Building Pre-Service Teachers' Self-Efficacy in Providing Reading Remediation: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Perceived Self-Efficacy

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Abstract: To better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted pre-service teachers' development of self-efficacy beliefs, two cohorts of pre-service teachers were studied. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the development of teacher self-efficacy beliefs was examined. One cohort facilitated an in-person reading remediation to students with disabilities while the other facilitated the same reading remediation but in an online setting. This study considers the findings in light of the impact of the pandemic on pre-service teacher development of self-efficacy.

Introduction

In order to determine what effect the COVID-19 pandemic had on the development of pre-service teachers' self-efficacy in reading remediation, a study of two cohorts of pre-service teachers was conducted. This paper considers the findings in light of the impact of the pandemic on pre-service teacher development of self-efficacy. More is becoming known about the impact of the pandemic on the preparation of teachers and this paper focuses on the findings of a study that explored the development of the perceived self-efficacy of undergraduate pre-service teachers (n=30) in the area of providing reading remediation to students with disabilities both before and during the pandemic. Possible causes for differences between the two groups of pre-service teachers are explored as well as ideas for fostering development of teacher self-efficacy for those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Self-efficacy has been studied in a variety of contexts and can be described as an individual's perception of whether he or she can perform a particular task (Bandura, 1982). In the context of teaching, self-efficacy relates to the extent to which teachers believe that they can competently complete the tasks of teaching with success. Among the sources of self-efficacy is mastery experiences (Bandura, 1977), but in the face of such learning opportunities, individuals experiencing a high level of anxiety often underestimate their ability to perform specific tasks (Yang et al., 2021). Thus, it is likely that the COVID-19

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pandemic would have a detrimental effect on the development of pre-service teachers' self-efficacy. This supposition is supported by the work of Browning et al. (2021) who note that "college students are among the most strongly affected by COVID-19 because of uncertainty regarding academic success, future careers, and social life during college" (p. 2). In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, Alemany-Arrebola et al. (2020) found decreased levels of academic self-efficacy along with increased state anxiety in their study of 427 university students.

Tschannen-Moran et al (1998) further developed Bandura's construct, molding it into a cyclical explanation of the development of teacher self-efficacy. Defining teacher efficacy as "the teacher's belief in his or her capability to organize and execute course of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context," Tshcannen-Moran's model provides guidance for developing field experiences for preservice teachers in general and may also help to explain students' perceptions of their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998 p. 233). Whitacre, Aldridge & Garcia (2023), in their study of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on preservice teachers, found that their participants doubted their teaching abilities. They noted a theme of generalized anxiety among the preservice teachers they studied concerning the pandemic and their field experience and self-efficacy. Additionally, Nissim & Simon (2024) found that in-service teachers' evaluations of their preservice teacher training and college professors impacted their self-efficacy. They reported that "teachers' retrospective perceptions of their preservice training indicate that the more they appreciate their training as positive and the more they value the lecturers, the greater their sense of self-efficacy" (p. 10). Absent time and space for retrospection, it may be that preservice teachers may be more vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic and its effects on their developing teacher self-efficacy.

Purpose and Method

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine what effect the COVID-19 pandemic had on the development of pre-service teachers' self-efficacy in providing reading remediation in two cohorts of pre-service teachers.

Method

Participants and Setting

This study was conducted with preservice teachers (PST) seeking either elementary or middle grades certification from two cohort years (n=18 and n=12). The first cohort completed the field experience prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The second cohort completed the experience during the pandemic. Each student in both cohorts completed a pre-field survey and a post-field survey with only the second cohort completing a follow-up interview. This study occurred within the required field experience for an undergraduate class. A campus-based transition-to-adulthood program served as the setting with high school students with disabilities aged 18 to 21. Each student had an IEP developed by the

staff on behalf of the school district. This program serves as the field experience site for undergraduate and graduate students in special education and regular education programs.

