

Social Foundations of Education and Teacher Efficacy

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Abstract

There are no studies of efficacy that examine the political context affecting teachers hence this article asks: how can the study of efficacy be expanded to include the contingencies new teachers face and how can education foundation courses include the context new teachers need to reach high levels of efficacy? By focusing on teacher roles, expectations, and social relations, efficacy can become the new framework for education foundations. Teacher preparation will then refocus on social foundations and address the current needs of teachers, schools and society.

Introduction

There are many reasons for teacher educators to be focused on efficacy. Efficacy is linked to student achievement. Teachers with a high level of efficacy feel a sense of responsibility for student achievement (Hoy, 2000). There are researchers who assert that no other characteristic is as highly correlated to student achievement as teacher self-efficacy (Ashton, Buhr, & Crocker, 1984, p. 28). Most important is that efficacy impacts motivation and performance. In studies of efficacy, teachers with a high level of efficacy believed they could control, or at least strongly influence student learning and motivation (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Beyond the student aspect, research demonstrates that perceived levels of efficacy are central to teacher effectiveness, attrition rates, and job satisfaction.

Prior surveys found that subtle variations in pre-service teacher preparation significantly impact teachers' perceived ability to maintain a high level of teaching efficacy. So what exactly is teacher efficacy? There is debate in the psychological community over whether or not efficacy is a trait, and debate over the extent to which efficacy can be accurately measured. This study sets these questions aside. It addresses the larger issues complicating teacher efficacy research, focusing on the impact of context. For example, how efficacy needs to be refined to capture more aspects of teachers' self-efficacy.

Although a significant number of studies have examined the relation between external contingencies and perceived levels of efficacy, there are no studies that examine the political context affecting the teaching profession. Aspiring teachers have extensive preparation on how to teach, but their access to knowledge and ability to contemplate the issues facing teachers is limited. In other words, they are prepared to address their student's needs, but not their own. Teacher efficacy needs to include the impact of contemporary political policies affecting teachers.

Background

Studies on efficacy originated in the 1970s (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Specifically, teacher efficacy was first discussed as a concept when the following two items were included in studies conducted by researchers at the Rand Corp: "*When it comes right down to it, a teacher really can't do much because most of a student's motivation and performance depends on his or her home environment.*" And "*If I try really hard, I can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated students.*" (Rand study cited in Hoy, 2000).

Since the Rand study, contemporary researchers have formulated more extensive surveys of efficacy. Early studies defined the concept of efficacy as a teacher's perception of his/her capacity to influence how well students learn. In more recent times the conception has shifted to the notion of how well teachers can affect teaching. Teacher efficacy is often understood as a teacher's confidence in their ability to promote students' learning (Hoy, 2000). Self-efficacy is often defined as teacher perception of their capacity to influence how well students learn, but some authors argue it needs to be conceived as how well teachers can affect teaching (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Others define efficacy as a teacher's perception of their influence on "how well students learn" (Dimopoulou, 2012).

This contemporary foundation for self-efficacy is situated in social cognitive theory developed by Albert Bandura. The theoretical framework for understanding the role of teacher efficacy grew out of the work of Bandura, identifying teacher efficacy as a type of self-efficacy--or cognitive process in which people construct beliefs about their capacity to

perform at a given level of attainment. For Bandura self-efficacy is a cognitive process, in which we construct beliefs about effort, persistence, resilience, and stress. Bandura defined perceived self-efficacy as “*people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave*” (Alfred Bandura, 1994, p. 1). For Bandura self-efficacy is a belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce expected attainments.

Self-efficacy is different from conceptions of self-worth, self-concept, and self-esteem. In short, efficacy is not an evaluation of self. Though efficacy is detached from our self-conception, very competent people do not feel efficacious because they have high standards for completing a task. It is about the capability to complete a task, and efficacy allows us to perform without worrying about our sense of worth being affected by the outcome, such as when young children are learning to walk. Teachers able to separate the myriad tasks of teaching from their personal self-worth will experience less stress and be able to maintain higher levels of efficacy throughout their careers.

Bandura’s work suggests belief in our ability to alter our behavior affects our motivation and ultimately our success or failure. His social cognitive theory emphasizes human agency within a multi-directional model where our capacity to positively impact our situation influences our thoughts and behaviors. Beliefs about our capacity to positively impact our situation influence how much effort we put forth, how long we will persist in the face of obstacles, our resilience in dealing with failures, and how much stress or depression we experience in coping with demanding situations (Albert Bandura, 1997). It is these demanding situations, the contingencies of modern teaching, which are not fully addressed in studies of efficacy.

