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Discipline orientations of pre-service teachers before and after student teaching

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Discipline orientations of pre-service teachers before and after student teaching

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This study examined the classroom discipline orientations of pre-service elementary teachers both before and after the student teaching experience. Prior to beginning and immediately after completing their full-time student teaching experience, pre-service teachers (N = 220) from three southeastern universities in the USA completed a discipline belief instrument which identified their preferred model of classroom discipline. The results showed that the student teaching experience significantly increased beginning teachers’ preferences toward a more assertive discipline model (Rules and Consequences) and decreased their preferences toward the humanistic discipline model (Relationship–Listening). These results demonstrate that the student teaching experience may be creating a dissonance in prior knowledge and beliefs, and experiences of pre-service teachers in classrooms. The results of the study suggest that teacher education programs can help pre-service teachers transition more smoothly into classroom teaching by providing a school–university partnership as well as more lessons and advice on handling specific classroom management situations.

Keywords: teacher thinking and knowledge; theories of teaching

Introduction

As the student population becomes increasingly diverse in the USA, the mission of preparing effective teachers is becoming more challenging for teacher education programs (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Whitney, Golez, Nagel, & Nieto, 2002). Several studies (Fuller, 1969; Huberman, 1992; Pigge & Marso, 1997; Sabar, 2004; Smith, 2000; Watzke, 2003) indicated that beginning teachers rank classroom management as their number one teaching concern, and that they feel poorly prepared in the area of classroom management (Clement, 2002; Jones, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Meister & Melnick, 2003; Pilarski, 1994). Teacher education programs are intended to help prospective teachers develop significant theoretical and practical knowledge and learn to use that knowledge to make their decisions in classrooms (Meuwissen, 2005). However, most pre-service teachers perceive an incongruity between teacher preparation and actual classroom teaching (Clement, 2002; Flores, 2006; Jones, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Pilarski, 1994; Stoughton, 2007; Whitney, Golez, Nagel, & Nieto, 2002).
Feiman-Nemser (2001, p. 1026) asserts that “new teachers have two jobs – they have to teach and they have to learn to teach.” Beginning teachers’ entering beliefs regarding teaching and learning may not always be compatible with realities of schools and classrooms (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Flores, 2006; Stoughton, 2007; van den Berg, 2002). Prospective teachers need opportunities to examine critically their previously established beliefs so that these beliefs can be developed or amended (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Research on teacher beliefs during the pre-service period of teaching preparation remains a major focus for those wishing to understand, educate, and train beginning teachers. Therefore, this study attempted to document changes in beliefs about discipline as a result of the situation-specific student teaching experience.

Background

Brown and Cooney (1982) define beliefs as time- and context-specific dispositions to actions. The study of teachers’ beliefs is an important aspect of educational research (Pajares, 1992) because these beliefs influence teachers’ behavior in the classroom (Brown & Cooney, 1982; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Nespor, 1987). In general, individually held beliefs are resistant to change (Brown & Cooney, 1982; Lewis, 1990; Nespor, 1987; Posner, Strike, Hewson, & Gertzog, 1982; Wilson, 1990); however, these beliefs constantly interact with and are filtered by social, cultural, and institutional environments (van den Berg, 2002). Pajares (1992) asserts that beliefs might be replaced when they are either challenged, proven unsatisfactory, or cannot be assimilated into existing conceptions. When individuals are not satisfied with existing beliefs, they search for new plausible beliefs (Posner et al., 1982). When newly acquired beliefs are tested and found effective, then accommodation of new beliefs occurs (Pajares, 1992).

Pre-service teachers’ educational beliefs come primarily from their families (Kennedy, 1995; Wolfgang, 2001) and their experiences as students (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Nespor, 1987; Rimm-Kaufman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta, & LaParo, 2006). These beliefs are well established by the time students enter teacher education programs (Clark, 1988; Nespor, 1987; Wilson, 1990). Pre-service teachers tend to hold idealistic and naive beliefs about the classroom environment (File & Gullo, 2002; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2006) and being an effective teacher (Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, & Minor, 2001; Pajares, 1992). However, these beliefs might be challenged and subsequently altered once the novice teacher begins teaching in an actual classroom (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Flores, 2006; Stoughton, 2007). Van den Berg (2002) indicated that teachers’ personal beliefs about the educational process can be in conflict with characteristics of school context. Several school factors such as externally imposed objectives with regard to “good teaching” (van den Berg, 2002), unclear expectations regarding teachers’ role (Kelchtermans, 1999), and students who appear to be less disciplined and less motivated (Hargreaves, 1997) can elicit concerns and doubts about being an effective teacher.

