



PERGAMON

Teaching and Teacher Education 19 (2003) 263–276

TEACHING
AND TEACHER
EDUCATION

www.elsevier.com/locate/tate

A case study of an African American Teacher's self-efficacy, stereotype threat, and persistence

H. Richard Milner^a, Anita Woolfolk Hoy^{b,*}

^aDepartment of Teaching and Learning, Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, Box 3030, GPC, Nashville, TN 37203, USA

^bCollege of Education, The Ohio State University, 29 West Woodruff Ave., Columbus, OH 43210, USA

Received 8 August 2001; received in revised form 25 January 2002; accepted 6 February 2002

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative investigation was to understand the sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) for an African American teacher in a suburban high school in the United States. As one of only three African American teachers in the school, she encountered many challenges that could have threatened her sense of efficacy and thus caused her to leave the school, yet she persevered. We attempted to identify and interpret the sources of efficacy that encouraged the teacher's persistence in an unsupportive environment. In addition, we considered how the concept of stereotype threat might help us better understand the teacher's situation. Findings of the case study have implications for teacher self-efficacy theory and research, as well as teacher persistence.

© 2003 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Teacher self-efficacy; Teacher beliefs; Social context; Stereotype threat; African American teachers; Case study

It is difficult to retain talented teachers. In the United States, up to 25% of beginning teachers do not return for their third year and almost 40% leave the profession within the first five years of teaching (Gold, 1996; Harris & Associates, 1993). In Germany, fewer than 10% of the teachers work until normal retirement age. The Czech Republic has reported attrition rates of 20%, and similarly, in Britain, there are more teachers leaving the profession early than remaining until retirement (Macdonald, 1999). Even more troubling, there is some evidence that the academically talented leave teaching early (Heyns, 1988).

Several factors have been identified as integral to teacher attrition (Macdonald, 1999). For instance, research has found that many teachers leave the profession because they become burned out, and teacher burnout has been linked to teachers' perceived self-efficacy in classroom management (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Chwalisz, Altmaier & Russell, 1992; Emmer & Hickman, 1991). Gold (1996) suggests that an additional reason teachers do not remain in teaching is that they develop "a sense of inconsequentiality.... this leaves teachers with a lack of personal accomplishment along with feeling little or no appreciation from others" (p. 558).

This sense of powerlessness and ineffectuality is in stark contrast to teacher self-efficacy or "the teacher's belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to

*Corresponding author. Tel.: 615/322-4503; fax: 615/322-8999.

E-mail addresses: rich.milner@vanderbilt.edu (H.R. Milner), awoolfolk@aol.com (A.W. Hoy).

successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context” (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy & Hoy, 1998, p. 233). There is evidence that those who leave teaching have significantly lower scores on measures of teacher self-efficacy than teachers who remain in teaching (Glickman & Tamashiro, 1982). Indeed, teacher self-efficacy has been linked to level of professional commitment for elementary school, middle school, and preservice teachers (Coladarci, 1992; Evans & Tribble, 1986), and to level of stress experienced in teaching (Smylie, 1988). Much of this research has been quantitative in nature and has not identified links between sense of efficacy and commitment, stress, or persistence in teaching. Further, the meaning of efficacy and the links between efficacy and persistence in teaching for under-represented groups have received virtually no attention.

One way to probe the connections between efficacy and persistence is to examine the experiences of one teacher in depth. The purpose of this case study was to understand the relationships between a teacher’s self-efficacy and persistence in a suburban high school in the United States. We chose this African-American teacher because she encountered many challenges that could have threatened her sense of efficacy, yet she persevered. In fact, in the faculty of 126 full time teachers, she was the only African American female and the only African American teaching in the core academic curriculum. Thus her experiences can teach us about self-efficacy theory and research, as well as teacher persistence. In addition, we hoped to address the lack of attention to and research on sense of efficacy for teaching among African America educators.

1. Theoretical framework

This inquiry is grounded in two bodies of theory and research: the work on teacher self-efficacy and the research on stereotype threat. Teacher self-efficacy—teachers’ beliefs in their ability to promote students’ learning—continues to interest researchers and practitioners alike (e.g., Ashton & Webb, 1986; Guskey & Passaro, 1994; Hoy and

Woolfolk, 1993; Wheatley, 2002). Much has been written about the origins and consequences of teacher self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran, et al., 1998) and about the challenges of assessing self-efficacy (Pajares, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Stereotype threat, or “the pressure an individual faces when he or she may be at risk of confirming negative, self-relevant stereotypes” (Wheeler & Petty, 2001, p. 804) is appropriate in this investigation because the case study concerns a teacher who is one of only three African American faculty in her school. Quite often, this teacher expressed a sense of responsibility to positively represent African Americans and to educate students about racial issues. Consequently, she might have felt the psychological burden that her actions could confirm and/or challenge stereotypes about African Americans in general.

1.1. Teacher self-efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy was identified over 25 years ago as one of the few teacher characteristics related to student achievement (Armor et al., 1976). Since that early study, teachers’ sense of efficacy has been related to student outcomes such as achievement (Armor et al., 1976; Ashton & Webb, 1986; Moore & Esselman, 1992; Ross, 1992; Saklofske, Michayluk, & Randhawa, 1988), motivation (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989), and sense of efficacy (Anderson, Greene, & Loewen, 1988).

