

Mainstream Preservice Teachers' Beliefs about English Language Learning and Teaching: Contextual Factors and Belief Change

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Abstract

Increasing numbers of English language learners (ELLs) are resulting in mainstream teachers across the United States taking on the responsibility of teaching ELLs. This demands the preparation of all teachers to teach this linguistically diverse student body. Yet adequate preparation of these educators depends on insight into the beliefs that preservice teachers carry with them to the classroom and the possibility of belief change as a result of experiences. The purpose of the present qualitative study was to better inform teacher preparation programs by exploring factors that cultivate differences of beliefs among preservice mainstream teachers and whether preservice teachers experienced a change in beliefs about ELL issues after the completion of English as a second language (ESL) coursework. Our findings show that different factors were influential in bringing a change in beliefs. It was found that after ESL coursework there was a shift in preservice teachers' beliefs toward greater alignment with principles of ESL education.

Keywords: Preservice teachers, teacher preparation, English Language Learners (ELLs), belief change, English as a Second Language (ESL)

Introduction

There is a dichotomous trend in educational demographics in the United States today. The number of English language learners (ELLs) is increasing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), yet the number of educators prepared to teach them is not (Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010; Rizzuto, 2017; Webster & Valeo, 2011). Furthermore, there is an increasing gap between students and teachers in terms of socio-economic status, race, and language background (Kolano & King, 2015; Olson & Jimenez-Silva, 2008). Public school teachers in the United States are vastly White (81.9%) and female (76.3%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). These teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching are largely informed by their personal experiences as students in White, usually middle-class environments. Those experiences very well may have never challenged their beliefs about ELLs or prepared them for working with ELLs. With a consistently homogenous teaching force and increasingly diverse student population as well as the heightened demands imposed through high-stakes testing, what mainstream teachers, also known as general education teachers, believe about English language learning and teaching is a powerful

force in the education of diverse school children across the United States (Gleeson & Davison, 2016).

This study focuses on gaining an understanding of what factors influence mainstream preservice teachers' beliefs and the impact of Second Language Instruction courses, or English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, for preservice teachers as instigators of belief change. Specifically, this study will address the following research questions:

1. What factors influence preservice teachers' beliefs about English language learning?
2. How do preservice teachers' pre-existing beliefs about second language learning and teaching change after second language instruction coursework?

The study is valuable for informing the field of ESL teacher education because it empowers teacher educators to be better prepared as they instruct ESL education classes. The study provides teacher educators with insight into common preservice teacher beliefs and contextual factors that may lead to change in beliefs. Ultimately, further research such as this study can pave the way for better prepared preservice mainstream education teachers who will promote educational success for the increasing numbers of ELLs in the United States.

Literature Review

In his seminal work on beliefs, Rokeach (1968) defined the construct of beliefs as "inferences made by an observer about underlying states of expectancy" (p. 2). There is some agreement in research that beliefs and practices intertwine and impact the school experience of students (Buehl & Beck, 2015), the ways teachers implement policies (Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004; Ullucci, 2007), and teachers' relationships with students (Raths & McAninch, 2003). Fives and Buehl (2012) suggest beliefs have four characteristics: beliefs (a) can be both implicit and explicit, (b) exist along a continuum of stability, (c) are generally context independent, and (d) are interwoven with knowledge. While many preservice teachers may hold implicit beliefs about ELLs, unbeknownst to them, these beliefs may become explicit when consciously brought up through coursework or other experiences involving ELLs. Fives and Buehl (2012) maintain that while beliefs have "some degree of plasticity ... that will allow beliefs to change with experience and interactions," they also have "some degree of consistency" to avoid a "constant state of dynamic flux" (p. 475). In other words, beliefs can change, but this change is not instant and requires time and effort. Though context can affect beliefs, Fives and Buehl (2012) posit that beliefs are within the teacher, rather than the context, and that these beliefs move with the teacher. Finally, while it is difficult to differentiate beliefs from knowledge, "holding beliefs without knowledge and knowledge without beliefs is possible, and changes in one of these are not particularly meaningful" (Fives & Buehl, 2012, p. 477). Taken together, this research is based on a theoretical framework of beliefs that postulates that beliefs guide what a preservice teacher's expectations of ELLs are and that positive changes in beliefs through coursework can influence the preservice teachers as they enter classrooms with ELL students.

