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A comparative study of teachers’ sense of efficacy in low-and high-decile schools

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Educational Psychology at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand.

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2013
Abstract

Closing the gap in education between the extremes on the socioeconomic scale is the subject of much research and debate. Great emphasis is placed on the role of teachers. Teachers’ feelings of self-efficacy can be a powerful driving force behind the motivation to strive for student achievement. Various teacher and contextual variables can influence the level and stability of this efficacy. Successful experiences against challenge are known to contribute toward improving beliefs in efficacy. The concern however is the effects of unsuccessful teaching experiences and implications for student achievement. Researchers recommend a greater understanding of the contextual effects on teacher efficacy, particularly in lower socioeconomic teaching environments.

Previous research has commonly investigated the effects of teacher experience, teacher attributes, and student socioeconomic status on teaching efficacy. This study positioned the classroom teacher as a participant within an educational process which functions systemically and involves various other participants. Level of teacher efficacy is viewed as an outcome of the nature of the relationships and engagements within the educational process and system. This study compared teacher efficacy beliefs and experiences between low- and high-socioeconomic teaching contexts. The qualitative data from teacher responses to open-ended questions were analysed to investigate how the variables involved in forming teacher efficacy beliefs operate and function. Convincing evidence was found to support the assertion that low teacher efficacy may be the result of system failures or shortcomings. In general teachers tended to attribute the reasons for school problems to students or factors outside the classroom. Data analysis revealed states of teacher “helplessness” against challenge which can be linked to poor
relationships and communication with sources of support. Evidence was found in support of more collaborative partnerships for higher teacher efficacy and resilience against challenge.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Michael Irwin, for the tremendous support and guidance as I struggled emotionally between a family tragedy and maintaining focus on this research project. My sincere gratitude and appreciation go to all participants in this research project. My gratitude also extends to my dear friend Adrienne Tohovaka and her daughter Reese for their kind assistance. I thank my family in South Africa for their constant motivational support. Particular thanks go to my wonderful wife, Anusha, and my daughters, Alanna, Sasha, and Nikita for their persistent encouragement. Finally, I wish to dedicate this research project to my late beloved sister Dawn and my niece, Clarissa.
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