Parameters of the Field Experience

In this field experience, the format consisted of the undergraduate preservice teachers writing a remediation plan that included the planning, written program description, rationale, scheduling, a description of the arrangements, instructional procedures, data collection and measurement, program monitoring, and treatment fidelity. This reading intervention protocol is based on the work of Harty, Kanfush, and Riordan (2019) which demonstrated the positive effect of explicit and systematic reading interventions with students at risk of academic failure. The protocol is summarized in **Table 1**. In teams, the preservice teachers were responsible for meeting with their assigned student's special educator to review the most recent IEP, reading goals, and testing information. Based on this data and particular reading skills identified by the special educator, they composed a Reading Remediation Plan which was implemented 4 days per week during which time they collected and graphed the relevant data. The plan was modified as needed based upon student progress. The experience culminated in the presentation of a poster summarizing the experience.

Table 1. *Reading Intervention Protocol*

Time Interval	Procedure	Example
3-5 Minutes	Repeated Reading	Reread 2 to 3 pages from previous day's reading
3-5 Minutes	Structural Analysis Vocabulary Instruction	Instruction on phoneme, morphemes and robust vocabulary instruction on words in the current day's segment of text
10-15 Minutes	Oral reading of new section of the text (twice)	Using the intervention you have been assigned: choral reading, echo reding and paired (partnered with researcher) reading
3-5 Minutes	Summary and Comprehension Check	Oral comprehension questions and/or student written summary

Note. This table is based on the Intervention Schedule of Harty et al. (2019).

Survey

The pre-test survey consisted of 15 Likert items that asked the PST to consider their past experiences in reading. Statements prompted participants to consider experience, knowledge, and feelings toward teaching students with reading disabilities. The post-test survey consisted of the same 15 Likert items but included an additional 7 open-ended questions. The response for each Likert item was on a scale of 1 through 7 where 1 represented strongly disagree and 7 denoted strongly agree. The surveys were the same for both cohorts. As listed in **Appendix A**, the pre- and post- survey questions 4, 9, and 11 were

inverted to serve as reliability items. As listed in **Appendix B**, the open-ended questions that were asked during the post survey.

Interview

As the survey was originally implemented pre-pandemic, follow-up interviews were conducted with members of the second cohort to further assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the participants' perceptions of teacher self-efficacy. Each participant met individually with the researcher and responded to 14 open-ended questions about their experience and had the opportunity to add in any other information they had not previously shared.

Results

Data

The Likert data for pre-test and post-test surveys for each cohort were gathered from Survey Planet and compiled into an Excel spreadsheet. To account for reliability, the responses for items 4, 9, and 11 were inverted. Next, a composite Teacher Self-Efficacy (TSE) score was calculated for each participant by summing the Likert responses. Data for both cohorts were imported into SPSS for analysis. Statistics were calculated on all Likert items including descriptive and inferential statistics on composite scores, median scores on individual items, and reliability measure (Cronbach's alpha) for survey items (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. *TSE Score*

Cohort	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Median	Variance	Kurtosis	Skewness	Std. Error of Kurtosis	Std. Error of Skewness
2020	53.4444	18	11.79842	54.0000	139.203	.600	-.826	1.038	.536
2021	57.7500	12	12.40091	58.0000	156.023	-1.745	.122	1.232	.637
Total	55.1667	30	12.05757	54.0000	145.385	-.121	-.361	.833	.427

To interpret the Likert scale scores, the following reporting standards were used (Warmbrod, 2014). First, a frequency table containing each item was used to record the percentage of respondents and the meaning and names for each of the constructs were described. Second, using the Likert scale responses, a summated total score was calculated for each respondent. Third, the appropriate Cronbach's α coefficient was computed for the summated total score. Then, the descriptive statistics for the summated total score were computed including measures of central tendency (mean, median, mode), variability (standard deviation and range), skewness, and symmetry (kurtosis). Next, a frequency table was used to record the measures listed above. Finally, text to further explain the frequency table was used to describe the content and meaning.

