

Education Candidates' Perceptions of Title I Public Schools

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This study examines freshmen education candidates' perceptions of Title I schools prior to and following a four-day field experience in Title I schools. Analyses of pre and post-field experience surveys reveal the experience affected candidates' perspectives. Over the course of the field experience, they developed a more favorable and optimistic perspective of Title I schools. The specific impact of the field experience and the implications for teacher education programs is discussed.

Introduction

Field experiences (i.e., practicums, fieldwork, etc.) make an impact on preservice teacher candidates in several ways, from improving their reading and pedagogy skills, to their self-efficacy for teaching (Haigh, Pinder & McDonald, 2006; Johnson, La Paro, & Crosby, 2016; Robbins, 2008). Practicums also strengthen candidates' content knowledge and social skills, while providing invaluable work experience in authentic settings (Sekyiacquah & Partey, 2014). Indeed, Darling-Hammond (2006) asserts that "extensive and intensely supervised" (p.307) fieldwork remains a hallmark of powerful preparation programs.

Field experiences benefit candidates in other ways. For example, in one study, more than two-thirds of secondary education candidates tutoring in an alternative high school reported that the experience increased their desire to become a teacher (Washburn-Moses, Kopp, & Hetersimer, 2012). With respect to the current study, the authors find this especially compelling. That the education majors grew *more* motivated to become a teacher after working closely with the most at-risk high school students

underscores the value of field experiences in shaping candidates' views of teaching. Washburn-Moses, Kopp, & Hetersimer (2012) stated that the participants in their study learned valuable lessons about good teachers and good teaching.

Candidates also benefit from teaching in a variety of educational settings, from one-on-one tutoring arrangements to traditional, whole class experiences (McCullough & Ryan, 2014; Mueller & Hindin, 2011). Research suggests that field experiences are beneficial for cooperating teachers too. For example, James and Watson (2001) found that science teachers who hosted elementary candidates during their internship grew more cognizant of their own teaching practices and were more likely to modify their approach after hosting the candidate.

The current study explored another benefit of field experiences. Specifically, the authors sought to understand how a four-day field experience in a Title I school influenced freshmen candidates' perceptions of that setting. Perceptions are important because they inform teachers' expectations of future experiences. Expectations, in turn, shape how teachers interact with and respond to students whom the school has affixed a particular label or those deemed by

their teacher as less capable. For example, teachers are less likely to praise so-labeled low achieving students and are more likely to criticize their successes (Cotton, 1989). Similarly, teachers demand better performance and are more likely to persist in eliciting correct responses from students for whom they hold high expectations (Good & Brophy, 1970). In one study, young students classified by their piano teacher as less-proficient worked on basic skills, through review and repetition while students believed to be more talented engaged in meaningful interactions with their teacher and worked more on interpreting and actually performing music (Budai, 2014). In addition to competence, teachers' perceptions of certain personality traits appeared to influence their expectations of students. For instance, Timmermans, Boer, & Werf (2016) report that teachers held higher expectations for students they perceived as self-confident and diligent; conversely, teachers held lower expectations for those students believed to exhibit more positive social behavior.

While the literature is replete with studies of teachers' perceptions of students, much less is known about teachers' perceptions of a school itself, and specifically, how one's perception of a school might change over time. One notable exception is Wolffe (1996) whose Junior Elementary Education candidates initially harbored negative, fearful expectations of Cincinnati-area urban schools. After a two-day field experience, the candidates revised their previous notions of urban schools and their students. Instead of the rough, poorly-behaved students they imagined, the candidates found well behaved, curious, and responsible students. So transformative was the experience for some candidates that they began to consider teaching in such a school (Wolffe, 1996).

Similar to Wolffe (1996), the authors of the current study sought to better understand how a four-day field experience in a Title I school might shape freshmen education candidates' perceptions of those schools. The following two questions guided our research:

1. What preconceptions do freshmen teaching candidates hold regarding Title I schools?
2. How does a four-day field experience in a Title I school influence candidates' perceptions of Title I schools?

Research Methodology

The Education Course & the Title I Field Experience

The current study included freshman teacher candidates (hereafter referred to as candidates) enrolled in a "First Year Experience" course at a public mid-size, liberal arts institution in the southeastern United States. The purpose of the course is to develop the candidates' critical and creative thinking, and to improve their information literacy, communication, and study skills. In addition, the course requires candidates to complete a field experience (i.e., three half-days and one full day) in a Title I school where the candidates both observe and assist their cooperating teachers as needed. Because the schools were located between 5 and 25 miles away from the nearest urban center, they bear the moniker of "Rural-Distance Schools" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Eighty-nine percent of the enrolled students in the schools fit the federal definition of poverty because they meet at least one of the following conditions: eligibility for public assistance (i.e., Medicaid or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP); enrollment in a foster care program, and/or officially identified as homeless. Sixty percent of the teachers at the targeted Title I

schools hold advanced degrees, 55% have continuing teaching contracts, and 82% taught in the same school the previous year.