In addition, teachers’ self-efficacy also relates to their behavior in the classroom. Self-efficacy affects the effort teachers invest in teaching, the goals they set, and their level of aspiration. Teachers with a strong sense of efficacy are open to new ideas and are more willing to experiment with new methods to better meet the needs of their students (Berman, McLaughlin, Bass, Pauly, & Zellman, 1977; Ghaith & Yaghi, 1997; Guskey, 1988; Milner, 2002; Stein & Wang, 1988), and tend to exhibit greater levels of planning and organization (Allinder, 1994; Milner, 2001). Efficacy beliefs influence teachers’ persistence when things do not go smoothly and their resilience in the face of setbacks. Greater self-efficacy enables teachers to

be less critical of students when they make errors (Ashton & Webb, 1986), to work longer with a student who is struggling (Gibson & Dembo, 1984), and to be less inclined to refer a difficult student to special education (Meijer & Foster, 1988; Podell & Soodak, 1993; Soodak & Podell, 1993). Teachers with a higher sense of efficacy exhibit greater enthusiasm for teaching (Allinder, 1994; Guskey, 1984; Hall, Burley, Villeme, & Brockmeier, 1992), have greater commitment to teaching (Coladarci, 1992; Evans & Tribble, 1986; Trentham, Silvern, & Brogdon, 1985) and are more likely to stay in teaching (Burley, Hall, Villeme, & Brockmeier, 1991; Glickman & Tama-shiro, 1982; Milner, 2002).

Bandura postulated four sources of efficacy expectations: mastery experiences, physiological and emotional states, vicarious experiences, and social persuasion. Mastery experience has been identified as the most powerful source of efficacy information—the perception that a performance has been successful raises efficacy beliefs while the perception of failure lowers efficacy beliefs, contributing to the expectation that future performances will also be inept. The level of arousal, either of excitement or anxiety, adds to the feeling of mastery or incompetence. Vicarious experiences are those in which the skill in question is modeled by someone else. When a model with whom the observer identifies performs well, the efficacy of the observer is enhanced. When the model performs poorly, the efficacy expectations of the observer decrease. Social persuasion may entail a “pep talk” or specific performance feedback. The potency of persuasion depends on the credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise of the persuader (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Beyond direct attempts at persuasion, other social factors may be important as well. For teachers, forms of social persuasion can include the responses of their students (Mulholland & Wallace, 2001) and the sense of collective efficacy within the entire faculty (Goddard & Goddard, 2001). In addition, social persuasion, in the form of social support systems, is one of the major occupational stress reducers (Bandura, 1997). Thus social persuasion in terms of verbal feedback and specific help, encouragement, praise, and norms of persistence and

achievement can help create a supportive social environment, whereas lack of feedback, nonresponsiveness from colleagues and students, criticism, and norms of neglect can create an unsupportive environment.

1.2. *Stereotype threat*

Stereotype threat is “a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists” (Steele, 1997, p. 614). In the case of African Americans, stereotype threat is “a social psychological predicament rooted in the prevailing American image of African Americans as intellectually inferior” (Aronson, Fried & Good, 2002). The idea is that when stereotyped individuals are in situations where the stereotype applies, they bear an extra emotional and cognitive burden. The burden is the possibility of confirming the stereotype, in the eyes of others or in their own eyes. Accordingly when girls are asked to solve complicated mathematics problems, for example, they are at risk of confirming widely held stereotypes that females are inferior to males in mathematics. It is not necessary that the individual even believes the stereotype. All that matters is that the person is *aware* of the stereotype and *cares about performing* well enough to disprove its unflattering implications (Aronson, Lustina, Good, Keough, Steele, & Brown, 1999).

The most immediate effect of stereotype threat can be anxiety that undermines performance (Osborne, 2001). In a series of experiments, Joshua Aronson, Claude Steele and their colleagues demonstrated that when African American or Latino/a college students are put in situations that induce stereotype threat, their performance suffers (Aronson & Salinas, 1998; Aronson, Steele, Salinas, & Lustina, 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995). For example, African American and White undergraduate students in an experiment at Stanford University were told that the test they were about to take would precisely measure their verbal ability. A similar group of students was told that the purpose of the test was to understand the psychology of verbal problem solving and not to assess individual aptitude. When the test was

presented as diagnostic of verbal ability, the African American students solved about half as many problems as the White students. In the non-threat situation, the two groups solved about the same number of problems. Anxiety and distraction were the main stumbling blocks identified. The African American students were more likely to be thinking about the stereotypes as they tried to work (Osborne, 2001; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995), which likely increased anxiety and psychological stress—burdens taken on to disprove stereotypes.

In the following case study we attempted to identify and interpret the sources of self-efficacy that encouraged the teacher's persistence in an unsupportive environment. In addition, we considered how the concept of stereotype threat might help us better understand the teacher's situation, self-efficacy, and thus her persistence. Findings of the case study have implications for teacher self-efficacy theory and research, as well as teacher persistence.

2. Methods

For the past 25 years, teacher self-efficacy has been studied predominantly through quantitative scales and surveys. However, Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) note that:

...qualitative studies of teacher self-efficacy are overwhelmingly neglected. Interviews and observational data can provide a thick, rich description of the growth of teacher self-efficacy. Interpretive case studies and qualitative investigations are needed to refine our understanding of the process of developing efficacy (p. 242).

The current study embraces this call for qualitative inquiry about teacher self-efficacy by employing a case study approach (Stake, 1994) to gather data using researcher observations and interviews as data collection techniques. The case study approach was selected because it provided us the opportunity to concentrate on and inquire about the specifics of the teacher's experiences through oral communication with her, and

through the first author's observations of her in context. In particular, over a 5-month period (September–February) during the 2000–2001 academic-year, the first author conducted context observations and interviews. Throughout the entire five months of the inquiry, the first author observed this teacher's classes and randomly attended other school-related activities (e.g., a band concert, and a school play), as well as observed in other contexts (e.g., the library, the hallways, and the cafeteria). Most mornings, he was in the school building before the bell sounded talking to students and/or teachers and remained in the school for the entire school day. Context observations included the recording of field notes in the classroom, library, cafeteria, and hallways. Although the first author participated in some of the classroom tasks, he was more of an observer than a participant.