Efficacy research is one of the few areas in social psychology that differentiates between perceptions of competence and contingency. Contingencies are external factors influencing teacher effectiveness. Examples of changing factors impacting teachers are: student demographics, parent engagement, teacher support systems, and the public perception of the teaching profession. Specifically, this changing professional climate includes merit pay based on state mandated testing, a law that limits collective bargaining rights, and new policies for evaluation and teacher tenure. These external factors profoundly affect teachers, especially those new to the profession. All the previous studies of efficacy have centered on the perceived capacity to impact student success and did not address teacher needs. Therefore this study completed survey research examining how educational foundations coursework addresses efficacy. This study specifically asks: how can the study of efficacy be expanded to include the contingencies new teachers face and how can education foundation courses include the context new teachers need to reach high levels of efficacy?

External Factors Affecting Teaching

Contingencies are external factors influencing teacher effectiveness. In the research these are primarily focused on teachers in low-income areas affected by parent engagement. Because of such factors, future studies of efficacy should consider the changing political climate facing teachers today. Teachers can also benefit by learning from each other how roles have evolved, especially through the lens of efficacy. Multiple studies suggest that self-efficacy can be positively affected by vicarious experiences. Therefore, learning about successful political reform movements led by teachers in the context of educational foundations classes would have a positive impact. Studies of efficacy should reflect how today’s testing movement, the standards and accountability movement, merit pay, the attack on teacher organization, and other factors impact the teaching profession in unprecedented ways.

It stands to reason that policies, such as evaluating teachers on the basis of standardized tests, affect perceived levels of personal efficacy, and those policies that limit teacher autonomy impact levels of self-efficacy. In addition, self-efficacy is presumed to decrease if teachers believe factors external to teaching are more important to the students learning than the influence that a teacher might have. In other words, external control impacts perceived levels of personal efficacy.

Researchers believe that efficacy is specific to a given context, and an important aspect is what’s known as the ‘teacher locus of control’ (Knoblauch & Hoy, 2008). This means the extent to which teachers believe they have control over their profession. Efficacy is contingent on the roles, expectations, and social relations facing teachers. This occurs to the extent that the environment affects teachers’ levels of efficacy.

There is an element of reinforcement in a teacher self-efficacy; specifically, whether or not one perceives control of reinforcement as residing internally or externally. Feelings of autonomy, actually predicted teacher self-efficacy positively (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010, p. 1064). Though, as discussed, outside factors greatly affect efficacy and teachers rarely perform in autonomy. There is also a cycle of reinforcement. The teacher reinforces student learning, and student learning reinforces teacher behavior and motivation (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007; Tschannen-Moran et

al., 1998). Teachers with a high level of efficacy believe they can control, or at least strongly influence student learning and motivation.

Teachers weigh their perception of self-efficacy in the light of assumed requirements and anticipated tasks. Teacher standards affect efficacy, creating one example of collective efficacy (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p. 20). Collective efficacy in terms of teacher autonomy, most strongly relates to supervisory support. Subsequently, positive school administrators and positive teachers tend to influence others. The notion of collective efficacy has been examined in various studies. Collective efficacy means shared perceptions of teacher impact are in one sense contagious. A low sense of teacher efficacy can be contagious. The few available studies on efficacy suggest a moderate positive relation between perceived collective self-efficacy and individual teacher self-efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). The real question becomes how to prepare new teachers to face the contingencies and create a high level of collective efficacy. Refocused education foundation courses can do just that.

Refining Education Foundation Courses

Kathleen deMarrais writes, ‘there is a sense within the field that our work is slipping away from us, pushing social foundations faculty further to the margins of teacher education’ (Hyttén, 2007, p. 278). By focusing on efficacy through the social and political context impacting teachers’ educational development could refine the focus that is needed. Many researchers in educational foundations note the challenge in defining the field of study. Dan Butin, for example asks, ‘*is it a curricular emphasis? A theoretical orientation?*’ (Hyttén, 2007, p. 278). Because of this vagueness, educational foundations is often conflated with fundamentals and then can turn into an introduction to teaching course (Hyttén, 2007). Instead, courses should focus on efficacy as studies show that efficacy is most malleable during the early years of a prospective teacher’s career. Efficacy is linked to student teaching and early career success. Teacher education programs, therefore, affect an individual’s sense of efficacy.

