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The Impact of Experiential Learning in Literacy and Teacher Efficacy: A Study of SA Reads

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of an experiential learning course work component on teacher candidates' perception of literacy knowledge, their perspective of a community-based literacy partnership, and their self-reported sense of general and personal teaching efficacy. Initial findings reveal there is growth in all areas of perception of literacy knowledge, with knowing how to assist a struggling reader with fluency and vocabulary skills being the greatest areas of gain. Findings indicate there is minimal change in the participants' perspectives of the community-based literacy partnership. Finally, participants gained in the areas of general and teaching efficacy. Extant literature will be reviewed and implications for future practice will be explored.

Keywords: *preservice teachers, experiential learning, teacher efficacy*

Introduction

Teachers are the cornerstone of the classroom environment. The teacher must exhibit confidence in teaching literacy concepts and skills to students to yield positive student outcomes and produce readers. Yet, evidence supports the premise that teachers are not prepared to teach literacy skills to students (Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2004; Joshi et al., 2009), especially those who struggle to understand the basic components of literacy: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency,

vocabulary, and comprehension. There are ways to ameliorate the “misteaching” of literacy skills. One way is to provide teacher candidates with opportunities to master the art of teaching literacy prior to induction into teaching. An effective method to provide candidates the experiences of “doing literacy” rather than “learning literacy” is through experiential learning.

Experiential and hands-on practice in literacy instruction increases teacher efficacy, which positively impacts student outcomes.

Increased student outcomes will yield better readers. One way to provide teacher candidates the opportunity to experience authentic practice is through participation in *SA Reads*, a community-based literacy outreach program.

Literature Review

Teaching Efficacy

Bandura (1977) defined efficacy as the belief in one's ability to be successful on a given task. Efficacy is critical for success in any given area (Zeldin, Britner, & Pajares, 2008). This statement is especially true in the teaching profession. Hoy and Woolfolk (1993) examined the impact of efficacy as two constructs: general teaching efficacy and personal teaching efficacy. Szabo and Mokhtari (2004) explained general teaching efficacy is the belief in one's ability to reach children with difficulties in the classroom, or to teach efficacy in the face of external forces beyond the teachers' control; personal teaching efficacy is the belief in one's personal capability to provide instruction. Both constructs affect students.

A teacher's sense of efficacy can greatly impact student outcomes (Goddard & Goddard, 2001). Teachers with high reports of self-efficacy, coupled with competence in professional knowledge, are less likely to report burnout (Durr, Chang, & Carson, 2014). Burnout can be deleterious to student learning (Lauermann and König, 2016). Increasing efficacy can reduce burnout and, in turn, increase student acquisition of knowledge.

As a teacher, it is imperative that one's sense of efficacy, especially in core subject areas, remain high enough to impact student outcomes. Literacy is a critical core area that is impacted by a teacher's sense of efficacy. When teaching literacy skills to emerging and beginning readers, efficacious teachers will yield better readers (Guo, Piasta, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2010).

Preparation for Literacy Instruction

Literacy knowledge and pedagogy are both necessary for teachers to be comfortable implementing and demonstrating to learners. One way to increase teachers' sense of comfort with these factors is through quality teacher preparation programs of study. Regardless of the critical need for knowledge and pedagogy, Greenberg, Walsh, and McKee (2014) found that only 17% of teacher preparation programs prepare elementary and special education teachers in the five components of literacy.

There are several ways to increase one's efficacy in literacy knowledge and effective pedagogy. The National Reading Panel's (2000) five essential components for reading instruction can aid current and future educators in implementing the science of teaching reading. The candidates' self-efficacy impacts the acquisition of the understanding of the science of teaching reading.

Bandura (1977) posited there are major influences on self-efficacy beliefs, which are vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, physiological arousal, and mastery experiences. Based on these influences, Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) examined four models of professional development for literacy teachers. Results indicated that mastery experiences impact teachers of literacy in a powerful way (Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011). Mastery experiences are those "hands-on" experiences that allow teachers the ability to practice their teaching and experience positive student outcomes. Similarly, Johnson (2010) found that teacher educators who modeled literacy instruction to teacher candidates positively influenced their candidates' sense of efficacy. Experiential learning is one way to increase a candidate's skillset in literacy.