In addition to countless informal interviews and conversations with the teacher, the first author conducted five 1–2 semi-formal, structured interviews. These interviews typically occurred during the teacher's lunch hour, planning block, or after school. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Member checks were employed to ensure the integrity of the study. In particular, we made sure that the teacher in this case reviewed the materials produced in the study to reduce ambiguity (Janesick, 1994). Throughout the study, the participant read complete copies of the interview transcripts and also read and reviewed versions of this manuscript. On several occasions, the participant and the first author discussed these reviews. In the rare cases of disagreement, both the teacher's position and the researchers' interpretation were noted and revealed. Because findings, as revealed in this study, were based on both observations and interviews, the patterns of findings thematically emerged from multiple data sources resulting in triangulation. For instance, triangulation occurred when what the teacher articulated during interviews also became evident in her actions or the actions of her students. Through triangulation, we developed themes to represent and categorize the findings.

Although there were multiple versions of an interview protocol, considering inductive analysis

and reasoning, the major research questions that guided this investigation included: What was the nature of this teacher's sense of efficacy? What kept this teacher at this school? What was the relationship between this teacher's confidence¹ and her perseverance? How had this teacher's self-efficacy for teaching evolved over the years? What was it like for this teacher to be one of three African American teachers at this school? What sources contributed most to her sense of efficacy? What sources undermined her sense of efficacy? Was stereotype threat a factor for this teacher, and if so, how did it affect her self-efficacy for teaching and her persistence?

2.1. *The teacher*

Dr. Wilson² provided all the data for this inquiry. In our sampling decision to make her the focus of the case study, several qualities were considered. She was: (a) reflective and articulate, (b) experienced, (c) a minority (African American) teacher in a majority school—only 2% (3 out of 126) of the teachers were African American, and (d) willing to participate in the study.

Dr. Wilson had been teaching in this district for 11 years but had been teaching for a total of 25 years. She had earned Ph.D., two Master's degrees, and a Bachelor's degree. Energetic and passionate, Dr. Wilson kept her students laughing and 'entertained' while stressing the importance of quality work—she was committed to academic excellence. She enjoyed reading, traveling and, most of all, her own two children.

2.2. *The school*

Constructed in the early 1990s, Ritz High School was an economically affluent, Midwestern,

¹Throughout this manuscript the terms confidence and efficacy were used interchangeably. This was done because the participant felt more comfortable using the concept confidence rather than efficacy. The authors are fully aware that efficacy is competence whereas self-efficacy is the belief or thinking about that competence. Consequently, teacher efficacy is akin to teacher competence.

²Throughout the manuscript, pseudonyms are used to mask the identity of the teacher, the school, and the community.

suburban high school. It accommodated a mostly homogeneous group of over 1600 students. Specifically, 86% of Ritz High students were White European American, 4% were Black or African American, 10% were Asian American, with 2% speaking limited English, 2% coming from low-income homes, 7% receiving special education, and a 3% turnover rate. No Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, or American Indians enrolled in the school. According to a Ritz county realtor, houses in the district ranged from \$150,000 to \$300,000. It was one of two high schools in the Ritz county district and was prominently known in the community for its scholarship as well as competitive soccer and lacrosse teams.

3. Findings and interpretations

Several themes related to the sources of and the influences on self-efficacy emerged in this case: (a) the teacher's experience of social and collegial isolation, (b) the burden of invalidating stereotypes among her colleagues and students, (c) the importance of students' and parents' perceptions and respect, and (d) the role of successful self-reflective experiences.

3.1. *Social and collegial isolation*

Dr. Wilson informed us that she had experienced social and collegial isolation from the very beginning of her teaching at Ritz High School. As the only African American female teacher at this school, her sense of efficacy was jeopardized because she did not feel welcome and a part of the school environment. As she noted:

I have gone through so much at Ritz High that it would have been easy for me to leave or crawl in a hole or something. I wasn't going to take the easy way out, and I know many teachers would have just given up and said that it's too much of a headache, a hassle, you know, to stay here, but I was not about to let them get me down and defeat me...

From the very beginning of Dr. Wilson's teaching experience at Ritz High, she had not felt

accepted by many of her colleagues. Almost 10 years later, this lack of acceptance still affected her level of confidence at Ritz. Yet, she persevered and continued in spite of these challenges. She further explained this isolation stating:

My colleagues have avoided me since the time that I was hired in this school. And that avoidance has sent out a negative message to me. Today, there are some people in my department that I am close to, but there are others who still haven't spoken to me or had a conversation with me for more than a minute or so. So, yes, that has affected my confidence because those teachers have not given me a chance...I see teaching as a family affair, you know, we [the teachers] ought to work together for the kids. I believe it takes a village to educate, but my colleagues did not want me to be a part of it, and I have felt alone.

This avoidance was likely so profound because, as Dr. Wilson put it, “[she] was the first Black woman in the school, and [she] had all this experience [she came into the district with many years of experience] and was being paid all this money [she had earned a Ph.D.]” Dr. Wilson further explained that, “I think they resented that, and some of them have never gotten over it, so they just avoided me.” She described this avoidance and “isolation” as hurtful because “they really never gave me a chance. They had all these preconceived feelings about me—things they had heard.” This avoidance was likely intensified by local newspaper articles that “focused on my high salary and extensive years of experience in another school district.” In sum, Dr. Wilson came into the district with a Ph.D. and many years of experience, which made her salary well above the norm. She believed that this was a major problem for many of her colleagues. This avoidance and isolation had been a negative informer of her sense of efficacy in the past, and as a result, she started to question herself from time to time.

In terms of Bandura's sources of efficacy, Dr. Wilson experienced the absence of positive verbal, social persuasion. Rather than receiving constructive feedback or verbal/nonverbal encouragement, Dr. Wilson perceived avoidance, isolation, and

negative evaluations from her colleagues. Early on, this absence of social support threatened Dr. Wilson's sense of efficacy, as she noted above.