Various factors have been identified as influencing preservice teachers' beliefs about ELL students such as a teacher's background, experiences with diversity, and teacher preparation courses (Donato & Davin, 2018; Lucas, Villegas, & Martin, 2015; Smagorinsky et al., 2004). As Donato and Davin (2018) point out, the history-in-person impacts a teacher's approach to the classroom, and any change to practice must acknowledge and address this history. Yet at the same time, when beliefs are derived from a variety of experiences, a conflict between various beliefs may emerge (Smagorinsky et al., 2004). Along with experiences, a teacher's ethnicity and

language abilities (i.e., bilingualism) have been found to affect beliefs toward ELLs and ELL teaching (Flores & Smith, 2009; Garrity, Aquino-Sterling, Van Liew, & Day, 2018). Using survey data collected from 564 teachers, Flores and Smith (2009) determined that ethnicity significantly influenced beliefs about ELLs, with Hispanics yielding more positive beliefs than their White counterparts. Within this group, Hispanics who were bilingual tended toward more positive beliefs than those who were monolingual. Similar findings have been reported by Garrity et al. (2018) in terms of beliefs about bilingualism and bilingual education. While bilingualism has been found to be an important influence for positive beliefs in many studies, not all have found it to be a significant predictor (Bernstein et al., 2018).

Studies have also demonstrated that beliefs are influenced by experiences with diversity such as encounters with persons from varied cultural backgrounds (Fitts & Gross, 2012; Merryfield, 2000; Milner, 2005) and international travel (Milner, 2005). These experiences are fundamental to both initial belief development as well as belief change. Fitts and Gross (2012) found that tutoring ELLs was one particularly effective experience for influencing preservice teachers' beliefs. However, experiences with ELLs do not necessarily need to be face-to-face to be effective. Indirect experiences through digital stories and pen-pal programs have also been shown to be effective. Pappamihiel, Ousley-Exum, and Ritzhaupt (2017) reported that preservice teachers' beliefs about ELL students were positively affected after viewing digital stories created by K-12 ELLs. Walker-Dalhouse, Sanders, and Dalhouse (2009) and Mahalingappa, Hughes, and Polat (2018) researched the effect of ELL pen-pal programs on preservice teachers. Results from both studies suggest that pen pal experiences with minorities fostered positive beliefs about ELLs and greater self-efficacy.

Given that there is believed to be "some degree of plasticity" (Fives & Buehl, 2012, p. 475) in regard to preservice teacher beliefs, and these beliefs are considered influential in the quality of instruction minority students receive (de Araujo, 2017; Kelly, 2018; Rizzuto, 2017), much research has been conducted on understanding and influencing preservice teachers' beliefs about ELLs through teacher preparation courses. Ortiz and Robertson (2018) outline various competencies preservice training should address including language and linguistics knowledge, cultural competence, and assessment and instructional skills, among others. Within these competencies Villegas, Saiz de La Mora, Martin, and Mills (2018) suggest that knowledge of language and linguistics and instructional practices for ELLs should receive specific attention.

Though older literature on course work's influence on changing preservice teacher beliefs suggest little effect on beliefs (Doolittle, Dodds, & Placek, 1993; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; McDiarmid, 1990; Peacock, 2001), more recent literature seems to point toward a consistent positive influence of coursework (Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000; Kolano & King, 2015; Lee, 2004; Lucas et al., 2015; MacDonald, Badger, & White, 2001). A review of the literature by Lucas et al. (2015) suggests that teachers who held ESL/bilingual credentials held significantly more positive beliefs than mainstream teachers, suggesting that extensive coursework preparation may be effective in fostering positive beliefs toward ELLs. However, many studies have found that even a single course can be effective in influencing the beliefs of mainstream teachers toward ELLs (Clark-Goff & Eslami, 2016; Kolano & King, 2015).