Aspiring teachers with higher efficacy, are more likely to question the behavior of supervising teacher (Hoy, 2000, p. 5). This is especially important as institutions can shape personnel through a variety of mechanisms designed to make the person conform to the values of the organization (Hoy, p. 4.). Lortie notes that early teacher socialization occurs through the internalization of teaching models; this socialization occurs during the years a prospective teacher spends as a student (2002). Socialization to professional norms and values continues during college preparation. This socialization to the profession, when aspiring teachers enter the actual world of teaching, will often evoke an experience of shock (Hoy, p. 4: plus 3 other studies cited). The shock occurs when organizational norms and values are out of line with what professors from teacher education programs espouse. Education foundations need to directly address how teachers can navigate socialization and identify the opportunities they have within the different organizations. Efficacy beliefs help to determine how environmental opportunities and impediments are perceived (Albert Bandura, 1997). This greatly affects how teachers are able to form their careers and continue teaching under difficult contingencies.

Studies indicate that efficacy will rise during teacher preparation, but fall with actual experience as a teacher (Hoy, 2000, p. 16). If educational foundations courses show teachers how to face the external factors then teachers can maintain higher levels of efficacy throughout their careers. Efficacy has been strongly linked to teacher burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Increased levels of efficacy have led aspiring teachers to indicate optimism over whether they would remain in the field of teaching. Retaining quality teachers and fostering professional careers is the end result of education foundation courses focused on efficacy.

The Study

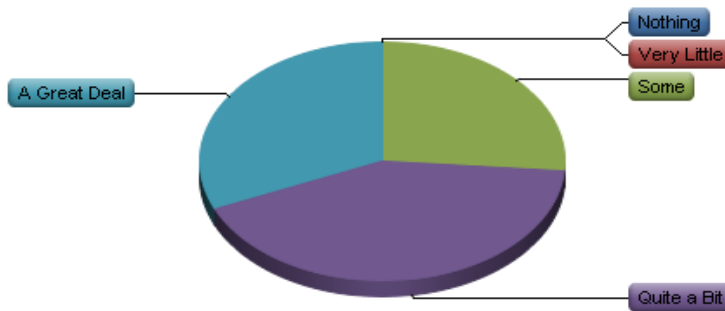
The objective of this study is to understand how current educational foundation coursework and classroom structure can prepare teachers to evaluate and engage in issues relevant to their chosen profession.

The students have not yet begun their required educational foundations course focusing on the complex relationships between schools and society through sociology, history, and philosophy of education. The students surveyed are in their junior or senior year. Most have completed practicums, but have limited experience teaching.

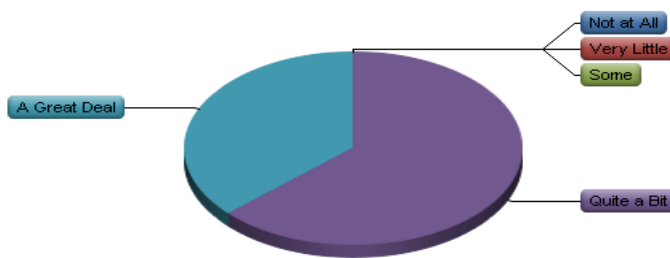
The intention of this study is research on preparing future teachers. Baseline data was collected at the beginning of the semester through online scaled-questioner surveys. The study utilized qualtrics survey software distributed via an online campus email system. The survey consisted of multiple questions on a likert scale. Items on the survey are rated on a 1-to-5 response scale. Items were created according to an understanding of the subject matter. Surveys were administered prior to the beginning of the semester. Participants were prompted to to complete the online survey at the beginning of the semester. A secure website was used to minimize or eliminate transmission of confidential data.

Discussion of Results

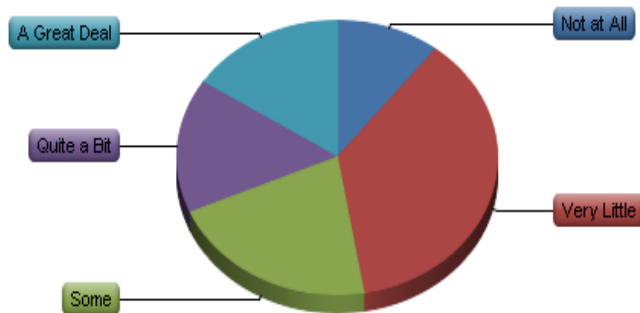
Students expressed concern over future policies affecting their chosen profession. Regarding the question *“To what extent are you concerned about the effect of current policies on teaching?”* 74% of students responded ‘Quite a Bit’ or ‘A Great Deal.’ Only 26% of the respondents answered “some”, and none of the students answered ‘nothing’ or ‘very little’. This means all of the respondents felt current policies affecting teachers concerned them, and an overwhelming majority indicated significant concern. The graphic below depicts the response to the question above.