3.2. *The burden of invalidating stereotypes*

Stereotype threat appeared to affect Dr. Wilson's sense of efficacy in two ways. First, combating negative stereotypes about African Americans was part of her definition of the teaching task. Thus mastery of teaching for Dr. Wilson was defined, in part, by how successfully she was able to combat these pervasive stereotypes (see [Tshcanen-Moran et al., 1998](#) for a discussion of the role of task definition in making efficacy judgments). Second, the stereotypes themselves could be seen as a kind of societal-level social persuasion that undermines the efficacy judgments of African Americans. We examine each of these more fully next.

3.2.1. *A challenging teaching task*

Because Dr. Wilson was one of three African American teachers in the school, she felt extra responsibilities to demystify or change negative stereotypes about African Americans. Morally, she believed that she had a responsibility to enlighten her students and her colleagues about African Americans, and this became apparent in her thinking, teaching, and talking about her work. Accordingly, the experience of stereotype threat may have intensified her sense of responsibility. Dr. Wilson felt obligated to educate her students and her colleagues about other African Americans because of what she perceived as their limited exposure and knowledge about other African Americans. Dr. Wilson had developed a moral license to do what she believed to be right, and that sustained her in many ways.

Dr. Wilson frequently expressed her responsibility to display the most positive images of other African Americans. Clearly, she felt obligated to “represent” other African Americans in her work with the teachers and the students at Ritz High School. She undertook this role to correct or contest previously conceived stereotypical beliefs that some of her colleagues and students may have held about African Americans. Combating

negative stereotypes had become part of Dr. Wilson's definition of the teaching task and thus an element in her self-efficacy judgments. In her words:

I came into this district to be Black and to let the kids see a Black woman with no pretentiousness, to see a Black woman and to embrace that. Now I cannot pass for White, and I wanted them to see a Black woman because, you see, these kids are going to get out there and go to college, just like Bowling Green and Ohio U, and they're going to interact with roommates who might look like me, a true Black woman, not a woman who is fair-complexioned...they may have untrue ideas about Black people. I want to teach these kids not to buy into this—I have to. That's the reason I can continue teaching the way I do. I know who I am and what my responsibilities are.

Repeatedly, Dr. Wilson spoke about her thinking and beliefs about her "responsibilities" to educate her students in this way. For example, during another interview she stated:

I keep my hair cut short because I want my kids to see a dark skinned Black woman with short hair. For many of them, Rich, they have never seen this. And yes, there are lessons in that. And, yes, I plan this. I am aware of what I'm doing. I want them to see a Black woman with Black features and how yes, I am OK, and I am smart, a reader, successful, you see? I tell them about how I've traveled the world, and they look at me in awe.

3.2.2. *Accomplishing the task*

The first author's classroom observations noted many instances when Dr. Wilson acted out her responsibility to represent the African-American experience. The following extended example is from a lesson in her senior composition class:

Dr. Wilson prepares the class for the day's reading—Alice Walker's *Everyday Use*, which is a short story that focuses on the cultural and historical legacy embedded in patch quilts and the art of quilting. She provides some brief information about Alice Walker and the story.

She calls this "setting the stage." "You see," she informs, "Alice Walker is a brilliant African American woman who wrote the novel *The Color Purple*, which was made into a movie. Has anyone in this class read that novel or seen the movie?" Not more than two students raise their hands (all of the students were European American in the class). "I see," Dr. Wilson responds. "Well, let me tell you a bit about that novel before we move on." She spends about 10 min discussing the time period of the novel and points out some of the major themes. After which, she returns to the story at hand—*Everyday Use*. The students read the story with Dr. Wilson orchestrating the reading:

She calls on students one by one to read—there are no choices in the matter—"you either read or you are not participating, which means points are deducted." After a few paragraphs, Dr. Wilson interjects, "I remember when I was a girl. My grandmother made me a quilt when I went off to college. I still have it today. That quilt is old and dingy now, but it'll be in my family forever because it means something to me—culturally. I see that quilt as more than pieces of cloth sewn together." Dr. Wilson continued: "And I miss my grandmother—the food she cooked, and her smell, you know, all the things that remind us of the good times—when my sisters and I would play in her yard, and the clothes on the line outside flew in the wind. Those were some great times. And so when I run across that quilt in my basement, I think back to those times and I get full [emotional]. Those are times for me to share about my sisters, my parents, and my grandmother with my [own] kids."

Not a person moves during Dr. Wilson's soliloquy. Engagement—words cannot describe the solace in the room. Dr. Wilson continues, "and if my grandmother or even my parents could see me now as DOCTOR WILSON, their hearts would be glad. I was a little Black girl who grew up right outside of Bowling Green, Ohio, and so yes, it is deeper than just the cloth, and the quilt, and the fabric. It's about artifacts that we treasure and allow to become meaning makers to remind us—to

remind us to tell stories to our children who I hope will tell stories to theirs—starting from a patch quilt. I cannot help but think about this as we read this story.” The bell sounds to dismiss class, and no one moves. It is obvious that this is a special moment for not only Dr. Wilson but for her students as well.

Later during an interview I asked Dr. Wilson about this class session. In her words, “you know Rich, I don’t mind sharing my experiences with them. Some of them [her experiences] are hurtful, and others are times to celebrate. They see me for a real person because I cannot present myself in any other way. They know this about me, and I am proud of that.” She went on to describe a student in that class who from the observation notes, had appeared captivated by the lesson during this session. As noted:

During another class session, Dan talked about being upset about the people who are coming into our district. I think he was referring to the Spanish or the Mexicans; I’m not sure what nationality. And Dan was saying that he was upset that this guy couldn’t understand him in a convenience store. He said, ‘why are these people moving here, and they can’t even speak English?’ And that gave me a chance to teach—to really get down and teach. I love it—because this kid was very passionate ‘why are these people here?’ And I told him that these people are doing things that we don’t want to do. He was saying that he didn’t like these people coming here, and I was saying, that his family, his grandparents, great-grandparents came from different countries. And they don’t see that; that’s all important to me because I think that sensitivity, Rich, I have a sensitivity to people who are not like my kids at Ritz High School—that are not, you know, mainstreamed right away.

