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

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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.

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Table of contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	v
List of appendices	v
List of tables	vi
Chapter 1. Introduction and research questions	1
Chapter 2. Review of the literature	6
2.1. Definitions of teacher efficacy	6
2.2. Theoretical framework of teacher efficacy.....	7
2.3. Teaching and learning contexts	8
2.4. An evaluation of experience as a source of teacher efficacy.....	9
2.5. The classroom climates of efficacious teachers	12
2.6. Challenging classroom climates	18
2.7. Factors which can influence low efficacy beliefs.....	19
Chapter 3. Research methodology and method.....	31
3.1. Theoretical perspectives and research methods	31
3.2. Methodology used for thematic analysis	33
3.3. Background to the New Zealand school decile ranking system.....	35
3.4. Method.....	36
3.4.1 Research process.....	36
3.4.2 Criteria used for the selection of teacher participants.....	36
3.4.3 Data collection	38
3.4.4 Online survey instruments used for the collection of data.....	38
3.4.5 Ethical considerations	40
Chapter 4. Results and findings	42
4.1. Comparison of teacher goal orientation and efficacy between LD and HD schools.....	42
4.2. The overall relationship between teacher experience and efficacy	44
4.2.1 Teacher experience and efficacy.....	44
4.3. Comparison of efficacy and goal orientation between the least and most experienced teachers in LD and HD schools.....	45
4.3.1 LD school teachers.....	45

4.3.2 HD school teachers	46
4.4. Summary of the findings illustrated in above Tables 1-4.....	46
4.5. Thematic analysis	47
4.5.1 Emerging themes	49
4.6. Summary of findings	57
Chapter 5. Discussion.....	59
5.1. Teacher assessments and responses to socioeconomically related challenges....	60
5.2. Teacher experience	63
5.2.1 Classroom teaching experiences and teacher efficacy beliefs	64
5.2.2 Relationship experiences and teacher efficacy beliefs	67
5.2.3 Successful classroom experiences	69
5.2.4 Support for successful teaching experiences	71
Chapter 6. Conclusion	75
References	77
List of appendices	88

List of appendices

Appendix 1: Teacher goal orientation scale.....	88
Appendix 2: Teacher Sense of Self-Efficacy (TSES)	89
Appendix 3: School and teacher participation information sheet	91

List of tables

Table 1: Teacher goal orientation and sense of efficacy	43
Table 2: Goal orientation and efficacy per level of teacher experience.....	44
Table 3: ANOVA results for experience differences and efficacy	44
Table 4: T-test results for experience between least and most experienced teachers	45
Table 5: Analysis of responses to open-ended questions.....	48