Regarding the question, *“To what extent do external issues and policies impact the teaching profession?”* 63% of students felt external issues and policies impact the teaching profession quite a bit. In addition, 37% felt external issues and policies impact the teaching profession a great deal. The graphic below depicts these responses.

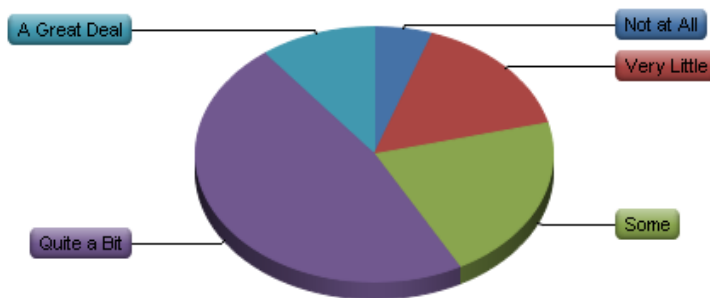


Perhaps the most significant finding came with the next question, *“To what extent can you impact education policy?”* The majority of students, 74%, answered very little or some. This means although a majority of students feel external policies will greatly impact their teaching capacity, and job satisfaction, very few students feel able to affect those policies. Furthermore, students were asked to what extent previous courses prepared them to understand the social issues and policies impacting education. The following is a representation of the responses:



The answers to this question are revealing. The graphic above indicates while most students recognize that policies affecting education would dramatically impact their career, most feel unprepared by previous course work to understand these issues.

Students were asked, *“How well informed do you feel to make informed decisions about current education policy?”* 5% listed not at all, 16% indicated very little, while 21% indicated some, and 47% of students indicated quite a bit. Only 11% of students indicated a great deal. The graphic below depicts these responses.



Regarding educational foundations coursework, students were asked, to what extent they felt these courses covered topics relevant to their job as a teacher. 42% stated some, 26% indicated quite a bit, and 32% indicated a great deal. This clearly supports the idea that educational foundation coursework needs to be reworked to address the new contingencies affecting the teaching profession.

When asked the question, *“to what extent do teachers impact our society?”* 32% of respondents felt teachers in general have an impact on the larger society. 68% felt teachers have a great deal of influence over society. Respondents were also asked, *“To what extent is it important for teachers to understand policies impacting education, and to be politically active?”* 16% indicated some, 42% indicated quite a bit, and another 42% indicated a great deal. Therefore, educational foundation courses need to include information on new policies, understand the dynamics of social factors and show ways for teachers to engage in current issues.

Student Responses

In addition to survey data, anecdotal data was gathered. This information conveyed students concerns about the political context of teaching. A number of students wrote similar statements to this: *“I am very concerend [about current policies impacting teaching] because teaching is not only my future career, but also one of my passions.”* In addition,

student responses indicated pessimism regarding their potential in influencing the political context of teaching. One student wrote, *I don't think I'll be influencing policymakers, so not very much. I'm not informed enough.*

The more informed students were, the more they felt the potential to influence the political context of their chosen profession. The following exchange is emblematic of students who felt more informed. When asked if they felt informed regarding contemporary issues impacting the teaching profession one student wrote, *"Very much so. I've been to hear Glenda Ritz speak twice, watched all those "Waiting for Superman-esque" movies, and I keep up on many of the political aspects of education."* Regarding the potential for teachers to influence change this student stated the following, *"I think it starts in your classroom. Grassroots policy change is what makes the whole yard grow. I can change my classroom and hopefully, my classroom can influence the yard."* Having accessed examples of teachers affecting the political context, students were more apt to believe they could do the same.

The anecdotal evidence in the study indicates the more informed students are, the more likely they feel empowered to affect change. In other words, the more students understand the contemporary political context, the more potential self-efficacy they feel in relation to this context.

Conclusion

The pool of students surveyed was too small to make widespread conclusions. Future studies need to examine how educational foundations coursework prepares teachers to evaluate and engage in relevant issues. There are limited qualitative assessments of self-efficacy, and these have focused on the roles, expectations, and social relations. Therefore, qualitative studies of teacher efficacy in relation to educational foundations would be most fruitful.

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