Using qualitative research methods, this research builds on the recent momentum of research geared toward understanding and influencing positive beliefs in mainstream preservice teachers toward ELLs. Specifically, this research looks to add to what we know about the factors that influence preservice teachers' beliefs and how coursework can work to change those beliefs. The four principles proposed about beliefs by Fives and Buehl (2012) would suggest that beliefs

are a very individualized construct, making a qualitative inquiry an appropriate method for exploring how this individualized construct forms and changes with preservice teachers. We believe that examining these areas together is critical for improving preservice teacher outcomes and future instructional quality for ELLs in U.S. schools.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study include twenty-three preservice teachers in a preservice teacher preparation program in a university in the southern United States. Participants were interviewed in one of six focus group sessions that were conducted by the first author over two semesters, fall and spring of an academic year. The focus groups were held at the end of each semester. Information about the participants in each of the focus group sessions can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Focus Group Participant Information (N = 23)

Focus Group	Semester	Male	Female	Total
1	1	2	2	4
2	1	0	5	5
3	1	1	2	3
4	2	0	3	3
5	2	0	4	4
6	2	0	4	4

During their participation in this study, the participants were enrolled in Second Language Instruction and Assessment and/or Assessment of English Language Learners. All three Bachelor of Science degree plans in Interdisciplinary Studies require the Second Language Instruction course, while two of the three require the Assessment of ELLs course. Focus groups one through three were conducted during the fall semester. Four participants in focus group one were simultaneously taking both courses. The second group was comprised of five participants who were taking Assessment of English Language Learners course, and the third group of three participants came from the Second Language Instruction and Assessment course. Focus groups four through six were conducted during the spring semester. The fourth and sixth focus groups had three and four participants, respectively, who were all enrolled in separate sections of the Second Language Instruction and Assessment course. The fifth focus group was comprised of four participants taking the Assessment of ELLs course.

Second Language Instruction Courses

Participants in the study were enrolled in at least one of two second language instruction courses: Second Language Instruction and Assessment or Assessment of English Language Learners. Second Language Instruction and Assessment is a required course in the teacher preparation program. The course focuses on how to instruct ELLs in the classroom. Students learn ways to modify lessons to help the ELLs that they will teach. Some instructors pair their students with an ELL during the semester or partner the students with classes in local schools, and some do not. Assessment of English Language Learners course is required for some, but not all degree

plans. The course builds on the previous course described above, focusing on documentation and assessment procedures in ELL instruction. Students learn how to document growth of ELLs' academic performance by learning to design and use rubrics, portfolios, and personal anecdotes.

Researcher Positionality

“In qualitative inquiry, the person...is the instrument of inquiry. The inquirer's skills, experience, perspective, and background matter” (Patton, 2015, p. 33). The first author conducted all of the focus group interviews. As a female Caucasian American, the researcher comes from a background that is seemingly very similar to many of the participants. Like most of them, she is a native Texan. She completed her BS in Education just as the participants were seeking to do. And like many of them plan to do, she has taught early childhood and primary students in Texas' public schools. Her expectation was that they would be comfortable in sharing their beliefs with her because she appears to be very much like them.

Yet it was also recognized that some disadvantages exist with the first author conducting the interviews herself. Her role as a researcher, for example, creates an unequal power differential. They may view her as an outsider rather than a peer, which could have limited their responses. This is compounded by her higher level of education which might have caused them to view her more like they view their instructors rather than an equal. Furthermore, being somewhat older than them might have inhibited the participants from sharing openly and fully. The first author sought to overcome these issues by increasing their comfort level through allowing them the support of their peers and also by creating a casual environment in the interviews through snacks and conversations that preceded the interviews.