Experiential Learning

Goodlad (1984) asserted that experience is the best teacher. Thusly, teacher candidates need to develop their literacy skillset and expertise in varied contexts (Pradhan, 2011),

providing them the option to put theory into practice. Since teacher preparation programs want to produce competent teachers, program faculty must give teacher candidates ample opportunities and experiences with school-aged students (Pittman & Dorel, 2014). Teacher candidates exhibit positive pedagogical gains when experiential learning contexts allow them to work with students in their targeted age groups (Wilson, Bradbury, & McGlasson, 2015).

Borgerding and Caniglia (2017) examined the effect of service learning on teacher candidate perspectives. The candidates in their study reported that participating in these experiential learning opportunities provided them exposure to high needs contexts and opportunities to practice their pedagogical skills. The candidates also felt more comfortable teaching and had an increased sense of confidence. This improved confidence led to increased self-efficacy (Bernadowski, Perry, & Del Greco, 2013; Cartwright, 2012).

Similarly, Hildenbrand and Schultz (2015) found that 93% of the teacher candidates they studied agreed that the service learning experiences added value to their courses. These experiences helped them to gain and reinforce knowledge and skills; and they helped them understand concepts related to authentic experiences. As rich as experiential learning practices can be, they are only as high quality as the community partnerships that support them.

Community Partnership with SA Reads

San Antonio Reads (SA Reads) is a community-based organization established to meet the charge that every student in San Antonio should read on grade level by 2020 (www.sa2020.org). The focus of SA Reads is to help develop the literacy skills of readers who fall below grade level. SA Reads is a project of Literacy San Antonio, Inc. (LSA) whose mission is to increase literacy and educational attainment

in Bexar County, a large county in southcentral Texas (<http://www.literacysanantonio.com/>).

Approximately 120 teacher candidates per 16-week semester tutor for nine consecutive weeks as part of their academic service learning component in the required course. Tutoring sessions are one hour each week, broken into two sessions with two different struggling readers for 30 minutes each. The teacher candidates use curriculum provided by the SA Reads organization, which includes the Florida Center for Reading Research (FCRR) (www.fcrr.org) Student Center Activities. The curriculum aids teacher candidates in providing scientifically based reading instruction in word analysis and decoding skills to the students. In addition, the teacher candidates use Scholastic Readers with guide cards. These materials afford teacher candidates opportunities to incorporate vocabulary and comprehension tasks, as well as a chance to model and listen to students read. Furthermore, SA Reads provides background checks, professional development for the tutors, and ongoing feedback sessions for the teacher candidates. SA Reads matches each teacher candidate with two identified struggling readers. Throughout the semester, SA Reads monitors the progress of the tutors through observations at each school. They provide support by offering feedback and focus group sessions for the teacher candidates.

Methodology

The struggling readers are chosen to participate in SA Reads based on their Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) scores or by teacher nomination. Students are identified as being at-risk for reading difficulties. Through a community partnership between the university and SA Reads, the researchers examined the impact of an experiential learning course work component on teacher candidates' perception of literacy knowledge, their perspective of a community-based literacy partnership, and their self-reported sense of general and personal teaching efficacy.

Research Design

Pre-and post- surveys were administered to the candidates at the beginning and end of the semester. The survey measured knowledge and perceptions of various literacy skills and consisted of 17 Likert scale items ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Ten additional questions (the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale-Short Form) were included to measure teacher efficacy, along with several open-ended questions to gauge participant reflections regarding the SA Reads process. Data were collected and analyzed using Excel and SPSS.

Participants

Teacher candidates who were enrolled in a Foundations of Literacy (EDRG 3314) course at a major university in south central Texas are expected to participate in the SA Reads learning project. This yielded a convenience sample of participants. Candidates were directed to complete the survey but had the option to opt out if they did not want to participate. In this study, 65 candidates completed the pre-survey and 179 completed the post-survey.

Seventy-three percent of the participants who completed the pre-survey identified as Hispanic, while 70% of participants in the post survey did. Twenty-seven percent of participants identified as Caucasian in the pre-survey, and 26% of the participants in the post survey did. These percentages are representative of the student population of the participating university. Additionally, participants were 95/93% (pre and post-survey) female and 5/7% male. The percentage of participants who

identified themselves as being 25 years or younger were 66% (pre-survey) and 55% (post-survey).