Cleverly, she then links her comments to the power structure, informing:

Anytime you’re part of the ruling class with power, it’s likely that you don’t see it. You’re not as sensitive to minority groups, and that’s OK. We have to learn these things from people

who live them. And Rich, it’s not just Black and White. I’ve had many of my Asian students talk about things that they’ve heard or gone through, too. We all learned from the discussion that day, even Dan [referring to the Everyday Use discussion].

3.2.3. *The responsibility to enlighten colleagues*

The notion of carrying the burden and perceptions of other African Americans also became overt as Dr. Wilson discussed her role and relationships with other teachers at the school. It was her “responsibility” to challenge pre-existing beliefs about African Americans, and this affected her sense of efficacy. As she explained:

I know that Mrs. Jones [Dr. Wilson’s White European American colleague] means well, but I often have to help her understand the Black students in her classes. She doesn’t always understand the issues that Black students deal with on a daily basis. She’s really a fine teacher, but I don’t want her to categorize all the Black students just because she is having difficulty with one Black student. We [teachers] do that, you know. But there’s too much at stake when teachers do it with Black students. There is so much negativity—you know—negative thoughts about Blacks

Dr. Wilson felt a deeper level of responsibility placed on her in her quest to enlighten her colleagues and students about matters concerning African Americans. Much of this responsibility likely stemmed from her being one of the few African Americans in the school. Dr. Wilson almost felt overwhelmed by some of these dilemmas—working to develop ways to change perceptions of African Americans. This demanding task—to enlighten colleagues and students—probably was linked to Dr. Wilson’s level of efficacy. Total mastery of such an important goal was likely to meet with disappointments and a sense of failure at times. In Dr. Wilson’s words:

...[A]nd sometimes I get down, you know, because I think I’m fighting a tireless battle with some of them. Some of them know, but others don’t. I am often concerned if I am making

them see it. Am I making a difference? Not all Blacks are the same, and I want my teaching to make a difference. Some of my colleagues and especially my kids have good hearts. But do they know me, or what they see on TV, or have heard about me?

3.2.4. *Stereotypes as social persuasion*

Dr. Wilson not only tried to combat stereotypes, she also felt that stereotypes could affect how she was perceived. It seems that she never really felt adequately comfortable and self-efficacious with her colleagues because she was constantly questioning their motives and how they perceived her; she reflected on the negative stereotypical beliefs about her and other African Americans. She was consistently thinking about these preconceived beliefs of her students. As she explained it, her students had limited interactions with other African Americans, and they “often relied on what they see on TV or even what their parents believe about Black people.” These negative stereotypes could be seen as a form of social persuasion that undermines efficacy and contributes to negative emotional arousal (anxiety and stress) that also could lower efficacy. Research has indicated that the threat of stereotypes is more pronounced when the area of performance is important to the individual (Wheeler & Petty, 2001). Teaching to combat stereotypes clearly was important to Dr. Wilson.

Despite these factors that could undermine her sense of efficacy, Dr. Wilson persevered and continued working at Ritz High. In the midst of her experiences of isolation and stereotype threat, which resulted in what we are calling *an endangered sense of efficacy*, it would have been easy, as Dr. Wilson explained, for her to leave such an unsupportive, isolating environment. Dr. Wilson regained and sustained her sense of efficacy by focusing on evidence of student and parental perceptions and respect, as well as personal, successful reflections.

3.2.5. *Student and parental perceptions and respect*

Dr. Wilson had been “relegated” to teach the students who “the other teachers cannot handle. They can’t handle many of those kids because

those kids’ll say what they want; they are real, and they are not superficial, and they will call teachers out.” It was the respect of her students and their parents that helped Dr. Wilson persevere. She stated:

Those are my kids, and I enjoy them. They respect me and their parents also respect me. To me, this is what it’s all about. When I think about it, this is what matters most to me, you know, that my kids respect me and that their parents know me now and that they know that hey I’m not a bad person or a racist. I care about those kids, and so my students’ respect and their parents’ respect and acceptance means more to me than anything else. When I see my kids and their parents in the store or at a game or something because we all live in the same neighborhood, and those kids come up to me and hug me, and their parent says ‘my child talks about you all the time,’ this makes me happy. So, when I talk about confidence, I’d say that this is most important... There is typically a line of parents waiting to meet me at graduation, and they tell me how much I’ve meant to their child. And I think this is important because some of those kids are left out because they are not the most popular or the smartest or whatever. So, that’s what matters to me, that I can give out all those diplomas [students select their favorite, most influential teacher to award their diplomas] to kids who respect me and their parents appreciate me, accept me, and respect me...

When she did begin to lose confidence, she thought about a specific example of a mastery experience that “affirms my presence here. We all want to feel like our teaching makes a difference; well at least I do, so I have to constantly remind myself why I teach here—for my kids.” She provided an example of one of these instances that she often thinks about when she doubts herself. As noted:

One of my students was involved in a fight over the weekend, and I was in New York City. And this student was in my seventh/eighth period senior composition class, and you know him.

And there were some kids who broke his hip. Yes, they broke my student's hip, and he had to get six pins in his hip. His father called me because this student wanted him to call Dr. Wilson. And his father called me, told me he was at Saint Ann's Hospital, and that this student would be tickled if he received a call from me. So, you know, I did better than call him. I went to the hospital to visit him. My students—I'm only here because my students accept me, and respect me. This makes me confident because I feel like I'm doing something that is making a difference in my kids lives.

