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RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Examining the Influence of Additional Field-Based Experiences on
Preservice Teachers and their Perceived Ability to Teach

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Over the last few decades, teacher education programs worldwide have experienced greater scrutiny than ever before in the form of government initiatives, mandated policy, and critical reports (Edwards, Gilroy, & Hartley, 2002). Examples of recent government initiatives and mandates include the Australian government reforming higher education, the French teacher education programs experiencing a major overhaul, and the government driven changes to teacher education in England. Examples of reform efforts include the Scottish Teachers for a New Era in Scotland, and the Carnegie Teachers for a New Era in the United States, (see Hobson, Malderez, Tracey, & Kerr, 2005). Interestingly enough, many of these reforms have taken place with little to no discussion or debate (Ellis, 2009).

These recent course of events, however, are not the first of their kind. Reports criticizing teacher education worldwide have been steady, but none more pointed than those emerging from the United States during the 1980s (Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986; Holmes Group, 1986; National Commission for Excellence in Teacher Education, 1985; National Consortium for Educational Excellence, 1985). Many of these reports led many to question the utility of traditional teacher education programs (Levine, 2006). One consistent recommendation in these reports was the need for more clinical experiences to provide hands-on learning for teacher candidates (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002).

Alternative routes to teacher certification have embraced the concept of providing more classroom hands-on experiences by eliminating traditional teacher education coursework. These changes are reflected in programs such as *Teach for America* in the U.S.A., and its adaptation, *Teach First*, in England. The format of these programs suggests that highly competent individuals armed with a bachelor's degree and five to six weeks of training at a summer institute are more qualified than teacher candidates who submit themselves to a minimum of two years'

worth of coursework, field-based experiences such as student teaching, and standardized assessments at the conclusion of their teacher education program. Are teachers who receive an alternative route to license better prepared than those who attend traditional teacher education programs? Is time spent on coursework irrelevant to the preparation and training of teachers? In a study comparing the beginning teachers receiving training and certification from a variety of venues, Darling-Hammond, Chung, and Frelow (2002) demonstrated that teachers trained in traditional teacher preparation programs reported feeling better prepared than teachers who pursued alternative routes to license (such as *Teach for America*). Zientek (2007) replicated these findings, but these studies alone are neither axiomatic nor conclusive. More empirical studies are needed if we are to determine the influence that teacher training has on teacher candidates.

In an attempt to analyze more closely the training experiences of preservice teachers, I conducted an exploratory quasi-experimental study at a university located in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. All students who were enrolled in the same reading methods course (but enrolled in different sections) were invited to participate in this study, and all students agreed to participate (N= 71). One group was randomly assigned to be in the control group (N=41), with the other group randomly assigned to be in the treatment group (N= 30). All participants were elementary teacher education students completing their last semester of coursework just prior to student teaching. Participants in this study were predominantly white (99% White, 1% Latino), and mostly female (only one participant was male). Ninety-four percent of the participants ranged in age from 20-29 years, with the remaining six percent being 30 years of age or older. All participants had previously completed a one-semester introductory reading course with general instruction in the areas of concepts of print, phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency.

The purpose of the experiment was to determine if there would be a difference in the perceptions preservice teachers had about their ability to teach reading based on the amount of field-based experiences they were provided. Traditionally, this methods course is taught with nine weeks of coursework, followed by a full time six-week practicum experience in an elementary school classroom. Participants in the control group were provided this schedule, while participants in the treatment group were provided this same schedule with an additional fieldwork experience of working with an elementary student in the midst of the nine weeks of coursework to practice the teaching skills they were learning during their coursework. This study received ethical approval through the Institutional Review Board. Treatment group participants spent 45 minutes to an hour each week, over the course of nine weeks, assessing the reading skills of their elementary student partner and teaching explicit lessons on specific reading skills. The participants in the control group completed the same activities only they practiced on college classmates instead of elementary students.

The data for this study was collected using the *Self-Assessment of Proficiency to Perform Reading Tasks* (SPPRT) scale. Examples of questions from this scale include the following: “How well can you evaluate reading materials for their usefulness and appropriateness for your students?”, “How well can you adapt reading instruction to accommodate students with special needs?” and “How well can you use comprehension activities (e.g., discussion questions, graphic organizers, and other assignments)?” I wanted to know if these hands on experiences with an elementary student would better prepare these preservice teachers to perform teaching tasks that would be required of them as practicing teachers.

I hypothesized that participants in the treatment group would report statistically significant higher scores on the SPPRT when compared with the control group because of their

nine-week partnership with an elementary student and the chance for them to practice their skills on young reader. However, to my surprise, this was not what happened. Results of the independent samples *t*-test indicated no significant differences between groups on the SPPRT at the beginning or at the end of the experiment. The control group ($M = 40.12$, $SD = 6.45$) and treatment group ($M = 39.21$, $SD = 4.36$) at the conclusion of the course, $t(69) = .38$, $p = .54$, indicated that the treatment did not influence the perceptions of pre-service teachers in the treatment group about their ability to perform reading instructional tasks above and beyond the perceptions of participants in the control group. These findings suggest that more hands on experiences with elementary students during coursework do not always result in preservice teachers feeling more prepared and capable to perform teaching tasks, but more research is clearly needed.

One key limitation in the current study was the small sample size and so this study is being replicated with a much larger sample size ($N = 200$) with preservice teachers randomly assigned to the control or treatment group. This new research study will address the following research question: Do pre-service teachers who engage in weekly teaching activities with an elementary student during a reading methods course report higher perceptions of their ability to perform reading instructional tasks than pre-service teachers who do not have these experiences? The data analytic strategy will include descriptive statistics to determine characteristics about the overall group of preservice teachers as well as characteristics of the control and treatment group. A repeated-measures ANOVA will be utilized to examine differences between and within groups.

This study is needed to understand more fully how clinical experiences influence the feelings of preparedness to teach in teacher candidates. Key outcomes from this study will

provide a framework for future research addressing best practices of teacher training and how these practices influence feelings of competence and ability. Without this type of evidence, teacher training will continue to be determined using information based on supposition, hunches, and/or hypothesis, instead of empirical evidence. A call is also issued to international researchers and collaborators to take this research further into different settings, contexts, and cultures so that we may more fully understand what experiences produce teachers who are capable and prepared to handle the challenges inherent in teaching today's youth.

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