Overall, the first author found that conducting the interviews herself had much greater advantages than enlisting and training a college student would have had. She was able to interact with the participants personally, so she was able to gain a feel of the tone of the interviews and openness or reservation of the participants. She was also able to take steps to make the participants feel comfortable and safe in sharing their beliefs. Furthermore, she had the freedom to follow the flow of the discussion rather than a regimented script so that she could maximize interaction with the participants.

Data Collection

Focus group interviews were used to collect data in this study. Seven questions developed based on previously reported survey results (Clark-Goff & Eslami, 2016) were used during the interviews to stimulate discussion (Table 2). Different questions were emphasized depending on the group and the flow of the interviews. Questions were also added that emerged based on the participants' conversations. Interviews were held in a small, quiet, centrally located conference room in the primary education building on campus and lasted approximately one hour. With participant approval, all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Table 2*Focus Group Questions*

Have you taken ‘Second Language Instruction and Assessment’ or ‘Assessment of ELLs’?
If you were advising the leadership of the College of Education, what would your insight be regarding these two courses for the benefit of future students? Keep? Get rid of? Change? Are they valuable?
How do you think those classes will influence your future teaching?
Did you work with an ELL this semester? Tell us about that experience.
How did your ESL methods class prepare you or not prepare you for working with the ELL? For teaching in your future classroom?
How have your beliefs about ESL, teaching ESL students, and language learning changed this semester?
What has influenced those beliefs?

Data Analysis

The transcribed focus group interviews were analyzed using the constant-comparative method to determine themes within the interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Glaser and Strauss (1999) introduced this approach to data analysis which, as indicated by its name, continuously draws comparisons between incidents and categories until a theory is evident. The goal is to “construct categories or themes that capture some recurring pattern” (Merriam, 1998, p. 179).

Merriam (1998) pointed out several steps that are inherent to the constant-comparative method and were used in the qualitative data analysis of the present study. Analysis is actually a continuous process beginning in the data collection phase. After data collection, this unfolding and ongoing analysis requires re-reading transcripts. During this review, the researcher marks the transcripts with comments and notes. These markings are thereafter grouped and categorized, with categories reflecting the research’s purpose. After categories are established, the researcher reviews the transcripts in light of the established categories. It is from these categories that the researcher is able to evaluate descriptively, as well as interpret the data by making inferences, drawing conclusions, and developing theories. As Merriam succinctly explains, “when categories and their properties are reduced and refined and then linked together by tentative hypotheses, the analysis is moving toward the development of a theory to explain the data’s meaning” (p. 192).

Results**RQ1: What Factors Influence Preservice Teachers’ Beliefs about English Language Learning?**

The first objective in this research was to identify factors that influence preservice teachers’ beliefs about English language learning. The focus group interviews shed light on several factors influencing preservice teachers’ beliefs that emerged from the interview as themes through the use of the constant-comparative analysis method.

Instructors. Many interview participants addressed the powerful role of their instructors in affecting their beliefs. As Jessica (pseudonyms used) explained, “Professors have a whole lot to do with [our beliefs], especially in something so vital as [teaching ELLs]. This is important stuff.” Jessica voiced the feelings of many of the students interviewed who felt that the professor helped

raise their awareness about the challenges ELLs face and the importance of being prepared as educators to support ELLs in the classroom. The impact of professors seemed to be particularly salient for students attending classes with non-native English speaker teachers (NNESTs). Two of the interview groups volunteered that having a NNEST enhanced their class experience. Jana explained why having a NNEST as an instructor was impactful: "She [the instructor] knows the perspective of learning English. It really helps us who don't have that knowledge of acquiring another language fluently, but she tells us her experiences in it, when she'd try to learn English." As Patricia explained, "It was nice to actually hear firsthand accounts of the experience." Given that most of the participants do not have personal experiences of learning a second language, hearing the experiences of NNESTs who had mastered this challenging feat seemed to be influential for them.

