changes as they matriculate through their teacher education programs (Pendergast, Garvis, & Keogh, 2011) making an investigation of reading teacher self-efficacy at various program checkpoints additionally informative.

Conclusion

Despite acknowledged impact of teacher efficacy on student achievement (Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Graham, Harris, Fink, & MacArthur, 2001; Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990), these findings are not necessarily generalizable to preservice teachers or across domains. Haverback (2009) cautions that high efficacy in preservice teachers does not necessarily yield the same positive impact that has been noted for inservice teachers. According to the International Reading Association (2000), it is the teacher's knowledge, rather than self-efficacy, that makes a difference in student achievement. The teacher's role in the reading process is to create experiences and environments that introduce, nurture, or extend students' abilities to engage with text. Accordingly, studies measuring both knowledge and efficacy are needed to determine the link between knowledge, efficacy, and

student achievement. Further investigation of the link between reading teacher efficacy and better reading teaching can only contribute to our growing understanding of what exactly constitutes effective reading teacher preparation.

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Table 1 Course of Study by Program

Elementary Education		K-6 Education	
COURSE NAME	HOURS	COURSE NAME	HOURS
Professional Studies	28	Professional Studies	32
EDF 211 Clinical & Lab Exp. in Ed. Found.	0	EDU 302 Classroom Management II	1
EPY 251 Human Growth & Development	3	EDM 310 Microcomputing Systems in Ed.	3
EDM 310 Microcomputing Systems in Ed.	3	EDU 311 Partnerships in SPE	3
EDF 315 Education in a Diverse Society	3	EDU 312 Intellect and Physical Disabilities	3
EEC 345 Sequence Field Experience	1	EDF 315 Education 3in a Diverse Society	3
EEC 346 EEC School Program	3	EDU 345 Field Experience	1
SPE 400 Ed. for Exceptional Child. & Youth	3	EPY 351 Human Growth & Development	3
EEC 430 Student Teaching	9	EPY 355 Evaluation of Teaching & Learning	3
EPY 455 Evaluation of Teaching & Learning	3	EDU 430 K-6 Internship	6
		EDU 495 K-6 Internship SPE	6
Teaching Field	36	Teaching Field	32
PE 166 Movement, Rhythms, and Dev. Act.	3	EDU 300 Classroom Management I	1
HS 262 Personal Health	3	EDU 301 Arts in the Elementary School	3
EEC 300 Classroom Management	3	EDU 303 Field Experience SPE	1
AED 301 Art in the Elementary School	3	EDU 313 Learning & Behavior Disorders	3
MUE 301 Music for Elem. Classroom Teachers	3	EDU 330 Found. of Reading Instruction	3
RED 330 Found. of Reading Instruction	3	EDU 331 Teaching Reading	3
RED 331 Teaching Reading	3	EDU 335 Teaching Mathematics	3
EEC 332 Teaching Language Arts	3	EDU 336 Teaching Social Studies	3
RED 333 Literature for Children	3	EDU 337 Teaching Science	3
EEC 335 Teaching Mathematics	3	EDU 346 K-6n Education	3
EEC 336 Teaching Social Studies	3	EDU 362 Behavior Management	3
EEC 337 Teaching Science	3	HS 365 HPE Curr/Methods-Elem. Teachers	3
Total	128	Total	128

Table 2 Description of Field Experiences by Program

Program	Semester 1		Semester 2		Semester 3		Semester 4	
	Hours	Type	Hours	Type	Hours	Type	Hours	Type
Elementary Education	10	vicarious	75	vicarious	150	vicarious/mastery	525	mastery
K-6 Teacher Education	20	vicarious	200	vicarious/mastery	250	mastery	525	mastery

Table 3 Reading Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale Means for Preservice Teacher Groups

RTSES Items (abbreviated)	Elementary Education		K-6 Teacher Education		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
1. Help students think critically while reading	8.53	0.68	8.26	1.00	0.26	51
2. Motivate students who show low interest in reading	8.23	0.86	8.39	0.94	1.17	51
3. Get students to believe they can do well in reading	8.50	0.78	8.52	0.79	0.64	51
4. Respond to difficult questions from students about reading	8.17	1.01	8.30	0.88	0.10	51
5. Help students value reading	8.30	1.02	8.43	0.79	0.52	51
6. Help to gauge student comprehension of reading skills you have taught	8.37	0.89	8.43	0.73	0.52	51
7. Craft good reading questions for your students	8.30	0.92	8.26	0.96	0.30	51
8. Foster student creativity while reading	8.47	0.73	8.35	0.83	0.15	51
9. Improve the understanding of a student who is failing reading	8.10	1.14	7.91	1.31	0.31	51
10. Adjust your reading lessons to the proper level for individual students	8.30	0.88	8.22	0.90	0.67	51
11. Use a variety of reading assessment strategies	8.40	0.81	8.57	0.84	0.99	51
12. Provide an alternative explanation or example when students are confused about reading	8.40	0.86	8.22	1.09	0.53	51
13. Assist families in helping their children do well in reading	8.07	1.23	7.74	1.36	0.54	51
14. Implement alternative reading strategies in your classroom	8.20	0.87	8.04	1.15	0.72	51
15. Provide appropriate challenges for very capable readers	8.47	0.73	8.35	1.02	0.84	51
16. Get through to the most difficult students in reading	8.07	0.98	7.96	1.10	0.26	51
RTSES Total	132.8	12.23	131.9	12.4	0.45	51

Note. All *t* test statistics were not statistically significant ($p > .05$).