Teaching and Teacher Education 35 (2013) 34–42

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Teaching and Teacher Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tate

Does emotional intelligence predict student teachers' performance?

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Emotional intelligence explored as contributor to preservice teaching performance.
- Gender and prior academic attainment also explored.
- No positive association between variables and teaching performance was found.
- Implications for our understanding of emotions and teaching.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 30 August 2012
Received in revised form
11 March 2013
Accepted 9 April 2013

Keywords:
Emotional intelligence
MSCEIT
Pre-service teacher education
Emotional competence
Teaching performance

ABSTRACT

There are good theoretical grounds for seeing emotional intelligence (EI) as important in the teachers' skill set. Yet there is a lack of data on whether student teachers' levels of EI are associated with their teaching performance. This question was addressed, with gender and prior academic attainment also being explored as possible contributors to teaching performance. No association between the three independent variables and teaching performance was found. This raises serious questions for our understanding of emotions and teaching.

1. Introduction

There is a growing body of evidence that the ability to work with emotion is an important part of the teachers' skill set. The emotional skills of teachers have been found to influence how students behave, their engagement and attachment to school, and their academic performance (Baker, 1999; Battistich, Schaps, Watson, Solomon, & Lewis, 2000; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Hawkins, 1999; Wentzel, 2002; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). Teachers who have higher scores on tests of emotion regulation ability (one element of emotional intelligence) also report less burnout and higher job satisfaction (Brackett, Palomera, Mojsa-Kaja, Reyes, & Salovey, 2010). There have, consequently, been a number of calls for a greater focus on emotion in pre-service teacher education (Corcoran & Tormey, 2010, 2012a,b,c; Intrator, 2006; Rosiek, 2003; Tormey, 2005; Whitcomb, Borko, & Liston, 2008).

Teachers' ability to work with emotion has been conceptualized in different ways: as affective teacher–student relationships, as teacher emotional competence, and as emotional intelligence (EI). It has been argued that the emotional intelligence model is valuable in that it provides a clear and assessable framework for understanding and measuring the ability to work with emotion. There are, however, very few studies on emotional intelligence among student teachers (Corcoran & Tormey, 2010, 2012a,b,c), and, while emotional intelligence theory might lead us to expect that having high emotional intelligence would be associated with the quality of teaching performance among student teachers, there is no existing evidence to address this question. Hence, the overarching question which this paper addresses is: does emotional intelligence predict student teacher performance?

This question is all the more relevant given that research and policy debates have often focused on what teacher characteristics are associated with teaching performance, with a great deal of

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0742-051X/$ – see front matter © 2013 Published by Elsevier Ltd.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2013.04.008

attention being paid to prior cognitive ability (such as measured by verbal ability) (Aloe & Becker, 2009; Wayne & Youngs, 2003; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). There has also been some focus on whether or not the teacher's gender impacts upon teaching performance (Driessen, 2007; Hopf & Hatzichristou, 1999) and, given that gender has been found to be associated with emotional intelligence scores among student teachers (Corcoran & Tormey, 2012b), this factor also merits attention. In addition, it has been identified (Corcoran & Tormey, 2012b) that teachers can have higher or lower scores on different sub-skills within the emotional intelligence framework, and so the question as to how each sub-skill might relate to teacher performance is worth considering. Arising from this, supplementary questions which this paper also addresses then include: does any skill area within the emotional intelligence framework have a stronger relationship with student teacher performance than others, and does gender or academic attainment mediate any relationships found between emotional intelligence and teacher performance?

The structure of this paper is as follows: In Section 2 we clarify the conceptual framework for the research. We begin by clarifying our dependent variable – teacher performance – and our independent variable – working with emotion. We distinguish between three different ways in which the ability to work with emotion can be understood: affective teacher–student relationships, emotional intelligence (EI) and teacher emotional competence. We show that there is substantial evidence to suggest that working with emotion is likely to be an important aspect of teacher skills, and that there are good theoretical reasons for using the EI framework as a way of assessing or measuring these skills. In the final part of Section 2 we locate this research in its local and international context. In Section 3 we describe our methodology. Drawing upon a large study of emotional intelligence in post-primary Irish student teachers, the relationship between emotional intelligence scores (as measured using the Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test V.2.0 MSCEIT) and student teacher performance (as measured by observations of student teaching) was explored. Gender and prior cognitive achievement (as measured by grades on a high stakes, state-run examination) were also considered. In Section 4 we present our findings. Surprisingly, no association was found between any of the independent variables (EI scores, gender, prior achievement) and the student teachers' teaching performance on their practicum placement. Given the strength of evidence on the relationship between teacher affective attributes and teacher performance, this is a notable finding, and one that requires explanation. In Section 5 we explore some ways of understanding these findings.