Classroom/Social Interaction. Throughout the interviews, participants addressed the variety of course experiences that affected their beliefs about English language learning and teaching. Group projects were reported to be effective in student learning. As Karen reported, "One of the things we did was ... a group project where we had to make a whole lesson plan and teach a core subject ... That was really beneficial because you have to use the strategies that we learned ... and then ... watch other groups go. So I really learned a lot through the class." One focus group emphasized the contribution international student guest speakers had brought to their class. Members found guest speakers who gave firsthand accounts of their experiences to be beneficial. Furthermore, videos that instructors incorporated into their courses increased understanding. As Eleanor said, the videos "struck your heart, and you would understand [language learners'] situation." The struggles of being a language learner in U.S. schools were new to many of the participants, so videos, such as this one, exposed them to a perspective of which they were previously unaware.

Experience working with ELLs. Pervasive among the interviewees was the discussion that hands-on experience was irreplaceable in its impact on their beliefs about English language learning and teaching. Such experiences allowed the preservice teachers to work with ELLs in a variety of different forms such as thirty-minute tutoring sessions with local public school students or working in the university's English Language Institute, which is designed to assist international students in strengthening their English skills so they can succeed in the university classroom. Patricia explained, "Before I'd just been like 'Oh my gosh, they don't speak English. Oh my gosh, I can't deal with that.' But now ... I've seen that and they are helpable ... I'm a lot more at ease with helping an ELL student now." Patricia's comments echo those of many preservice teachers who perceive the lack of English proficiency of some students as a burden, a responsibility in which they feel both ill-equipped and, perhaps, ill-willed to take on as future public school teachers. However, interview participants often cited experiences with ELLs in public schools and the university's English Language Institute as the most pivotal element to their personal growth in the courses in that these experiences showed them that ELLs are eager to learn, and the preservice teachers have the ability to help them.

RQ2: How Do Preservice Teachers' Pre-Existing Beliefs about Second Language Learning and Teaching Change after Second Language Instruction Coursework?

A second goal of this research study was to investigate how preservice teachers' beliefs change after taking ESL classes. Themes detected through constant-comparative qualitative

analysis of interviews show that the preservice teachers experienced belief change in the following areas: (a) language and language learning, (b) locus of responsibility for teaching, and (c) views of ELL students.

Beliefs about Language and Language Learning. Some participants expressed increased understanding of the value of the native language for English language acquisition while other participants maintained beliefs that first language use by parents may detract from English learning. A tension between old beliefs, supportive of English-only monolingual environments both at home and in school, and new beliefs, which acknowledged the value of bilingualism and, specifically, first language use in the home, was exemplified in several interviews. Megan, for example, said, “I think a lot of it depends on what side the parent is on—whether they’re encouraging their student [to learn English] or whether they’re trying to keep them from learning the language because they don’t want them to assimilate.” Though Megan does not explicitly call for a monolingual environment in the home, her words suggests she maintains a belief that some parents may have reason to discourage their child’s English development, possibly through their use of the first language at home or through other cultural means. While beliefs, such as those expressed by Megan, about parents and language learning were reminiscent of the predominant monolingual ideologies many preservice teachers held before engaging in ESL courses, other interviewees showed the development of new beliefs that emphasized the importance of the first language in maintaining the familial culture and not as a barrier for English learning. For example, Jana reported, “I think it’s important for the parents to still talk their native language, because if you don’t and you still have family in that other country you are losing that identity.” Julie emphasized the teachers’ role in encouraging first language usage in the home as a way to support English learning in school. She explained, “We should encourage them to read in their home language and talk to their family, and we’re supposed to encourage parents to do that.” Course work seemed to help many of the preservice teachers evolve their thinking on the role of culture and the first language as one that supports, rather than detracts, from English language learning in school.