Sample Population

Two hundred ninety-five candidates enrolled in the First Year Experience course during the fall semesters of 2016 and 2017. In total 48% of the candidates (n=142) completed the pre and post versions of the Title I survey and constitute the sample population for this study. The sample consist of 130 females and 12 males, the ethnic diversity of the sample is as follows: 80% white (n= 113); 13% African American (n=19); 3% Hispanic (n=4); 2% biracial or multicultural (n=3); 2% Asian (n=1); 2% Native American (n=1); and 2% other (n=1). The composition of the sample in terms of major is: 34% early childhood education majors (n=48); 25% elementary education majors (n=35); 10% middle level education majors (n=15); 7% secondary education majors (n=10); and 6% physical education majors (n=9).

Title I Questionnaire

Prior to and after the Title I field experience the candidates completed an online Title I questionnaire in a computer lab/classroom (see Appendix A). Survey items were generated based on small group discussions, candidates' written reflections, and their comments shared during the seminars. The survey included 11 total items, six of which probed demographic factors such as the candidates' education program, gender, and race. Four items used a Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree) and probed the candidates' knowledge and perceptions of Title I Schools. The final item prompted candidates to select from a list of actions they believed could improve the quality of Title I schools.

Analysis of the Title I Survey Data

Before and after the field experience the candidates completed the survey probing their perceptions of Title I schools. The pre and post-field experience responses were analyzed using paired t-tests. Any statistically significant items were analyzed using the Cohen's d statistic (Cohen, 1988). The Cohen's d statistic is used to determine the relative effect size (i.e., small, .20 to .49; medium, .50 to .79; and large, .80 to 1.0) of the field experience on the candidates' perspectives. Finally, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) determined if the candidates' gender, ethnicity, and program area influenced their responses on the questionnaires administered before and after the field experience.

Results

Analyses of the Education Candidates' Perceptions of Title I schools

Paired t-tests revealed statistically significant changes in the pre and post-field survey responses for five items on the survey (Table 1). First, there is a statistically significant increase ($p < .01$) in the candidates' self-reported knowledge and understanding of the Title I designation before and after they completed the field experience. Computation of the Cohen's d statistic produced a value of .70, which indicates a moderate increase in the candidates' perceived understanding of what constitutes a Title I school.

Table 1
Survey items for which there is evidence for significant changes in the candidates' perspectives

| | Item | Mean Score & p values | Interpretation |
|----|--|--|--|
| 1. | I know how schools are designated as Title I. | (2.77, 3.30) p <.01 Cohens d (.70) Effect Size: medium | Improved understanding of how schools are designated as Title I schools. |
| 2. | The teachers in Title I Schools are just as qualified as teachers in non-Title I Schools. | <.01 (2.49, 2.81) Cohens d (.37) Effect Size: small | More positive perception of the relative quality of Title I teachers. |
| 3. | The support given to teachers by the principal and/or Assistant Principal in Title I Schools is similar to the support given to teachers by the principal and/or Assistant Principal in non-Title I schools. | <.01 (2.68; 2.97) Cohens d (.20) Effect Size: small | More positive perception of the support offered by administrators at Title I schools. |
| 4. | If a Title I School has low standardized test scores the state should take over the school. | <.05 (2.48; 2.33) Cohens d (.20) Effect Size: small | A perceptual shift (post field experience) whereby the candidates look less favorably on a state taking over a Title I School with low test scores. |
| 5. | Teachers in Title I Schools spend more time managing students' behavior than teachers in non-Title I Schools. | <.05 (2.73, 2.91) Cohens d (.30) Effect size: small | Post-field experience the candidates appear to perceive Title I students as more challenging in the context of classroom management |
| 6. | I would like to teach at a Title I school | .311 (2.84, 2.89) Cohens d (not applicable) | These results indicate that overall the candidates maintain a favorable view of Title I schools before and after the field experiences at Title I schools. |

Second, the candidates' responses reveal a statistically significant shift ($p < .01$) in their responses to the following item: The teachers in Title I schools are just as qualified as teachers in non-Title I schools. The Cohen's d statistic of .37 indicates the field experiences made a small, but positive impact on the candidates' perceptions of the content knowledge and pedagogical skills of teachers who work at Title I schools.

A statistically significant shift ($p < .05$) also occurred in how the candidates viewed the level of administrative support provided to teachers. The subsequent Cohen's d value (.20) suggest a small, positive shift in the candidates' views of the quality of the administrative support offered in Title I schools.