2. Conceptual framework

This paper looks at the relationship between two contested concepts: 'teacher performance' and 'ability to work with emotion'. In outlining the conceptual framework we will look at teacher performance first.

2.1. Teacher performance

Teacher performance can be evaluated in terms of *inputs*, *processes* and *outputs* (Goe, Bell, & Little, 2008). Much of the literature on "teacher effectiveness" focuses on outputs; on the impact of the teacher on student achievement. While it is arguable that the best measure of teacher performance might be to assess increases in a range of different types of student learning including academic and social outcomes (Herman, Heritage, & Goldschmidt, 2011), Darling-Hammond (2010) has noted that such measures can be unstable at the level of individual teachers and can find it difficult to factor out potentially intervening variables. In this context she has argued for process-based measures; for "structured teacher performance assessments …[that] evaluate directly what teachers do in the classroom, and …[can] incorporate contextualized evidence of student learning that is linked to evidence of the associated teaching efforts" (2010, p. 7). Indeed, teacher ratings by expert observers is a widely used means of assessing teacher performance in the research literature (Aloe & Becker, 2009; Blömeke, Suhl, Kaiser, & Döhrmann, 2012; Danielson, 2007, 2011; Goe, 2007; Metzger & Wu, 2008; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011) and is commonly used in pre-service teacher credentialing programs (Wei & Pecheone, 2010, pp. 73–74).

Darling-Hammond and Snyder (2000) have identified four characteristics of authentic assessments of teaching: (1) the assessments draw upon evidence from real teaching and learning situations about the actual knowledge, skills, and dispositions desired of teachers; (2) the assessments integrate the diversity of types of knowledge and skill used; (3) multiple sources of evidence are collected over time and in a range of different contexts; and (4) assessment evidence is evaluated by individuals with relevant expertise against an agreed-on set of standards. A range of different tools for assessing student teacher performance now exist (Wei & Pecheone, 2010), and no single method of performance-based assessment is agreed as being 'best practice'. As such, any assessment tool used is open to contestation. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to suggest that for an observation and assessment tool to be considered reliable, valid and fair it should meet the criteria identified by Darling-Hammond and Snyder.

2.2. Teacher ability to work with emotion and teacher performance

If measures of teacher performance are open to contestation, the same can be said for measures of teachers' ability to work with emotion. Yet, there is growing evidence that the emotional climate of the school and the class is related to learning. Battistich et al. (2000), for example, report that schools which had followed a program aimed at building stable, warm, and supportive relationships showed reductions in drug use, anti-social behavior, as well as an increase in pro-social attitudes. They also report improvements in students' academic attitudes, motivation, and behavior. Zins et al. (2007, p. 191) argue that social and emotional learning (SEL) by pupils have been found to be associated with a range of improved academic outcomes for pupils, including increases in math, language and social studies attainment, better problem-solving and planning, and greater use of higher-level reasoning strategies (2007, p. 206). Durlak et al. (2011) have recently reported on a meta-analysis drawing on 213 studies of school-based, SEL programs involving 270,034 school students from kindergarten through to high school age. They found that compared to controls, participants in SEL programs demonstrated significant improvements in social and emotional skills, pro-school attitudes, behavior, and an increase in academic performance, measured both in terms of test scores and grades.

If emotion is so demonstrably important in education, how is teacher ability to work with emotion to be understood and assessed? Much of the literature has conceptualized this ability in terms of 'affective teacher–student relationships'. In Section 2.2.1 we will identify the findings from this literature. In Section 2.2.2 we will move on to look at the potential value of the emotional intelligence framework as another means of conceptualizing and assessing the ability to work with emotions. We will conclude that section by looking at the links and distinctions between EI and a third relevant concept, teacher emotional competence.