Dr. Wilson's students' and parents' respect enhanced her confidence and was a source of her inspiration to stay at Ritz High School. That was important to her, and she often reflected on such reaffirming mastery experiences whenever she began to doubt herself and her reasons for teaching at Ritz High School. Similar findings were reported by [Mulholland and Wallace \(2001\)](#) in their case study of Katie, a beginning elementary school student teacher in Australia. The researchers noted that:

The enthusiasm of children during a science lesson seemed to act as a form of social persuasion (Bandura, 1995) which encouraged Katie to teach science and had the potential to strengthen Katie's science teaching beliefs...
 “(Mulholland & Wallace, 2001, p. 249)

3.2.6. *Successful self-reflective experiences*

Even with the respect received from many of the parents and students, Dr. Wilson believed that she had still not been accepted by many of her colleagues, and most of their problems with her concerned “the fact that I have my terminal degree and so many insightful experiences.” Dr. Wilson started using their problems with her credentials to enhance her levels of confidence. Simply put, she asserted that her credentials served as a boost to her sense of efficacy. As noted:

I know what it's like to go through a Ph.D. program and being a minority at that in a predominantly White program. That has im-

pacted my confidence, and I have taken what they [teachers who avoid and isolate her] envy and used it as confidence. You see, going through that Ph.D. program in that kind of environment tells me that there's not much that I can't do. Even if it's difficult to do, I can do it, and I tell myself that, which is what I pass on to my students...

To be clear, Dr. Wilson was more confident as a result of earning a Ph.D., an achievement that she believed had precipitated some of the avoidance and isolation she received from many of her colleagues. She used that mastery experience [attaining a Ph.D.] as a model for reflection as she faced challenges in what she perceived as an isolating environment.

In this sense, when she started to think that she could not achieve things inside and outside of her work, “I think back to my doctoral work at [a large predominantly white] University, and I know that I can do anything. Keep in mind that I finished my Ph.D. ... in two years, and I was married ...” Her credentials and the mastery of that experience influenced her thinking about her abilities to achieve difficult tasks and to stay at Ritz High. She reiterated this point in an example about how she had relied on her personal educational credentials to enhance her thinking about herself and her ability to persevere in this context. In her words:

You know the enriched courses here are given to teachers who they believe to be the most competent. That used to bother me, you know, because they never assigned those classes to me. That would make anybody doubt themselves, you know, but I just think, you know what, I have my doctorate, and that's just not easy to do. I know I'm competent and smart when I think back to those experiences. So, yes, I think my credentials have been helpful in making me feel better about myself. Lord knows I've had enough here to make me feel not so good.

In this regard, Dr. Wilson thought about the process, the environment, and the success of obtaining her Ph.D. She leaned on her credentials,

and the tenacity and intellect needed to achieve such a mastery experience in a predominantly White environment, to change her thinking about not being asked to teach enriched courses.

4. Conclusions and implications

Several issues warrant discussion here, given the findings of this case. We conclude this article with implications for teacher self-efficacy theory, research, and teacher persistence. Essentially, we begin this section by focusing on the physiological and emotional states associated with Dr. Wilson's self-efficacy and persistence. Second, we explicate the extensive breadth of the task Dr. Wilson set along with the mastery associated with such a task. Then, we examine how she used reflection on past successes to recreate mastery experiences. Fourth, we focus on the nature of context and its implications for research and theory. We conclude this section with research directions and research design considerations.

4.1. *The strain of battle*

Consistent with the sources of efficacy postulated by Bandura (1997), Dr. Wilson experienced physiological and emotional arousal that could have affected her self-efficacy and persistence. As evident in this case, Dr. Wilson felt pressure and stress in this predominantly White setting to change, demystify, and challenge teachers' and students' negative stereotypical beliefs about African Americans. She stated that she sometimes felt that she had to "fight a tireless battle" because she was not confident that she was helping others "see it." Her sense that she was fighting a tireless battle could have caused Dr. Wilson to leave the profession. Indeed, these issues became emotional and psychological burdens for her. She stated that she sometimes "gets down" — such emotional turmoil was likely linked to her sense of efficacy in pursuit of mastery. She wanted to "crawl in a hole" as some of her colleagues sent out a "negative message"—more experiences that likely caused some physiological and emotional strain. Apparently, these threats to self-efficacy were not

overwhelming. Dr. Wilson revealed that she often felt strained, yet she persevered.

4.2. *Bearing the burden*

Second, the difficulty and breadth of the task Dr. Wilson set for herself as well as the mastery associated with the task probably influenced Dr. Wilson's self-efficacy. Her definition of the teaching task (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998)—to change or demystify preconceived negative stereotypes—was indeed lofty. Succeeding at such a task is beyond the capabilities of any individual; thus total mastery of the task is virtually impossible. It did not matter whether others expected Dr. Wilson to combat stereotypes. What mattered was that Dr. Wilson adopted this task because there were few other African American teachers in the school, and she cared deeply about the task. Combating stereotypes was central to her role as a teacher; she felt responsible. Clearly, undertaking this challenge affected Dr. Wilson's sense of efficacy because she was never confident that she could master the task she set for herself (who could?). Because she never successfully mastered this (unreachable) task, she sought other sources to help her persist in an isolating context.

Stereotype threat was linked to Dr. Wilson's sense of teaching efficacy in at least two ways. First, the stereotype itself was a form of negative social persuasion and likely to be a source of anxiety (Osborne, 2001; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995), both of which could erode efficacy. Second, by defining the teaching task to include eliminating stereotypes, Dr. Wilson set a goal that was bound to limit her experience of mastery.