Beliefs about the Locus of Responsibility for Second Language Learning and Teaching. Many preservice teachers seem to enter ESL coursework with the incorrect assumption that the responsibility for teaching ELLs falls on an ESL teacher, not a mainstream teacher. As a result, these future teachers have rarely considered what may be involved in successful ELL instruction in a mainstream classroom. These beliefs seemed to shift as evidenced by interviewees’ mentions about their ability to “effectively instruct ELLs,” and the coursework seemed to be pivotal in guiding participants’ expectations for successfully teaching ELLs. The initial anxiety of “how do I help [ELLs]” is contrasted with some consolation that they learned strategies and had training in their ESL coursework to be successful in their future classrooms. Natalie verbalized this juxtaposition in her statement, “Well I think ... that it’s really intimidating [teaching ELLs] and it’s something you can’t really know until you put it into practice but...once you get thrown into that situation [of teaching ELLs] you’ll make it work and we’ll use everything we learned.” In contrast, coursework left a few like Sue with a concern that they might not be fully equipped to teach ELLs or be effective in that role, “I’m starting to wonder if I’m going to be prepared to do it or not. That’s a lot of responsibility to teach the ELLs, and I don’t want to deny them the same experience all the other students have.” However, this emerged realization and awareness a few students revealed can also be interpreted as the participants’ recognition of the importance of

properly educating ELLs, specifically in the acknowledgment and desire to provide ELLs with an equal educational experience as experienced by native English-speaking students.

Further, the interviews revealed a shift toward the recognition of mainstream teachers' responsibilities for teaching ELLs in their classes. The increased belief that they, as mainstream teachers, will be responsible for teaching ELLs and need to learn how to teach them emerged in the interviews. Kim shared, "I didn't realize how much ... the primary [mainstream] teacher needs to know about that." Margaret reiterated this expectation of ELLs in the mainstream classes and underscored her belief in the importance of mainstream teachers learning to teach ELLs: "You just can't push them off into a corner and pretend they're not there ... They're going to be there and need to know, we really do need to know [how to teach ELLs]."

Views about English Language Learners. In the interviews, participants indicated a belief that ELLs are no more prone to be behavior problems than native English speakers. They believed that behavior problems in ELLs could often stem from a lack of understanding of cultural differences. As Sarah learned, "When you're coming from another country there's a different culture and there's a different view on how a classroom goes and how things are handled ... And so there could be problems with that." Further, before coursework participants slightly agreed that "grammatical errors always require correction," relaying a belief that a lack of grammatically correct language use by English learners suggests a learning deficiency. Yet after coursework they disagreed with such sentiments as Kara explained, "What we've learned is if it hinders communication then that's what needs to be corrected. But if you can understand them and obviously they're learning, then that's what's most important." This shows a shift in beliefs that ELLs, despite imperfect language use, are able to learn in the classroom and marks a gravitation away from deficit beliefs about ELLs arising from monolingual standards.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to explore the factors that cultivate differences of beliefs among preservice mainstream teachers and also to investigate how beliefs change through related coursework. Interviewees commonly believed that being exposed to ELLs experiences and working with them and course experiences that gave them access to practical tools they could use in instructing ELLs positively impacted their beliefs and self-efficacy in working with ELLs. This underscores Fitts and Gross' (2012) and Merryfield's (2000) assertion that personal encounters with diverse individuals helps to prepare teachers for diversity and that field experience is highly valuable to the change process, herein specifically influencing student teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning. The present study involved a population that lacked exposure to diversity. Therefore, exposure to diverse populations facilitated a positive shift of beliefs and, at times, a conflict between old and new beliefs as has been shown in previous literature (Smagorinsky et al., 2004). The present study echoes the recommendation of various studies that teacher education programs increase their relevance by offering experiences with diverse populations (Fitts & Gross, 2012; Mahalingappa et al., 2018; Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009).

As far as ESL coursework and belief change, the findings indicated a positive overall change in the alignment of preservice teacher beliefs with research-based practices and course instruction, most specifically in regard to beliefs toward first language use and communicative, versus grammar-based, teaching practices. This finding is consistent with Lucas et al. (2015) who underscore the value of teacher education in increasing confidence of teachers. Influential

components of coursework include instructors who share personal experiences of teaching language learners or as language learners themselves, videos that display the experiences of language learners, and experiential projects where learned teaching strategies could be applied. These types of experiences seem to indicate a strong, positive shift in the acceptance of ELLs. Interviews indicated that after coursework preservice teachers saw ELLs and their linguistic differences as more of an asset than as a deficit. This finding further supports the value of teacher preparation in moving preservice teachers beyond the societal deficit myths.

