

PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' LEVEL OF COMPETENCE AND THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE TEACHING PROFESSION

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ABSTRACT

Despite vast research about teachers' competencies, little if any, is known about the relationship between this factor and attitudes towards the profession of teaching among the pre-service and novice teachers. In this study, the relationship between pre-service teachers' level of competence and their attitudes towards the teaching profession was investigated. For this purpose, a competency measurement observation card and a questionnaire on attitudes were administered to a sample of 41 male and female pre-service teachers from 4 universities in the Gaza strip, Palestine before and after a three-month competency training program. Results showed that the teachers' competency level correlated strongly with their attitudes before and after training. The paired Samples T-test indicated that the training improved their competencies as well as their attitudes. The findings have implications on teacher education programs to promote both competency and positive attitudes of pre-service teachers.

Keywords: Attitudes, competency level, pre-service teacher, teaching profession

INTRODUCTION

Success in the teaching profession is derived from three main aspects; knowledge, competencies and attitudes. Most educationists, however, pay excessive attention to the knowledge component while neglecting the development of the other two (Scocco, 2006). As a result, as soon as student teachers enter the real classroom setting, a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge becomes clear (Hascher, Cocard, & Moser, 2004). Student teachers feel there is a lack of 'connection' between the theoretical knowledge they learn in teacher education programs and the school-based teaching experiences (Hobson & Britain, 2006). Most student teachers may also experience a conflict between expectations of the role they are prepared to play and the reality of the actual work setting. This could adversely affect their attitudes towards the teaching profession. There is a need to provide practical guidance and directed training for pre-service teachers in the practicum period to help them develop their teaching skills and professional competencies.

It is the aim of any teacher education program to produce pre-service teachers who can start their career with sufficient competencies and positive attitudes towards the teaching profession. In

reality this may not happen. Most novice teachers encounter shock when they have to combat the challenges of everyday teaching and managing in school. Although pre-service teachers take theoretical courses about teaching and learning in their teacher education programs, many may be overwhelmed by the realities and complexities of the teaching task (Yilmaz & Iava, 2008). They may begin to view the teaching profession less favorably and develop negative attitudes towards it.

Just how strong is the link between the level of competency and attitude? If the issue of competencies is addressed, will attitude towards the teaching profession improve? Thus, this study examines whether the improvement of teacher's competence also brings along the development of positive attitudes towards the teaching profession.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dubois (1998) defines competency as knowledge, skills, mindsets, and thought patterns, that when used whether singularly or in various combinations, results in successful performance. Gultekin (2006) defines competency as the essential features of a profession to be successfully performed. Parry (1996) also defines competency as a cluster of related knowledge, skills, and attitudes that affects a major part of one's job and correlates with performance on the job. Competency can be measured against well accepted standards, and can be improved via training and development.

Competencies, or more specifically professional competencies, have been considered as the central element of teacher training, in keeping with the new emphasis on professionalization (Gauthier, Raymond, & Martinet, 2001). Pre-service teachers should possess a number of particular competencies that enable them to teach effectively. To be equipped with these competencies, teachers should be exposed to special training before starting the profession (Kilic, 2010; Sisman & Acat, 2003).

The definitions of competency above contain the affective dimension. That is to say, being competent in one's job requires the right kind of thinking or feeling towards it. The teacher is considered competent when he has enough knowledge, skills and attitudes required to perform in the profession. This can be measured through performance indicators; measurable behaviors that may prove whether a competency is fulfilled or not.

However competency can be seen as separate from attitude. While a person may have the competency to perform a task, that does not necessarily mean he or she will have the desire (attitude) to do so correctly. In other words, competencies give us the ability to perform, while attitudes give us the desire to perform (Clark, 1999).

Many attempts have been made in the literature to define attitude. McMillan (2000) defines attitude as the mental predispositions or tendencies to respond positively or negatively toward a certain thing, such as persons, events, or attitude objects, while Duatepe & Akku -Cikla (2004)

believe that it is a complex mental state involving beliefs and feelings. Ustuner, Demirtas, & Comert (2006) also define the attitude as a tendency attributed to the individual and which forms his thoughts, feelings, and behaviors about a psychological object.