4.3. *Remembering and recreating mastery*

Dr. Wilson combated endangered efficacy by reflecting on two arenas of accomplishment—attaining a doctorate and enjoying the respect of her students and their parents. As one of few African Americans in her doctoral program, she had successfully attained a terminal degree at a predominantly White graduate school. She reflected on the process of that experience. One

source of mastery in her current situation was the memory of mastery in a previous context with two similar characteristics. First, both contexts were predominantly White schools where achievement was valued. Second, racial stereotypes that question African American intellectual capabilities were likely operating in both situations. Self-efficacy, through a mastery experience, occurred when Dr. Wilson consciously transferred a similar (but not exact) contextual experience to her current situation. In her current context, Dr. Wilson focused on the respect she enjoyed from students and their parents. When she felt threatened, she consciously reminded herself of stories of accomplishment and testimonies of respect from the people who mattered most to her. Like the eminent actor Sir Laurence Olivier, who “used self-efficacy orations to combat stage fright by appearing on stage before a show began and proclaiming behind the curtain that he was a superb actor whose performance would captivate the audience that evening” (Bandura, 1997, p. 109), Dr. Wilson ascribed her arousal to the context and not to personal deficiencies.

4.4. *The importance of context*

More than anything else, this research shows that context matters. It is likely that Dr. Wilson would have fared quite differently in a school where she was not the racial minority. Results of research on stereotype threat indicate that being the only stereotyped individual in a context decreases performance on stereotype relevant tasks (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000). If Dr. Wilson had taught among other African American colleagues, she probably would not have felt solely responsible for combating stereotypes, a goal she adopted at Ritz High School. Defining the task as combating stereotypes depended quite significantly on the school context and the ways in which this teacher thought about her responsibility to her students. As Dr. Wilson reflected upon her students’ and colleagues’ lack of exposure to (and pervasive stereotypes about) African Americans, she felt that she had to take on the task of change agent. In order to get through these negative teaching experiences, Dr. Wilson relied on past teaching

experiences in similar contexts as she worked to persevere.

4.5. *Context and research design*

Finally, both theory and future research about teacher self-efficacy may consider the contextual nature of teachers’ experience. This highlights an obvious limitation of the current investigation—it was a case study of an American teacher in an American school, conducted by American researchers. Studies may need to consider cultural issues embedded in teachers’ thinking and self-efficacy. For example, how do contextual factors influence the definition of the teaching task—of what needs to be accomplished? What cultural capital do teachers bring into teaching as they accomplish the tasks they set? How do cultural backgrounds influence definitions of success and failure in teaching? As Dr. Wilson taught us, her contextual and cultural experiences shaped the task she set to combat stereotypes. Further studies should focus on teacher self-efficacy in a variety of cultural contexts, as there likely are differences among cases related to teachers’ cultures, ways of knowing, and experiences in the world. These inquiries should indeed be conducted using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative studies in this regard may be helpful to the development of quantitative measures and studies in general.

In conclusion, more qualitative studies may be needed to sharpen and broaden our knowledge about teacher self-efficacy, stereotype threat, and teacher perseverance in teaching. This inquiry provided evidence that the current measures of teacher self-efficacy may fail to capture some of the issues that this teacher encountered when she experienced stereotype threat. Future research should continue deeper examinations of the specifics of teacher self-efficacy in different contexts and in relation to cultural factors.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Professors Joshua Aronson and Frank Pajares for their helpful comments on

earlier versions of this manuscript. Requests for copies of this manuscript should be addressed to Dr. H. Richard Milner, Box 330, GPC; Department of Teaching and Learning; Peabody College; Vanderbilt University; Nashville, TN 37203; email: rich.milner@vanderbilt.edu.

References

- Allinder, R. M. (1994). The relationship between efficacy and the instructional practices of special education teachers and consultants. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 17, 86–95.
- Anderson, R., Greene, M., & Loewen, P. (1988). Relationships among teachers' and students' thinking skills, sense of efficacy, and student achievement. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 34(2), 148–165.
- Armor, D., Conroy-Oseguera, P., Cox, M., King, N., McDonnell, L., Pascal, A., Pauly, E., & Zellman, G. (1976). *Analysis of the school preferred reading program in selected Los Angeles minority schools*. Report No. R-2007-LAUSD; ERIC Document Reproduction No. 130 243. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation.
- Aronson, J., Fried, C. B., & Good, C. (2002). Reduction the effects of stereotype threat on African American college students: The role of theories of intelligence. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 38(2), 113–125.
- Aronson, J., Lustina, M. J., Good, C., Keough, K., Steele, C. M., & Brown, J. (1999). When White men can't do math: Necessary and sufficient factors in stereotype threat. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 35, 29–46.
- Aronson, J., & Salinas, M. F. (1998). *Stereotype threat, attributional ambiguity, and Latino underperformance*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Texas at Austin.
- Aronson, J., Steele, C.M., Salinas, M.F., & Lustina, M. J. (1999). The effect of stereotype threat on the standardized test performance of college students. In E. Aronson, (Ed.), *Readings About the Social Animal* (8th ed.). New York: Freeman.
- Ashton, P. T., & Webb, R. B. (1986). *Making a difference: Teachers' sense of efficacy and student achievement*. New York: Longman.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 191–215.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company.
- Berman, P., McLaughlin, M., Bass, G., Pauly, E., & Zellman, G. (1977). *Federal Programs supporting educational change. Vol. VII Factors affecting implementation and continuation*. Report No. R-1589/7-HEW Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 140 432).
- Brouwers, A., & Tomic, W. (2000). A longitudinal study of teacher burnout and perceived self-efficacy in classroom management. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16, 239–253.
- Burley, W.W., Hall, B.W., Villeme, M.G., & Brockmeier, L. L. (1991, April) *A path analysis of the mediating role of efficacy in first-year teachers' experiences, reactions, and plans*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago.
- Chwalisz, K. D., Altmaier, E. M., & Russell, D. W. (1992). Causal attributions, self-efficacy cognitions, and coping with stress. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 11, 377–400.
- Coladarci, T. (1992). Teachers' sense of efficacy and commitment to teaching. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 60(4), 323–337.
- Emmer & Hickman, (1991). Teacher efficacy in classroom management and discipline. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 51, 755–765.
- Evans, E. D., & Tribble, M. (1986). Perceived teaching problems, self-efficacy and commitment to teaching among preservice teachers. *Journal of Educational Research*, 80(2), 81–85.
- Ghaith, G., & Yaghi, H. (1997). Relationships among experience, teacher efficacy, and attitudes towards the implementation of instructional innovation. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 14, 451–458.
- Gibson, S., & Dembo, M. (1984). Teacher efficacy: A construct validation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76(4), 569–582.
- Glickman, C., & Tamashiro, R. (1982). A comparison of first-year, fifth-year, and former teachers on efficacy, ego development, and problem solving. *Psychology in Schools*, 19, 558–562.
- Goddard, R. D., & Goddard, Y. L. (2001). A multilevel analysis of the relationship between teacher and collective efficacy in urban schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, 807–818.
- Gold, Y. (1996). Beginning teacher support: Attrition, mentoring, and induction. In J. Sikula (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teacher education* (2nd ed.) (pp. 548–594). New York: Macmillan.
- Guskey, T. R. (1984). The influence of change in instructional effectiveness upon the affective characteristics of teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 21, 245–259.
- Guskey, T. R. (1988). Teacher efficacy, self-concept, and attitudes toward the implementation of instructional innovation. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 4, 63–69.
- Guskey, T., & Passaro, P. (1994). Teacher efficacy: A study of construct dimensions. *American Educational Research Journal*, 31, 627–643.
- Hall, B., Burley, W., Villeme, M., & Brockmeier, L. (1992, April). *An attempt to explicate teacher efficacy beliefs among first year teachers*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.

