

Understanding Preservice Teachers' Constructions of Personal Theories and Professional Knowledge

Dawn M. Shinew

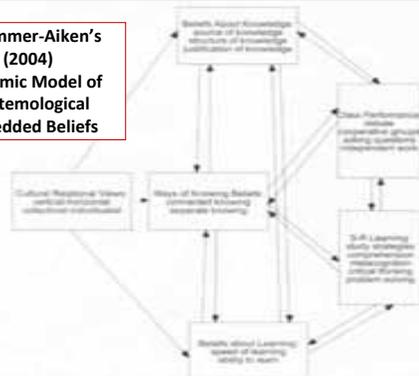
Berry Family Fellow of Teacher Education
Department of Teaching and Learning

PROBLEM: As new teachers enter the profession, their first years are often characterized by frustration and failure. On average, a third of the newly hired teachers leave during their first three years; almost half leave during the first five years (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF], 2003). Teacher preparation programs are called "to provide evidence that their programs make a difference to the teachers they prepare, and most important, the children their graduates teach" (*Journal of Teacher Education*, 2004). While WSU's program has collected data regarding students' learning outcomes, we have little evidence of how they translate these experiences into practice once they enter the field, or their impact on their students. In particular, there is a dearth of research regarding beginning teachers' construction of personal theories in relation to their epistemological development.



RESULTS: Analysis of the data suggests important connections between participants' experiences in the program and their practices as classroom teachers, particularly within the framework of epistemological beliefs. Participants were generally very positive about their experiences in WSU's elementary education program. All of the participants identified specific strategies and materials that they have integrated into their own teaching, though some of the participants provided limited explanations of how these practical applications related to theory and research. Participants who did not communicate clear connections between theory and practice generally described their approach and experiences in the program in ways consistent with Schommer-Aiken's (2004) concept of a "receiving pattern" of knowledge, indicating less sophisticated epistemological beliefs. Participants who articulated clear and knowledgeable links between their personal practice and professional knowledge (theories and research) described their experiences in the teacher preparation program in ways consistent with Schommer-Aiken's (2004) "mastery pattern" of knowledge, suggesting more sophisticated epistemological beliefs. These findings were triangulated through classroom observations and follow up discussions about participants' practice.

Schommer-Aiken's (2004) Systemic Model of Epistemological Embedded Beliefs



METHODS: 20 participants were identified based on a purposeful sample (Patton, 200). Participants needed to have graduated from WSU's elementary education program between 2004-2009 and be employed as a full-time teacher. Once one or two participants from each year had been identified, a "snowball" strategy (Patton, 2002) was used to recruit additional participants via email and other social networking sites. The sample was stratified to insure equal representation across all five years. Data consisted of open-ended surveys, interviews, and classroom observations.

IMPLICATIONS: Little research has been conducted on domain-specific epistemological beliefs (Stathopoulou & Vosniadou, 2007), though this study provides preliminary support for Schommer-Aiken's Systemic Model of Epistemological Embedded Beliefs. This study extends the discussion of Schommer-Aiken's Model beyond learning experiences and into the translation of those experiences into applied contexts.

References:

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