Normality

Since the Likert questions were unique and stand-alone, they could be analyzed as Likert-type items making modes, means, and frequencies appropriate tools. Means and standard deviations can be used to describe the scale when the questions can be combined to measure a particular trait (Boone & Boone, 2012). This implies that the data is being treated as interval or scale data, thus the assumptions of normality must be tested before utilizing parametric statistics to evaluate the data. This was handled in two different ways. First, to test normality, the z-scores for both skewness and kurtosis were calculated for both cohorts. With a small sample ($n < 50$), if the absolute z-score for either skewness or kurtosis is larger than 1.96 (corresponding with an alpha level 0.05), then the null hypothesis can be rejected, and the distribution of the sample can be assumed to be non-normal (Kim, 2013). For both cohorts, neither of the z-scores fit this description and so can be assumed to be normally distributed (see **Table 3**).

Table 3. *Skewness and Kurtosis*

Cohort	Kurtosis	Std Error of Kurtosis	Z Score of Kurtosis	Skewness	Std Error of Skewness	Z Score of Skewness
2020	.600	1.038	$\frac{.600}{1.038} = 0.578$	-.826	.536	$\frac{-.826}{.536} = -1.54$
2021	-1.745	1.232	$\frac{-1.745}{1.232} = -1.416$	.122	.637	$\frac{.122}{.637} = 0.192$

The Shapiro-Wilk test was the second method used for testing for normality which is also appropriate for small sample sizes (< 50). In this case, the null hypothesis states that data are taken from a normally distributed population and when $p > 0.05$, the null hypothesis is accepted and data are considered normally distributed (Mishra et al., 2019). **Table 4** supports this assumption of normality.

Table 4. *Tests of Normality*

		Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Cohort	Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
TSE Score	2020	.196	18	.067	.931	18	.205
	2021	.175	12	.200*	.900	12	.161

* This is a lower bound of the true significance

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Reliability

When calculating Cronbach's alpha with a score range between 0 and 1, acceptable scores are considered between 0.70 and 0.95. The coefficient alpha is a lower bound estimate of reliability (Basu, 2021). A reliability analysis was carried out on the survey calculating Cronbach's alpha to 0.862 showing that the questionnaire reached acceptable reliability.

Given a strong alpha and short survey size (15), it is reasonable to be comfortable about the internal consistency and reliability of the survey instrument (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Most survey items appeared to be worthy of retention, resulting in a decrease in the alpha if the item were deleted. The one exception to this was item 4 which states "I have not had much experience in working with students with reading disabilities." The deletion of this item would increase the alpha to a=0.897. As such, removal of the item should be considered.

Comparisons

Within Cohorts

For each cohort, the pre- and post-survey responses were compared. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the gain in teacher self-efficacy by preservice teachers in the pre-covid cohort and the covid cohort. There was a significant difference in the scores for teacher self-efficacy for the pre-pandemic cohort (M = 16.11, SD = 12.43) and the pandemic-cohort (M = 13.17, SD = 10.41). Each cohort showed a significant gain in levels of teacher self-efficacy ($p < 0.001$ for each cohort). See **Table 5**.

Between Cohorts

Independent samples t-tests were used to compare findings between cohorts. Analysis demonstrated that cohorts were relatively equal at the beginning and end of the remediation experience with no differences in gains in teacher self-efficacy between cohorts (p = 0.390). See **Table 5**.

Table 5. *Comparisons: 2020 and 2021 Cohort Gain in Teacher Self-Efficacy—Paired Samples Test*

		2020								
		Paired Differences							Statistical Significance	
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
		Gain Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	Df	One-Sided *p*	Two-Sided *p*
Pair 1	Post Composite – Pre-Composite	16.11111	12.42809	2.92933	9.93077	22.29146	5.500	17	<.001	<.001

2021

		Paired Differences							Statistical Significance	
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
		Gain Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	Df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
Pair 1	Post Composite – Pre-Composite	13.16667	10.40833	3.00463	6.55353	19.77980	4.382	11	<.001	.001

Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Items

Considering these findings, analysis of the responses to the open-ended post-test survey questions and follow-up interviews with members of the pandemic cohort were conducted to expose effects of the pandemic too subtle to have been apparent in the survey data. The open-ended question responses were grouped by cohort and reviewed using cross-categorical comparative analysis to identify relevant themes both within and between cohorts. For the most part, participants had no previous experience working with struggling readers and were nervous to start the reading intervention. Even though some groups experienced less success than other groups, participants reported enjoying the experience. Comments demonstrated that they grew in confidence through the experience and their self-efficacy increased.