Studies investigating the progression of pre-service teachers’ beliefs regarding classroom management and discipline reported mixed results. Some studies indicated that personal beliefs remain unchanged at the end of teacher education programs and the student teaching experience (Kagan, 1992; O’Loughlin, 1991; Tatto, 1996). Others found that pre-service teachers often become more authoritarian and less idealistic at the end of their student teaching experience (File & Gullo, 2002; Flores, 2006; Huffman, Holifield, & Holifield, 2003; Pigge & Marso, 1997). The conflicting results demonstrate that further exploration of pre-service teachers’ discipline beliefs is warranted.
In a recent qualitative study with 14 participants, Flores (2006) found that beginning teachers develop their teaching methods according to individual perspectives accompanied by a shift from a more inductive and student-centered approach to a more traditional, teacher-centered one. File and Gullo (2002) interviewed 119 pre-service teachers at the beginning and end of a teacher education program and examined the differences in their beliefs about classroom management. The study showed that student teachers near the end of the program were more likely to advocate the use of assertive classroom management strategies such as time-out and external reward systems, as opposed to child-centered methods. Thus, the priorities and beliefs of pre-service teachers appear to shift throughout their teacher education programs.

**Discipline models**

Wolfgang (1999, 2001) described teacher behavior toward achieving student desist across a continuum (see Figure 1). Along this continuum from minimum to maximum power and control, teachers move through three phases of discipline models: Relationship–Listening (RL); Confronting–Contracting (CC); and Rules and Consequences (RC).

Rooted in the humanistic view of child development, the Relationship–Listening model embraces the idea that a student’s behaviors are shaped by inner forces and that the student has the capability to change his or her behavior. Similar to Gordon’s *Teacher effectiveness training* (1974), this model involves minimal use of control and power. The intervention includes nonverbal cueing, such as looking and naming, and nondirective statements. The teacher explains to the student how the student’s action is blocking the teacher’s ability to teach, with a minimal expression of guilt, and projects optimism that the student will change the behavior. Successful resolution of this student–teacher relationship disequilibrium is dependent upon the warmth, empathy, and communication established prior to the clash (Wolfgang, 1999, 2001).

Based on social learning theories, the Confronting–Contracting model maintains that the child develops from the interaction of inner and outer forces. With moderate levels of teacher control, this model is similar to Dreikurs’ *Social discipline model* (Dreikurs & Cassel, 1972) and Glasser’s *Control theory* (1986). The Confronting–Contracting model evidences an escalated expression of power compared with the Relationship–Listening model. The intervention usually involves questioning and counseling. The teacher does not hesitate to confront the student directly by naming the student’s action as unacceptable. As a result, the student is challenged to consider cognitively and behaviorally how s/he may change his or her behavior to desist the disruptive actions. The student is expected to reflect cognitively on the offending

![Figure 1. Teacher behavior continuum (adapted from Wolfgang, 1999, 2001).](image-url)
actions for future change. An agreement or contract established between the teacher and the misbehaving student may often include a verbal commitment for future cooperation (Wolfgang, 1999, 2001).

Finally, the Rules and Consequences is a behaviorist model based on the belief that the child develops as a result of external conditioning. With high levels of teacher control, this model is similar to those of Canter and Canter (1992) and Jones (1987). The intervention in this model involves assertive and powerful techniques, such as directive statements, acting, and modeling. This model embraces the concept that the classroom belongs to the teacher, who establishes rules and consequences for the purpose of obtaining and maintaining order. The teacher praises and reinforces students that comply with classroom rules and punishes or applies negative consequences for misbehaviors (Wolfgang, 1999, 2001).