According to Richardson (2003), attention to attitudes has become a growing concern in teacher education. Several studies exist concerning the attitudes of teachers (Azeem et al., 2009; Cakır, 2005; Duatepe & Akku -Cikla, 2004; Oral, 2004; Senel, Demir, Sertelin, Kilicasla, & Kksal, 2004; Unal, Akman, & Gelbal, 2010; Ustuner, Demirtas, & Comert, 2009; Yaakub, 1990), however, the review of the literature reveals that very little research has been conducted with regard to the relationship between pre-service teachers' attitudes toward teaching and their competency level.

In the literature, many factors related to teachers' attitudes towards the teaching profession could be found. According to Bradley (1995), inadequate funding of schools, lack of parent and community support, insufficient salaries are given as examples of those factors. Marchant (1992) added the teacher's competence to the factors influencing teachers' attitudes towards their profession. Pre-service teachers face several difficulties when they start teaching. When this happens, they start to feel alone and isolated, and they feel that they have to do everything by themselves without any kind of support. Such cases could cause a burnout and negative attitude towards the teaching profession.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The current study examines whether level of teacher's competence is associated with attitude towards the teaching profession. In particular, this paper aimed to answer the following question:

1. Is there a statistically significant correlation between the teachers' level of competence and their attitudes towards the teaching profession?

METHODS

Research Design

The study utilized quantitative-correlational design through the survey research after conducting a teacher training course. The unit of analysis is English language pre-service teachers in the four universities in the Gaza Strip, namely, Al Aqsa University, Islamic University of Gaza, Al Azhar University, and Al Quds Open University.

Respondents

A sample of 12 male and 29 female pre-service teachers was selected by simple random sampling method from the population.

Instruments

The attitude questionnaire was adapted and translated from Ustuner, et al. (2006) attitude scale. It consists of 34 items about pre-service teachers' attitudes towards the profession of teaching. 24 of the items represent positive attitudes, while 10 represent negative attitudes. The observation card for teachers' competencies is adapted from a questionnaire originally developed by Barzaq (2007). It was shown in its initial form after modification to a group of 4 local university professors who are specialists in education and methods of teaching. In light of their views, certain items were excluded while some were added. Some others were amended to have 94 items distributed into 8 main domains.

The researcher conducted a pilot study for both instruments to examine their reliability. The attitude questionnaire and the observation card were administered to 30 pre-service teachers and 15 pre-service teachers respectively. Both pilot samples were similar to those of the real sample but were not included in the main study.

The researcher used the pilot study to calculate the reliability of the attitude questionnaire and the competency observation card which was measured by Alpha Cronbach and split-half methods. In the attitude questionnaire, the Alpha Cronbach coefficient was 0.979 and Split half coefficient was 0.915. In the competency observation card, the Alpha Cronbach coefficient was 0.977 and the Spilt-half coefficient was 0.777.

Data Collection

The level of competence of 41 English pre-service teachers was observed in 82 teaching sessions using the observation card before and after a three-month pre-service teacher training program. The attitude questionnaire was administered to the same student-teachers before and after the training in parallel with the observation card.

DATA ANALYSIS

The level of competence of 41 English pre-service teachers was observed in 82 teaching sessions using the observation card before and after a three-month pre-service teacher training program. The data collected by the observation card and the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics of means and standard deviations were used to describe the collected data. Pearson Correlation was used to test the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant correlation between the teachers' level of competence and their attitudes towards the teaching profession before and after the training. Paired-Samples T-test was used to prove that attitudes improved along with the competency improvement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Correlation of Teachers' Competence Level & Their Attitude towards Teaching Profession

Table 1: Correlation between teacher's competencies and attitudes (pretest)

	r	Sig. (2-tailed)
Competencies	.86	** .000
Attitude		

Noted: **Correlation significant at the 0.01(2-tailed)

The correlation between pre-service teachers' competency level and their attitudes towards the teaching profession in the pretest was calculated using Pearson Correlation Coefficient. As shown in Table 1, there is a statistically significant correlation at ($\infty \leq 0.01$) between pre-service teacher's competency level and their attitudes towards the teaching profession.

Table 2: Correlation between teacher's competencies and attitudes (post-test)

	r	Sig. (2-tailed)
Competencies	.51	** .001
Attitude		

Noted: **Correlation significant at the 0.01(2-tailed)

The level of competence of 41 English pre-service teachers was observed in 82 teaching sessions using the observation card before and after a three-month pre-service teacher training program. The attitude questionnaire was administered to the same student-teachers before and after the training in parallel with the observation card.

