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Preservice preparation and other potential influences on in-service beliefs and practices: A tale of two secondary social studies teachers

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ABSTRACT

Presented here are the cases of two secondary social studies teachers who were participants in a larger research endeavor designed to examine the enduring effects of a preservice teacher preparation program rooted in problem-based historical inquiry (PBHI) on their in-service beliefs and practices. The study was designed to revisit graduates of this teacher preparation program after they completed their induction into the profession. The two teachers selected for closer examination in this piece had relatively similar preservice teacher experiences and taught in the same city school system. Findings indicate that the preservice program continued to impact both to some extent. However, their current beliefs about social studies teaching and their typical classroom practices differed greatly. Evidence suggests that these differences may be attributed to their personal dispositions and their conceptions of the role of the teacher.

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Introduction

In this paper, I examined the beliefs and practices of two secondary social studies teachers and graduates of South University (SU) as they taught in nearby schools in the same city school system. Data on these teachers' beliefs and practices was collected through multiple interviews and classroom observations during the 2013–2014 school year as part of a larger project that included three other SU program graduates. This larger research effort was designed to answer the following questions:

1. How does preparation in a preservice teacher education program grounded in PBHI influence teacher rationales and practice?
2. What factors other than preservice preparation influence teacher rationales and practice?
3. What are the implications of this study's findings for promoting principled, professional teaching practice?

PBHI is a framework for teaching historical topics that involves framing units of instruction around persistent historical problems in order to promote student inquiry (Saye & Brush, 2007). Students build knowledge, engage in disciplined inquiry

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and discussion, and make ethical judgments with the goal of using evidence and values to answer the persistent historical question at the end of the unit (Brush & Saye, 2014; Saye & Brush, 2007). Study participants were introduced to the PBHI framework and the strategies employed as part of this framework over multiple semesters as part of their preservice preparation at SU.

As defined in this study, professional teaching knowledge (PTK) refers to a type of knowledge that combines the culture and practices of teachers with that of academic researchers as a means to bridge the gap so often noted between theory and practice in education (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Saye, Kohlmeier, Brush, Mitchell, & Farmer, 2009). Development of this type of PTK requires collaboration between researchers and teachers in a variety of forms beginning with, but continuing beyond, preservice preparation (Saye, Kohlmeier, Brush, Howell, & Maddox, 2013).

Problem context

Assessments of the effects of preservice preparation conducted near the end of formal teacher education programs show some promise with regards to the effects of programs on teachers' instructional decision-making processes and practices (Fehn & Koeppen, 1998; Saye et al., 2013). Despite this, however, we know little about the extent to which preservice social studies teacher programs continue to influence graduates' beliefs and practices in the field, and even less about the enduring impacts of such programs beyond teachers' first year in the classroom. The fear of many teacher educators is that the challenges of classroom life may lead teachers to set aside their preservice ideals for "defensive teaching" practices that prioritize order (Hawley, 2010; McNeil, 1986).

Such a departure from idealistic preservice rationales seems likely given the unique demands of a teacher's first three years in the field, a time known as the induction period (Kagan, 1993; Patterson & Luft, 2004). During this time, beginning teachers are navigating their own classrooms for the first time without the support of a cooperating teacher and university supervisor. They are also constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing their identities as teacher and their conceptions of teaching (Flores & Day, 2006; Hsieh, 2015). As a result, the first years in the classroom after preservice preparation have been characterized as a period of "transition shock" (Chong, 2011). Unfortunately, this induction period is often a lonely time in which teachers feel unsupported (Lortie, 2002).

Some studies have examined the rationales and practices of teachers as they transitioned from preservice programs to in-service teaching (Scott & Baker, 2003; Van Hover & Yeager, 2003; 2007). In these cases, findings centered on changes to teachers' rationales, the common challenges that made rationale implementation difficult, and teachers' awareness of the dissonance between their preservice beliefs and in-service practices. Hawley (2010) studied the rationales and practices of first-year social studies teachers, and found gaps between the two. He identified three recurring themes in the struggles of these novice teachers as they sought to address the dissonance between their beliefs and actions: "teacher versus the system," "rationale meets reality," and "built-in guilt." These themes represented the teachers' perceptions that the "system" prevented the practical implementation of their rationales, and that the clash between preservice beliefs and reality proved problematic. Further, these first-year teachers often exhibited some guilt over the gap between their rationales and classroom practices (Hawley, 2010).

The distance between preservice rationales and classroom practices is not unique to social studies teachers or to teachers in the induction period. Researchers have long acknowledged gaps between broad educational theory and classroom practice (Kagan, 1993; Lortie, 2002; McNeil, 1986). In social studies education, it has also been demonstrated that the inquiry-based instruction often advocated for at the university level is not prevalent in the practices of classroom teachers (Patterson & Luft, 2004). While such gaps are not unique to novice social studies teachers, support for these new teachers that focuses directly on discipline-specific instructional techniques can prove invaluable in bringing together preservice preparation and in-service practice (Van Hover & Yeager, 2004). While researchers continue to discuss the distance between general theory and practice, we still don't know enough about the extent to which the methods encountered in preservice preparation are utilized by in-service social studies teachers (Van Hover & Yeager, 2004).

Small-scale studies, such as those by Van Hover and Yeager (2003, 2007), have examined the experiences of one or two teachers in depth. Larger-scale studies such as that conducted by Scott and Baker (2003), must rely on teacher self-report. Even when teacher self-reports acknowledge the helpfulness of their preservice preparation, the actual influence of teacher education programs on teachers' daily instructional practices is unclear (Fehn & Koeppen, 1998; Van Hover & Yeager, 2004). More needs to be known about how preservice preparation and rationale-building continues to affect teachers beyond the induction period, as well as how preservice preparation interacts with other factors that influence teacher rationale and practice.

Study design

The larger study that included the participants focused upon in this writing was designed as a multiple-case study. As defined by Stake (2006) and Creswell (2007), a multiple-case or collective case study allows the researcher to select and study multiple cases in order to illustrate the key issue under examination, in this case the various factors that influence teachers' beliefs and practices. The purposeful selection of five cases allowed me to account for the widest possible range of

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