Additionally, as the survey was originally implemented pre-pandemic, follow-up interviews were conducted with 7 out of the 12 members of the pandemic cohort to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the participants' perception of teacher self-efficacy. Themes raised in the follow-up interviews of the pandemic cohort mirrored those in a study by Plummer et al. (2021) noting "participants described teaching during the pandemic as one of the most challenging experiences of their professional careers. Despite available resources, faculty noted challenges in making authentic connections with students, adapting to technological interruptions, assessment of student understanding of content, and managing work-life balance" (p. 1). The pre-service teachers in this study reported frustrations with the scheduling of online tutoring, technical difficulties regarding field experiences that were moved online but they did not see COVID-19 affecting the field experience in this study. They described this field experience to be consistent pre-pandemic and during the pandemic.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a difference in the development of teacher self-efficacy between a pre-pandemic cohort and a pandemic cohort while providing reading remediation. Each cohort followed the same procedures. The difference between the two cohorts was the way the reading remediation was administered. The first cohort conducted the remediation face-to-face prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The second cohort conducted the remediation virtually during the pandemic.

First, prior to providing the remediation, the PST completed a survey asking them to consider their experience, knowledge, and feelings toward teaching students with reading disabilities. The results of the pre-experience survey showed that the majority of the PST reported a lack of confidence when teaching students with disabilities, their ability to use reading assessment strategies, and their ability to teach a student with a disability to read.

Next, students in each cohort planned a reading remediation after meeting with the student's special educator and reviewing the most recent IEP, reading goals, and test information (WRMT-III and PPVT). The reading remediation plan was based on the data and skills identified by the special educator. The remediation was conducted according to the required protocol. This protocol began with a repeated reading followed by structural analysis vocabulary instruction leading to an oral reading of a new section of text (twice). Each session of the remediation concluded with a summary and comprehension check. Over the course of the remediation, the PST collected and graphed the relevant data. The first cohort completed all remediation sessions in a face-to-face setting. The second cohort completed all remediation sessions using an online synchronous platform.

Finally, after the completion of the reading remediation, each PST again completed a survey containing the same Likert scale questions with an additional seven open-ended questions related to their experience. Additionally, PST in the second cohort were invited to complete an interview to discuss their views of completing the remediation online.

The findings of this research show that there were significant gains in composite TSE scores found in both cohorts when the pre- and post- surveys were compared. This is consistent with Weißenfels, Klopp and Perels (2022), who also reported significant gains in TSE in their study of teacher burnout and self-efficacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. An examination of the open-ended items from the post survey showed that the majority of the PST had no previous experience working with struggling readers. Despite the fact most reported that they were nervous to begin the experience, they also stated that they enjoyed the experience even though some groups met with less than stellar results. Their responses showed an increase in their confidence levels supporting the outcome that their teacher self-efficacy levels increased.

The interview data with the second cohort raised themes mirroring those in a study by Plummer et al (2021) noting the increased level of challenge. Frustrations expressed by the PST align with this description. They reported difficulties associated with relying on someone else to schedule the meeting with the online student and fewer students participating in the program. Other frustrations included technical difficulties and difficulties keeping students on task.

Interestingly, the PST admitted they did not use classroom management techniques while online. They also admitted to lowering expectations for online students. Overall, they reported that they did not see the pandemic impacting the value of this teaching experience, but they did explain that they were not as successful in online experiences as they were in previous face-to-face experiences. They did take partial responsibility for this by admitting that they did not put in the same effort. They reported putting less effort into the online teaching experiences.