Findings

Data supported the fact that participants gained knowledge in literacy strategies (see Table 1). The finding with the greatest impact was that participants overwhelmingly felt they knew how to assist a struggling reader; there was a 56% increase in participants who agreed or strongly agreed. There were similar gains in vocabulary assistance (42%) and comprehension (39%). Overall, there were positive improvements in all areas of knowledge related to assisting struggling readers.

Data did not reveal any significant gains in how participants felt about the SA reads organization (see Table 2). It is important to note that most participants felt positively about the experience and community partner before the beginning of the implementation period. The major difference seen through this questioning was the increase in the belief that SA Reads helped the student.

Efficacy data (see Table 3) revealed that participants gained an average of 22 points or an average 35% difference in personal teaching efficacy. For general teaching efficacy, the scores are reversed so a negative difference was an increase. Therefore, there was an improvement of 10.4 points, yielding an average of a 28% difference between the beginning sense of general teaching efficacy. The overall total efficacy scores increased by 29%.

Table 1

Percentage of Participants' Knowledge of Literacy Strategies

Item	Pre %	Post %	Gain	Difference %
Agree or strongly agree they know how to assist a struggling reader who doesn't have phonological awareness	49	62	13	21
Agree or strongly agree they know how to assist a struggling reader who doesn't have alphabetic knowledge	46	66	20	31
Agree or strongly agree they know how to assist a struggling reader with word recognition (decoding)	45	66	21	32
Agree or strongly agree they know how to assist a struggling reader with fluency	40	91	51	56
Agree or strongly agree they know how to assist a struggling reader with vocabulary skills.	43	74	31	42
Agree or strongly agree they know how to assist a struggling reader with comprehension	45	73	28	39
Agree or strongly agree they know how to help a struggling reader learn how to read	48	73	25	34
Agree or strongly agree they know various strategies to assist a student in learning to read	40	69	28	42
Candidates were glad they gained knowledge and experience working with a struggling reader	82	84	2	3

Table 2

Percentage of Participants' Views of SA Reads

Item	Pre %	Post %	Gain	Difference %
Agree or strongly agree tutoring the SA Reads helped the student in the affective domain (motivation)	70	76	6	8
Agree or strongly agree tutoring in SA Reads built confidence in the student's reading ability	79	77	-2	-.08
Agree or strongly agree SA Reads made a positive impact on the student's overall reading ability	79	78	-1	-.09
Agree or strongly agree serving as an SA Reads tutor had a positive impact on their life [personally]	79	83	4	5
Agree or strongly agree serving as an SA Reads tutor had a positive impact on their life [professionally]	82	85	3	4
Agree or strongly agree serving as an SA Reads tutor had a positive impact on their life [academically]	80	81	1	1
Agree or strongly agree the experience with SA Reads reinforced content in EDRG 3314	77	77	0	0
Agree or strongly agree the SA Reads curriculum matched what was covered in EDRG 3314.	74	80	6	7

Table 3

Percentage Participants' Sense of Efficacy

Item	Pre %	Post %	Gain	Difference %
Personal Teaching Efficacy				
Candidates believe or strongly believe when they really try, they can get through to the most difficult students	56	77	21	27
Candidates believes or strongly believe if a student didn't remember information they gave in a previous lesson, they would know how to increase his/her retention in the next	40	64	24	37
Candidates believe or strongly believe if a student in their class became disruptive and noisy, they would know some techniques to redirect him/her quickly	56	75	19	25
Candidates believe or strongly believe if one of their students couldn't do a class assignment, they would be able to accurately assess whether the assignment was at the correct difficulty level	51	68	17	25
Candidates believe if they try really hard, they can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated students.	50	77	22	35
General Teaching Efficacy * (Reverse Coding)				
Candidates believe or strongly believe the amount a student can learn is primarily related to family background	31	41	10	-24
Candidates believe or strongly believe if students are disciplined at home, they aren't likely to accept any discipline	28	47	19	-40
Candidates believe or strongly believe a teacher is very limited in what he/she can achieve because a student's home environment is a large influence on his/her achievement	32	40	8	-20
Candidates believe or strongly believe if parents would do more for their children, they could do more	34	42	8	-19
Candidates believe a teacher really can't do much because most of a student's motivation and performance depends on his/her home environment	18	25	7	-28
Total Efficacy	396	556	160	29

Discussion

The results of the pre and post-surveys reveal that experiential learning has a positive impact on teacher candidates' confidence to teach struggling readers. The goal of the experiential learning assignment was twofold: 1) to increase the teacher candidate's literacy knowledge and self-efficacy; and 2) to assist in improving the literacy confidence for struggling readers. The data suggests that the teacher candidates overwhelmingly perceived themselves as knowing how to teach targeted literacy skills to struggling readers, as evidenced by Table 1. It appears that only minor gains (3%) were made when students responded to the question, "Candidates were glad they gained knowledge and experience working with a struggling reader." However, as stated, the students' pre-survey ratings were high allowing only slight gains to be made from pre-survey to post-survey.