Fourth, a significant change ($p < .05$) occurred in the candidates' views on the need for the state to take over low-performing Title I schools. Following the field experience, the candidates tend to regard a state-level take over as a less desirable strategy for improving the schools' standardized test scores. The Cohen's d value for this item (.20) indicates a small, but positive increase in the candidates' perceptions. After the field experience, the candidates have greater confidence in the confidence in the pedagogical knowledge and skills of Title I administrators and teachers.

Fifth, we observed a significant change ($p < .05$) in the candidates' perceptions of the behavior of Title I students; the subsequent Cohen's d value of .30 indicates a small, but noticeable positive negative shift. Contrary to the trends for other items in which statistically significant differences (or changes) emerged, the candidates' regarded Title I students as more challenging to manage both before and after their respective field experiences.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests using the demographic categories as the

sorting variables produced no statistically significant results. The analyses revealed no connections between the candidates' educational program, gender, or race and their responses on the survey prior to or after they completed the Title I field experiences.

Finally, the candidates appear open to the possibility of teaching at a Title I school. Prior to the field experience the mean agreement score to the survey item "I would like to teach at a Title I school," is 2.83. After the field experience the mean agreement score increased to 2.89. A mean score of "3" is indicative of "agreement" with the statement. Therefore, it can be inferred the candidates overall agree with the statement and are therefore interested and willing to teach at a Title I school.

However, it should be noted that this survey item does not reveal the underlying motives for the candidates' views. It is possible the candidates have a genuine and improved affinity for Title I schools. Conversely, the candidates may have a more pragmatic motive for agreeing with the item, which is the desire to obtain a professional teaching position. The impetus behind the candidates' responses to this particular item needs to be more closely examined during future iterations of the Title I field experiences.

Emerging Profile of Education Candidates' Perceptions of Title I Schools

To summarize, the candidates indicated a deeper understanding of what constitutes a Title I school. In addition, they held a more positive view of the administrators and teachers who work in these settings. Although the field experiences led the subjects to conclude that Title I students present greater behavioral and classroom management challenges, the candidates retained an overall positive view of these schools. At the very least, the candidates

view Title I schools as being comparable to non-Title I schools.

Discussion

That the majority of candidates initially perceived Title I schools as somehow less than adequate is particularly striking since they did not even know how to identify a Title I school. Yet, analysis of the freshman education candidates' pre and post-survey responses reveals a significant, positive shift in their expectations of Title I schools. This perceptual shift is encouraging in light of the research on teachers' expectations and student achievement (De Boer, Timmermans & Van Der Werf, 2018; Wang, Rubie-Davies & Meissel, 2018). Moreover, the candidates' revised view of those schools underscores the importance of diverse field experiences in changing candidates' overall perceptions of what might at first look like difficult settings in which to teach. After all, a number of studies indicate that students' perceptions of the physical school building may have implications for students' on several measures. For example, Maxwell & Schechtman (2012) found that adolescents' (ages 12-18) perceptions of school quality and self-efficacy significantly correlate with GPA but not necessarily standardized test scores. Similarly, a number of studies indicate that the quality of the building and its adjacent spaces relate to academic performance (Al-Enezi, 2002; Cash, 1993; Earthman, 2017; Earthman, 2002; Lewis, 2001). That is, better-quality facilities result in improved student outcomes, as measured by GPA. Finally, at least one study suggests that remodeled and/or newer facilities are strongly associated with math achievement and improved academic performance (Maxwell, 1999).

As alluded to earlier, teachers' expectations of students remain somewhat predictive: Teachers who hold high

expectations engender more persistent effort, and better performance from their students. On the other hand, students whose teachers perceive they are less capable remain locked out of meaningful interactions with their teacher, more challenging assignments, and the scaffolding which could help them achieve. In addition, the research reveals that teachers may maintain low academic expectations of students from low SES households (Tobisch & Dresel, 2017; Van Houtte, Demanet & Stevens, 2013). The adverse effects of low teacher expectations are particularly salient to Title I schools which consist of a relatively large number of low SES students. Again, changing candidates' perceptions of these environments appears to be a good first step in erasing the negative stigma sometimes appropriated to Title I schools.

A rather obvious implication for Colleges of Education is to help candidates learn as much as they can about Title I schools. Colleges can do this in several ways. First, a program of study should teach candidates how to classify a Title I school, preferably in their very first course (Introduction to Education, etc.). Beyond this rudimentary knowledge, a Title I curriculum would also provide candidates with a broad, holistic understanding of the schools and their origins. The following questions come to mind: When did the Title I classification first appear? What regions (or states) include the most Title I schools and why? How have the numbers of Title I schools changed year over year and from one state to another? How do Title I schools compare to non-Title I schools on measures of academic progress, student behavior, teacher qualifications, etc.?