- Harris, L., & Associates. (1993). *The metropolitan life survey of the American teacher: Violence in America's public schools*. New York: Metropolitan Life.
- Heyns, B. (1988). Educational defectors: A first look at teacher attrition in the nls-72. *Educational Researcher*, 17(3), 24–32.
- Hoy, W. K., & Woolfolk, A. E. (1993). Teachers' sense of efficacy and the organizational health of schools. *Elementary School Journal*, 93, 335–372.
- Inzlicht, M., & Ben-Zeev, T. (2000). A threatening intellectual environment: Why females are susceptible to experiencing problem-solving deficits in the presence of males. *Psychological Science*, 11, 3654–3671.
- Janesick, V. J. (1994). The dance of qualitative research design: metaphors, methodolatry, and meaning. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 209–219). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Macdonald, D. (1999). Teacher attrition: A review of literature. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 15, 835–848.
- Meijer, C., & Foster, S. (1988). The effect of teacher self-efficacy on referral chance. *Journal of Special Education*, 22, 378–385.
- Midgley, C., Feldlaufer, H., & Eccles, J. (1989). Change in teacher efficacy and student self- and task-related beliefs in mathematics during the transition to junior high school. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 81, 247–258.
- Milner, H.R. (2001). A qualitative investigation of teachers' planning and efficacy for student engagement. *Unpublished Dissertation*. The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.
- Milner, H. R. (2002). A case study of an experienced teacher's self efficacy and persistence through crisis situations: Theoretical and practical considerations. *The High School Journal*, 86, 28–35.
- Moore, W., & Esselman, M. (1992). *Teacher efficacy, power, school climate and achievement: A desegregating district's experience*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.
- Mulholland, J., & Wallace, J. (2001). Teacher induction and elementary science teaching: Enhancing self-efficacy. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, 243–261.
- Osborne, J. W. (2001). Testing stereotype threat: Does anxiety explain race and sex differences in achievement? *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 26, 291–310.
- Pajares, F. (1997). Current directions in self-efficacy research. In M. L. Maehr, & P. R. Pintrich (Eds.), *Advances in motivation and achievement*, vol. 10 (pp. 1–49). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Podell, D., & Soodak, L. (1993). Teacher efficacy and bias in special education referrals. *Journal of Educational Research*, 86(4), 247–253.
- Ross, J. A. (1992). Teacher efficacy and the effect of coaching on student achievement. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 17(1), 51–65.
- Saklofske, D. H., Michayluk, J. O., & Randhawa, B. S. (1988). Teacher efficacy and teaching behaviours. *Psychological Reports*, 63, 407–414.
- Smylie, M. A. (1988). The enhancement function of staff development: Organizational and psychological antecedents to individual teacher change. *American Educational Research Journal*, 25, 1–30.
- Soodak, L., & Podell, D. (1993). Teacher efficacy and student problem as factors in special education referral. *Journal of Special Education*, 27, 66–81.
- Stake, R. E. (1994). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 236–247). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, 52, 613–629.
- Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 797–811.
- Stein, M. K., & Wang, M. C. (1988). Teacher development and school improvement: The process of teacher change. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 4, 171–187.
- Trentham, L., Silvern, S., & Brogdon, R. (1985). Teacher efficacy and teacher competency ratings. *Psychology in Schools*, 22, 343–352.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2001). Teacher efficacy: Capturing an elusive concept. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, 783–805.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., Woolfolk Hoy, A., & Hoy, W. K. (1998). Teacher efficacy: Its meaning and measure. *Review of Educational Research*, 68, 202–248.
- Wheatley, K. F. (2002). The potential benefits of teacher efficacy doubts for educational reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 18, 5–22.
- Wheeler, S. C., & Petty, R. E. (2001). The effects of stereotype activation on behavior: A review of possible mechanisms. *Psychological Bulletin*, 127, 797–826.