Equally important, the participants rated their initial views of SA Reads highly. The results from Table 2 show that a small percentage of participants from pre-survey to post-survey formed a different view. In contrast, results indicate that the participants considered SA Reads as having little impact on building confident readers and increasing the students' overall reading ability. It is important to note that these percentages are very small and the sample size doubled from pre-survey to post-survey. The students were struggling readers who were reading one or more grade levels behind in reading. The teacher candidates were only able to tutor each student 30 minutes per week. Perhaps, many of the students needed additional minutes of intensive instruction in word analysis, decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension per week.

Moreover, the teacher candidates' efficacy increased exponentially as depicted in Table 3. Although the questions were not content specific, SA Reads helped build confidence in teacher candidates that will impact

their overall teaching regardless of which academic discipline they choose. Efficacy is important because it allows the teacher candidates to believe that they can accomplish tasks such as motivating students and reaching the most difficult students. Although the focus of this assignment was to increase teachers' knowledge and efficacy and to help children improve their reading skills, an additional variable was developed through the experience itself. The teacher candidates were able to increase their pedagogical knowledge.

The benefits of providing teacher candidates experiential learning opportunities are critically important in increasing their assurance in becoming a teacher. This type of experiential learning gives teacher candidates robust opportunities to work with struggling readers. Conversely, in a similar study, Pittman and Dorel (2014) found 82% of preservice students felt they gained experience in reading instruction after SA Reads, 95% of tutors would recommend other aspiring teachers to participate in SA Reads, and 95% of tutors believe they would make a positive impact on their students' lives after participating in SA Reads.

Impact on Practice

The results from this study suggest that teacher candidates compellingly agreed or strongly agreed that the SA Reads opportunity was impactful to their learning and teaching efficacy. The data highlight the importance of incorporating experiential learning into literacy-related courses. Often, the content knowledge (teaching a student to read) can be difficult to understand because teacher candidates, themselves, may have forgotten how they learned to read. The knowledge (content and pedagogical) will assist them in being more confident teachers. A framework, such as this, allows teacher candidates to connect theory to practice. Many times, textbooks, lectures, and classroom assignments focus on the struggling reader; SA Reads provide opportunities for teacher candidates to assist struggling readers weekly. It is the hope of this study that teacher

candidates will take this new knowledge into their classrooms upon graduating and receiving teaching licensure. In doing so, the experiential learning experience will have a longitudinal impact on the teacher candidates' teaching career.

Suggestions for Implementation

Implementing experiential learning into a course provides opportunities for teacher candidates to receive practical application of content-related skills. It can, however, be an appalling task if the course instructor does not have clearly stated learning goals; there must also be opportunities for teacher candidates to reflect upon their experience via critical analyses, such as classroom discussions and directed writing (Skinner & Chapman, 1999). Once the goal of the experiential learning experience has been defined, the instructor can partner with a local organization. It is important to inform the potential partner of the benefit the establishment will receive from the partnership. Key thoughts are, "How will teacher candidates benefit from this partnership?" and "How will the organization benefit from the partnership?"

For a list of potential partners, see organizations such as the Association of Experiential Education, National Society for Experiential Learning, and Campus Compact. These groups provide resources to implement experiential learning into curriculum.

In conclusion, experiential learning opportunities, such as SA Reads, are a necessity to increase content knowledge and teaching efficacy for teacher candidates. In this study, pedagogical knowledge was a by-product of the experiential learning experience. Further research should focus on the longitudinal impact of experiential learning on teacher candidates (i.e., once teacher candidates become licensed). The results of this study provide potentially positive affirmations for any instructor wanting to implement experiential learning into his or her course. The limitations of this study included a smaller sample size for the pre-survey versus the post-survey, which could have impacted the accuracy of results. All in all, however, this study indicates that experiential learning has positive implications.

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