Wolfgang (1999) suggests that as children cannot all be disciplined in the same way, teachers cannot all be forced to use a single approach to discipline. The type of discipline model a teacher uses may depend on his/her personality, years of experience in the classroom, or the grade level they teach (Wolfgang, 1999). For example, for beginning teachers, the establishment of classroom rules and rituals and survival in the classroom without discipline problems are crucial, whereas maturing teachers tend to be more concerned about what is best for the student (Wolfgang, 2001). Wolfgang (1999) also recommends that teachers build their own discipline model depending on the projection of power and control and autonomy they are willing to give to students when setting limits. Furthermore, Tomal (2001) emphasizes that teachers might need to use varying degrees of discipline, depending upon each individual situation. Therefore, student teachers need to understand the variety of discipline styles available so that they can interact effectively with students and manage discipline problems (Jones & Vesilind, 1995; Tomal, 2001; Wolfgang, 2009).

Previous research has demonstrated that teachers vary in their preference for the three orientations (Relationship–Listening, Confronting–Contracting, and Rules and Consequences) (Lourdusamy, Divaharan, Huan, & Wong, 2001; Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, Filer, Collins, & Moore, 2003; Schiffler, 2003; Witcher et al., 2008; Wolfgang, 1999). Some studies found that teachers equally embrace the assertive model of Rules and Consequences and the social model of Confronting–Contracting (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2003; Witcher et al., 2008). Others indicated that most teachers lean toward the Rules and Consequences model (Lourdusamy et al., 2001; Schiffler, 2003). The common finding in these studies was that the Relationship–Listening model was the least popular discipline model. Onwuegbuzie and colleagues (2003) stated that pre-service teachers are more likely to prefer the Relationship–Listening model and less likely to prefer the Rules and Consequences model compared with in-service teachers. Furthermore, teachers at the secondary level are more likely to prefer the Rules and Consequences model compared with their elementary-level counterparts (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2003; Wolfgang, 1999). None of the studies mentioned above followed the changes in preferred discipline models of pre-service teachers as a result of full-time student teaching experience. This study surveyed pre-service teachers’ beliefs at two time periods during the teacher training purpose, before and immediately after student teaching.

Two research questions regarding pre- and post-student teaching were framed for this study: (1) What are the discipline orientations of pre-service teachers in training prior to the student teaching experience? (2) Do discipline orientations of pre-service teachers in training change after they complete student teaching?
Method

Context

Once they’ve successfully completed their coursework, elementary education undergraduates are typically required to participate in a formal internship in actual school classrooms. The internship is considered a culminating experience that applies various elements of basic studies and professional education to actual classroom teaching. During this experience, student teachers apply theoretical knowledge from university courses in realistic professional settings. Generally identified as “student teaching” or “practicum” in a teacher preparation program, the internship aims to prepare student teachers for full-time teaching. Throughout their internship, student teachers are expected to demonstrate competency in practices such as human development and learning, communication, diversity, ethics, knowledge of subject matter, and learning environment.

Typically, student teachers are placed with experienced teachers who have completed clinical educator training and who have been identified by their principals as having successful classroom management strategies. Cooperating teachers share instructional materials, information about the student population, content to be taught, and school policies with interns. The first weeks of the semester are usually considered orientation, where student teachers are given few responsibilities and are expected to carefully observe and assist the cooperating teacher. Throughout the semester, the responsibilities of student teachers gradually increase. In the final stage of student teaching, interns are expected to teach a variety of subjects, prepare lesson plans, evaluate students’ work, and confer with the cooperating teacher daily. During this process, the university supervisor routinely observes and evaluates the student teachers. Cooperating teachers are also encouraged to evaluate interns and provide constructive feedback.

All participants in this study were enrolled in student teaching and guided by their university teacher education program. Although slight variations existed, the characteristics and sequencing of the student teaching experience were consistent across the board. The school context was not the focus of this study; however, all participants completed their internships in public elementary schools (grades K-6) in the counties where their universities were located. According to the latest census data, the three counties where the universities were located had populations between 264,000 and 910,000 and the following demographics: 64.5–85% White, 10–31% African American, 4–7% Hispanic, 2–3% Asian, and 2% “other” (US Census Bureau, 2009).