Among the broader body of beliefs research, the present study joins the growing collection of empirical studies that evidences the positive influence of teacher education. This study is consistent with the general body of educational research that demonstrates belief change is possible for preservice teachers (Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000; Kolano & King, 2015; Lee, 2004; Lucas et al., 2015; MacDonald et al., 2001). Our findings underscore the value of teacher preparation as one way to instigate belief change. In addition, given that beliefs have been shown to influence ELL instruction (de Araujo, 2017), there is a need for preservice teachers to identify their beliefs and look at them as they align to the pedagogical and curricular dimensions of the disciplines in which they intend to work. Focused group discussions similar to focus group interviews in this study, for example, can encourage reflection and allow students to better digest concepts taught in class and think about course material from various perspectives. An examination of a teacher's history-in-person, as recommended by Donato and Davin (2018), may also assist in belief identification and change. As McAllister and Irvine (2000) explain, teaching effectiveness of teachers of diverse students begins with their awareness of their own worldview.

Based on these findings regarding factors impacting beliefs, it is recommended that teacher educators of second language instruction courses invoke a variety of approaches to increase preservice teacher awareness and confidence by exposing them to ELLs' perspectives and providing them with opportunities to engage in instruction of ELLs as part of their course requirements. Our research shows that relevant coursework informed by research in the field of second language learning and teacher beliefs is a positive step towards preparing mainstream teachers to work with ELLs insofar as it challenges preservice teachers to re-evaluate misconceptions about ELLs, cultivates positive beliefs about ELLs, and helps raise awareness about the responsibilities of mainstream teachers to teach all learners. The findings also indicate that, although beliefs are highly resistant to change, it is possible to change them through effective course-related experiences. Research shows teachers need to adopt a positive set of beliefs to be able to successfully facilitate the inclusion and achievement of ELLs (Pettit, 2011).

Furthermore, the findings of this study strongly underscore the value of field experiences with ELLs. Based on this study, it is strongly recommended that future ESL coursework include a field experience dimension as part of the course design. A second recommendation is that instructors with experience learning another language and with knowledge and teaching experience of ESL be tapped for instruction of ESL teacher preparation coursework. It is also suggested that these instructors incorporate personal stories of language learning into their teaching to help preservice teachers identify with what is often an unfamiliar perspective, a practice that the preservice teachers in this study acknowledged as impactful.

While this study offers much for the improvement of teacher preparation programs, there are some limitations in this study that must be taken into consideration. One limitation is the usual limitation associated with self-reported data. We must recognize that there is not always an exact correspondence between what participants say they believe and what they actually do in the classroom. Also, an examination of the beliefs and approaches of the instructors who were teaching

these courses were not explored. As asserted by Olson and Jimenez-Silva (2008), the beliefs and background of instructors will surely influence the way material is portrayed. This study could have been further strengthened by conducting multiple focus groups at different times throughout the course in order to document the qualitative change of beliefs within the preservice teachers. Future studies may also consider including focus groups of preservice teachers not enrolled in ESL courses to act as a comparison group.

Conclusion

The disparity between the teaching force and the student population of current classrooms demands the preparation of all teachers to teach ELLs. Yet adequate preparation of these educators depends on insight into the beliefs that preservice teachers carry with them to the classroom and the factors that may influence those beliefs. These beliefs are critical in their impact on teacher behavior and teacher expectations of ELLs. The findings of this research are valuable for informing teacher educators and shaping teacher preparation programs.

By gaining an understanding of what mainstream preservice teachers believe and what factors influence those beliefs, teacher education will be better informed as to its audience and their needs. Ultimately, further research such as this study can pave the way for better prepared preservice teachers who will promote educational success for the increasing numbers of English language learners in the United States.

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