There was an unexpected aspect of the interviews. The PST consistently said they were affected by social media posts about teaching during the pandemic. The most powerful posts were the ones created by teachers and posted to TikTok. These posts focused on a teacher venting about the problems teaching during the pandemic and some announcing

their resignation from their teaching. The PST understood the frustration, but it also concerned them about the state of the field that they were entering. Several, however, saw this as a positive believing more jobs would open for them if teachers resigned due to the difficulties of the pandemic. This is consistent with the findings of Wells & Daniels (2024) who found that preservice teachers' commitment to the profession and career plans remained unchanged despite the pandemic.

Overall, the students interviewed reported feeling more successful in face-to-face experiences than in the online experiences. They found it to be more difficult to identify and work with struggling students in an online format than in an in-person setting. Although, the PST teachers expressed frustration with several aspects of teaching online, when asked what advice they would give underclassmen, they framed their online experiences in positive terms. Further, they encouraged underclassmen to seek out online experiences because it provided them the opportunity to develop skills that they otherwise would not have gained. These findings corroborate the findings of Biranza, Schmid, Tondeur & Petko (2024) that preservice teachers remained positive in their beliefs about the use of technology and saw benefits emerging from their experience of lockdown. The students in the current study believed that these skills would serve them well in future positions because they believed that the necessity for online instruction would continue.

Limitations

This study was conducted with a small number of PST enrolled in one course at the same college. It would be beneficial to know if the results from these surveys and interviews would be consistent with students in other courses or when focusing on academic areas other than reading.

Implications

Field experiences provide authentic learning experiences for PST and therefore affect their development of self-efficacy beliefs. Despite the differences in face-to-face experiences compared to online experiences, the reported levels of self-efficacy increased for both cohorts. The PST, however, identified key differences in the experiences that affected their perceived quality of the experiences. Both the quantitative and qualitative results of this study may be of interest to teacher educators who structure field experiences. Although the PST interviewed admitted that their participation in online experiences were not taken as seriously as those that occurred in a face-to-face environment, they did make recommendations to future PST stating the importance of gaining experience in both settings. Teacher educators can consider encouraging participants in online experiences to engage fully. This study also provides hope that PST who complete their field experiences online are developing a sense of teacher efficacy comparable to those who complete experiences face-to-face.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions (Pre and Post)

Consider your past experiences in teaching reading. Respond to each of the following by choosing a response on the scale where 1 means you strongly disagree with the statement and 7 means you strongly agree with the statement.

1. I have a great deal of experience in working with students with reading disabilities.
2. I believe that I am knowledgeable about the practical aspects of teaching students with reading disabilities how to read.
3. I can readily gauge student comprehension of the reading skills I have taught.
4. I have not had much experience in working with students with reading disabilities.
5. I am comfortable teaching students with reading disabilities how to read.
6. I can motivate students with low interest in reading.
7. I can respond well to difficult questions from my students about reading.
8. I can confidently use a variety of reading assessment strategies with students with reading disabilities.
9. I do not feel that I know much about teaching students with reading disabilities.
10. I can develop individualized, systematic reading instruction for students with reading disabilities.
11. I am very nervous working with students with reading disabilities.
12. I can craft good reading questions for my students with reading disabilities.
13. I feel very confident in my ability to teach the students with reading disabilities how to read.
14. I can provide alternative explanations or examples when my students with reading disabilities don't understand a concept in their text.
15. I can easily teach a student with reading disabilities how to read.

Appendix B

Open-Ended Questions

1. Describe your experiences teaching students with reading disabilities prior to ED320.
2. How much practical knowledge do you have about the characteristics of students with reading disabilities?
3. Some students have said that they loved the structured ED320 field experience. Others say they hated it. How do you feel? What aspects of the experience made you feel that way?
4. Describe how you felt on the first day of your ED320 field experience.
5. How did your feelings about the ED320 field experience change during the field experience?
6. Did your sense of efficacy (belief that you are capable of being successful in working with students with reading disabilities) change during the ED320 field experience? In what ways and at what point during the field experience did you notice this change? To what do you attribute your change in feelings?
7. Is there anything else about your feelings about the process and experience of the ED320 field experience that you think I should know?