Second, colleges should intentionally place candidates in Title I schools, even if respective state accreditation agencies do not mandate such experiences. Colleges of Education could liken a Title I experience to

a graduation requirement – a practicum that all candidates must complete prior to commencement.

Limitations

This study is an initial exploration of education candidates' preconceptions about Title I schools and the potential impact of a Title I field experience on the candidates' perceptions of Title I schools. As such, several questions remain unanswered. First, the survey primarily reveals information relevant to the education candidates' general perceptions of Title I schools. The specific factors influencing the candidates' perceptions of Title I schools were determined with just one selected-response item. Some of the candidates' responses identified salient factors such as a greater number of classroom management problems and limited resources within Title I schools. However, specific factors were not included in a significant number of responses and are therefore not generalizable. In future iterations of this study the specific factors that influence education candidates' perceptions of Title I schools can be more thoroughly and accurately probed using guided, one-on-one or group interviews.

Second, the current study involves freshmen education candidates who have only a limited number of observational and teaching experiences in schools. It is reasonable to infer that the candidates' limited educational experiences influenced their perceptions of Title I schools. For example, several candidates indicated that they were unclear as to how or why schools become designated as a Title I schools. Conversely, junior and senior education majors, who possess richer education schema, may maintain significantly different perspectives on Title I schools. A comparative study of lower and upper classman's perceptions of Title I schools can

potentially provide additional insights as to how and when education candidates formulate their perceptions of Title I schools.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that education candidates derive some benefit from field experiences in Title I schools. Though the experience itself was relatively short, the three half-days, and one full day effected a moderate change in the candidates' knowledge and perceptions of Title I schools. By the end of the practicum, candidates reported that they not only knew how Title I schools are designated, they also recalibrated their original notions of what they believed those schools were like. The candidates reported well-qualified teachers, effective instructional practices, and clean, maintained facilities. The candidates also felt differently regarding the need for a state takeover of underperforming schools. In short, much of what they originally thought about Title I schools was inaccurate and unfounded. Finally, the results indicate a modest increase in participants' desires to teach in a Title I School. The authors acknowledge that the participants initially expressed a neutral sentiment anyway, but at least the practicum did not appear to make the candidates *less* likely to want to teach in a Title I School. In fact, again, the results show a slight increase in the candidates' desire to teach in that setting, although the finding was not significant.

The authors see at least two opportunities for additional research. First, candidates' initial responses to the survey items revealed they held negative preconceptions about Title I schools. It is possible that explicitly addressing the candidates' preconceptions and specifically their misconceptions prior to entering the field experience can further improve the

candidates' perceptions of Title I schools. Future iterations of the course and field experience will include instruction explicitly addressing the candidates' initial perceptions of Title I schools. Survey data, together with focus-group interviews would indicate the value of such instruction for informing candidates' early notions. Second, our study suggests that candidates experienced only a modest desire to teach in a Title I school after the practicum. Would the same freshman candidates be any more inclined to teach in a Title I school if we increased the number of practicum hours or days? Would the candidates be more inclined to teach in a Title I school if, later, we required them to complete their internship in one? Answering such questions may help colleges of education and field placement coordinators make better-informed decisions regarding the frequency, duration, and scope of candidate field experiences.

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Appendix A

Title I School Survey Questions*

What is your major (Early Childhood, Elementary, Middle Grades, Secondary,

1. Education, Physical Education)
2. In which of the following grade ranges would you most like to teach? (Pk-3, 2-6, 5-8, 9-12)
3. What is your gender? (Male or Female)
4. What is your race? (African American, Asian, Hispanic or Latino, Native American, White, Two or more races, Other)
5. Were you ever a student at a Title I school? (Yes or No)
6. I know how schools are designated as Title I. (Yes or No)
7. The opportunities to enroll in AP, gifted/talented, and/or college prep classes are similar in Title I schools and non-Title I schools.
8. The services provided for Special Education students in Title I schools are similar to the services provided to Special Education students in non-Title I schools.
9. If a Title I school has low standardized test scores the state should take over the school.
10. I would like to teach in a Title I school.
11. Many strategies have been developed based on the needs of students and parents in Title I schools. Which one of the following strategies do you think would be MOST beneficial for Title I schools? Choices: (Afterschool programs and/or summer programs, parenting workshops, providing opportunities for staff development or graduate studies for teachers, recruiting and retaining quality teachers, reducing class size)

*The answer choices for Items 4 through 9 are Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree

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