



Rural, suburban, and urban schools: The impact of school setting on the efficacy beliefs and attributions of student teachers



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Rural, suburban, and urban student teachers showed enhanced efficacy beliefs.
- Urban student teachers had lower efficacy scores than suburban student teachers.
- Urban student teachers had lower Efficacy for Classroom Management subscores.
- Urban and rural student teachers had lower Efficacy for Student Engagement subscores.
- All three setting groups made more external attributions than internal attributions.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated student teachers' efficacy beliefs, to determine if school setting (i.e., rural, suburban, and urban) impacted teachers' sense of efficacy. Each setting group exhibited significant increases in teachers' sense of efficacy following student teaching. The urban student teachers exhibited significantly lower teachers' sense of efficacy. We also examined the attributions (external or internal) the student teachers made following student teaching. The urban student teachers did not make more external attributions than the rural and suburban student teachers, and the patterns of the self-serving attributional bias as well as the fundamental attribution error were apparent.

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1. Introduction

"I believe I can do it." Self-efficacy beliefs are powerfully related to attitudes and actions. For teachers, this construct is called teachers' sense of efficacy, which is "the teacher's belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context" (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998, p. 233). More than three decades of research has produced compelling evidence that teachers' sense of efficacy matters, for both teachers and their students.

Many studies have targeted the four primary sources of information that feed our efficacy beliefs: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (Bandura, 1986, 1997). What still lacks clarity, however, is the magnitude and generality of the effect of these sources of information on teachers' efficacy beliefs (Henson, 2002; Labone, 2004). For pre-service teachers, mastery experiences during student teaching seem to be the most powerful efficacy source (Mulholland & Wallace, 2001), and research has shown that teachers' efficacy beliefs typically are enhanced after the student teaching experience (Fortman & Pontius, 2000; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990; Woolfolk Hoy & Burke Spero, 2005). However, the student teachers in those studies were placed primarily at suburban schools. In perceiving efficacy beliefs, teachers analyze the teaching task and situation and then appraise their own ability to perform the task (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Thus, the context of the teaching task is a major player in the judgment. As Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) noted, "... a very

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confident rural sixth grade teacher might shudder at the thought of teaching sixth graders in the city” (p. 228).

For teacher education programs, multiple field placements in diverse settings have been consistently advocated (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Grant, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2000; McKinney, Haberman, Stafford-Johnson, & Robinson, 2008), but the research is less than clear regarding preservice teachers' sense of efficacy in those diverse settings. It seems apparent (for a variety of reasons such as poverty, lack of resources, cultural differences, and violence) that teaching in urban schools in the United States is challenging (Brown, 2002; Haberman, 1995; Haberman & Post, 1998; Leonardo & Grubb, 2014; Milner, 2012; Weiner, 1999; Zeichner, 1996). What does this additional challenge do to the developing efficacy beliefs of student teachers placed in urban schools?

Self-efficacy beliefs and causal attributions – the perceived judgments of causation – are both involved in the motivational sequence. Weiner (1985) categorized attributions into three dimensions: locus of causality, stability, and controllability. The stability dimension refers to the perception of change; is the situation fixed, or can it be changed? For the controllability dimension, one perceives if the situation is under his or her own control. The locus (location) of causality dimension refers to either internal or external attributions, and it is the dimension of interest in this current study. Locus of causality perceptions are connected to self-efficacy beliefs in that internal attributions for success most likely enhance self-efficacy beliefs, whereas external attributions for failure do not affect self-efficacy beliefs. When an individual makes an external attribution, the controllability dimension is invoked, in that the situation is not in his or her control. Haberman (1995, p. 780) suggested that unsuccessful urban teachers “... essentially blame the victims, the families, and the neighborhoods.” Tollefson (2000, p. 79) concluded, “When faced with students who appear uninterested, and unwilling to invest effort in schoolwork, it is often easier for teachers to protect their sense of personal teaching efficacy ...” When student teachers are placed in different settings (rural, suburban, or urban schools), do the urban student teachers make more external attributions?