After the administration of the posttest for the same variables, the correlation was calculated again using the same statistical test, and results indicated that there is a statistically significant correlation at ($\infty \leq 0.01$) between pre-service teacher's competency level and their attitudes towards the teaching profession as shown in Table 2.

In the two tests implemented on competencies and attitudes in two different times, statistical treatment showed correlation between competencies and attitudes. However this correlation can take place in three occasions. First, both competencies and attitudes might be improved positively because of the training to which the pre-service teachers were exposed. Second, both competencies and attitudes deteriorated negatively because the training was of negative effects. And third, no statistically significant changes happened to either competencies or attitudes. Two cases of the three can prove that the change in the competency level can result in change in the attitudes. These cases are the first and the second, because there were supposedly no statistically significant changes in the third.

In order to examine the effect of the training to which the participants were exposed in the period between the two tests on their competency level and to prove that the positive attitudes towards

the teaching profession were improved as a result of competency improvement, paired samples t-test was used as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Significant Differences in Teachers' Competencies and Attitude due to Training

	M	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Competency Pre-test and Post-test	-1.34	.52	-16.24	40	** .000
Attitude Pretest and Post-test	-1.43	.44	-20.47	40	** .000

Noted: **Correlation significant at the 0.01(2-tailed)

Based on Table 3 statistical results showed significance in both competency and attitude pairs. Accordingly, the training proved effective and the competency level of the participants and their attitudes towards the teaching profession improved correlatively as a result of the training program. Hence, the improvement of the competency level positively affected the teachers' attitudes towards the teaching profession. However, this does not necessarily imply a cause and effect relationship between competencies and attitudes; neither does it imply that competency improvement is the only factor that may affect the attitudes since there are other factors that may affect the attitudes. In some cases, the causation is true, but other factors may be responsible (Huck, 2008). Correlation is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to make causal inferences with reasonable confidence. But having gathered the data by experimental means, controlling extraneous variables which might confound the results, it can be inferred that there is a causal relationship (Hatfield, Faunce, & Job, 2006). Extraneous variables that can affect the attitudes are like insufficient salaries, inadequate funding of schools, lack of parental support, work burden and burnout (Bradley, 1995 and Marchant, 1992). All these variables have nothing to do with the pre-service teachers. When the data have been gathered by experimental means and confounds (extraneous variables) have been eliminated, correlation does imply causation. This may mean that the pre-service teachers' attitudes towards the teaching profession were positively affected by the improvement of their competency level.

CONCLUSION

Based on the literature, many factors can negatively affect the teachers' attitudes towards the teaching profession. These factors are like insufficient salaries, inadequate funding of schools, lack of parental support, work burden and burnout (Bradley, 1995 and Marchant, 1992). All of these factors can affect the attitudes of in-service teachers. In accordance with the results of this study, pre-service teachers' incompetence and professional unpreparedness proved to be a factor, among many others, that can negatively affect the pre-service teacher's attitudes towards the teaching profession. The training to which the pre-service teachers were exposed aimed at improving their competencies in teaching. The training material addressed the skills not the attitudes. The rise in the pre-service teachers' competency level contributed to a rise in their attitudes towards teaching. Accordingly, the more competent the pre-service teacher is, the more positive attitudes he/she establishes towards the teaching profession. Moreover, still the attitudes of teachers, whether male or female, can be affected by other factors such as experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this study provide several directions for future research. This study has specifically examined the effect of pre-service teachers' competency level on attitudes to teaching. Experience of in-service teachers and how long have they been in teaching can be a factor that affects the teachers' attitudes towards the teaching profession.

Besides, it examined pre-service teachers' competencies from the perspective of the researcher as he used an observation card for this purpose. The study did not measure the pre-service teachers' competencies as perceived by mentors, principals, and supervisors. A suggestion would be to replicate the study but also include the measurement of pre-service teachers' competencies as perceived by mentors, principals, and supervisors. Thus, the study could compare the perceptions of the researcher and the mentors, principals, and supervisors. The results of the study will indicate whether there is discrepancy between them.

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