In a study that focused on school setting and student teachers' efficacy beliefs, Knoblauch and Woolfolk Hoy (2008) examined the efficacy beliefs before and after a 16-week student teaching experience. The researchers reported that the student teachers in all three setting groups (rural, suburban, and urban) did show a significant increase in Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) scores, and there were no differences between setting groups. However, the sample size was relatively small (the rural group's n was 29 and the urban group's n was 28). The researchers had expected that the urban student teachers' TSES scores would be significantly lower than the rural and suburban student teachers' TSES scores, and they wondered if the urban student teachers relied on external attributions (blaming the lack of resources and facilities, for instance) – thus protecting their budding efficacy beliefs.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the student teaching setting (rural, suburban, and urban schools) on the development of teachers' sense of efficacy beliefs. A second element of the study was to investigate the nature of locus of causality attributions the student teachers made after the student teaching experience, and to determine if the types of attributions varied in terms of school setting.

2. Theoretical framework

Within the social cognitive theory framework, teachers' sense of efficacy is essentially self-efficacy beliefs directed toward a

teaching situation. Bandura (1977, 1986, 1997) postulated that efficacy beliefs are predictive of choice of task, effort, persistence, and ultimately, level of success achieved, and a large body of empirical studies have investigated its strong associations with teaching and learning variables. Teachers' sense of efficacy is related to student performance (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006) and commitment to teaching (Coladarci, 1992). Teachers with a strong sense of efficacy are more willing to learn and apply innovative and complex strategies (Cantrell & Callaway, 2008; Ross, Cousins, & Gadella, 1996; Woolfolk Hoy, Hoy, & Davis, 2009), to work harder with struggling students (Gibson & Dembo, 1984), and to be less likely to refer a student to special education (Soodak & Podell, 1993). Researchers have concentrated on the development of teacher self-efficacy in preservice teachers, because efficacy beliefs become somewhat stable and more resistant to change with years of experience (Henson, 2002; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Woolfolk Hoy & Burke Spero, 2005).

2.1. Context and teachers' sense of efficacy

Self-efficacy beliefs are context specific (Bandura, 1997; Labone, 2004; Pajares, 1996; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998), but the aspect of context has not been sufficiently studied in the literature (Labone, 2004; Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011; Ronfeldt, 2012). In a review of the literature focusing on the power of setting in field experiences, Grossman, Ronfeldt, and Cohen (2012, p. 329) stated definitively that “... the school context matters enormously in shaping opportunities for learning to teach.” For student teachers and their developing efficacy beliefs, a vital context variable is the setting (rural, suburban, or urban school) of the placement.

Grossman et al. (2012) remind us that urban field placements are quite varied, but many of the studies they reviewed “suggested that urban settings may be especially challenging environments for learning to teach” (p. 314). In the United States, urban or inner-city school districts tend to be large, under-funded, top-down bureaucracies with a high percentage of students of color (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Leonardo & Grubb, 2014). Research suggests that student teachers and novice teachers do not feel well prepared to teach in urban schools (Dana, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2000; McKinney et al., 2008; Rushton, 2000). However, in Rushton's (2000) qualitative study, he discerned improvement in the five student teachers' efficacy beliefs; they were more willing to take risks and their confidence increased. As previously mentioned, Knoblauch and Woolfolk Hoy (2008) reported enhanced teachers' sense of efficacy beliefs among rural, suburban, and urban student teachers. In a study of an urban school practicum, Helfeldt, Capraro, Capraro, Foster, and Carter (2009) reported that their teaching interns experienced significant growth in their readiness, confidence, and self-efficacy, but their program was a paid, year-long internship. Two other studies examined the effect of school setting on efficacy beliefs. In a comparison of the antecedents of self-efficacy beliefs of novice and experienced teachers, the school setting variable did not affect efficacy beliefs (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2007), and in the Tschannen-Moran and Johnson (2011) study of literacy teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, school setting had a negligible effect on teachers' self-efficacy. Both of those studies, however, were conducted on practicing teachers, not preservice teachers. While teacher education programs are being urged to provide field experiences in diverse settings (Burant & Kirby, 2002; Grant, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2000; McIntyre, Bird, & Foxx, 1996; McKinney et al., 2008), the impact of school setting on the developing efficacy beliefs of student teachers is still not clear.

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