Participants

The sample consisted of 220 teacher candidates enrolled in elementary education programs at three different universities located in a southeastern state of the USA. The majority of participants were Caucasian (71%) females (82%), between the ages of 18 and 25 (96%), with teaching certification in process. Data were collected over three consecutive semesters by five elementary education professors who were also supervising the participants at their assigned schools. Elementary education programs in the three universities were similar in terms of course contents and applications. After completing similar, state-mandated pre-requisite courses, pre-service teachers all took courses in the areas of foundations, child development, exceptional students, English
for speakers of other languages (ESOL), and content (i.e., science). Course sequence spanned approximately two years upon entering the program. Prior to the full-time student teaching experience, pre-service teachers in all three universities also completed a course on classroom management, which emphasized management techniques, discipline models, ethics, and legal issues.

**Data collection**

To assess pre-service teachers’ beliefs on classroom discipline, this study utilized the Beliefs about Discipline Inventory, as developed by Glickman and Tamashiro (cited by Wolfgang & Glickman, 1986). The inventory has three subscales: Relationship–Listening; Confronting–Contracting; and Rules and Consequences (Wolfgang, 1999, 2001). It was administered at two specific points during the study: prior to entering the classroom for the student teaching experience and immediately following departure from the student teaching semester. Data were collected at the universities during meetings with the university supervisor. Subject anonymity was preserved through the implementation of numeric coding practices.

The inventory presented the participants with 12 dichotomous choices between two value statements representing one of three discipline-philosophical view points: (1) Relationship–Listening; (2) Confronting–Contracting; and (3) Rules and Consequences. The participants completing the inventory were forced to choose between two competing philosophical value statements and then to locate responses for each numbered question on the self-scoring record that was included with the inventory. The following are examples of the statements presented in the inventory:

1. a. Because students’ thinking is limited, rules need to be established for them by mature adults (Rules and Consequences).
   b. Each student’s emotional needs must be taken into consideration, rather than having some pre-established rule imposed on all (Relationship–Listening).

2. a. During the first class session of the new school year, the teacher needs to assign each student his or her own desk or table space, and the student should be taught routinely to take that space after transitions (Rules and Consequences).
   b. Groups of students can decide through a class meeting what rules they need to govern themselves (Confronting–Contracting).

Subscale scores for each of the three discipline models were obtained by tallying response scores in three sets of pairwise comparisons (RL, CC, and RC). These three sets of comparisons were each represented by four items where eight responses fell under each subscale. Therefore, scores on each subscale range from zero to eight. A score of zero on any subscale indicates that the individual does not endorse the underlying discipline model for any of the items. Conversely, a score of eight indicates that an inclination toward that discipline model is reaffirmed for every item. The subscale with the highest score indicates the preferred discipline model represented.

The validity and reliability of the Beliefs about Discipline Inventory was previously established. Glickman and Tamashiro (1980) field-tested the instrument with 124 teachers. The item discrimination ranged from 29–71%, which suggests good
item discrimination. For the theoretical consistency, the items were evaluated by teachers, curriculum specialists, and education professors (Glickman & Tamashiro, 1980). Recently, Witcher and colleagues (2008) reported the alpha reliability coefficients of subscales as 0.77 for Relationship–Listening, 0.80 for Confronting–Contracting, and 0.72 for Rules and Consequences. In this study, the three subscales generated the alpha reliabilities of 0.73, 0.84, and 0.76, respectively.

Data analysis
Descriptive statistics for the subscale scores of the Relationship–Listening, Confronting–Contracting, and the Rules and Consequences discipline models were reported both before and after the student teaching experience was completed. A series of paired sample t-tests was conducted to examine the differences among scores. The Bonferroni Adjustment was used to control for Type I error (Glass & Hopkins, 1996). The alpha was set to a more stringent level of 0.017 (0.05/3). There were no variations in scores among the different groups of pre-service teachers (i.e., different universities); therefore, group analyses were not necessary. Paired sample t-tests examined the differences among the subscale scores before and after student teaching, as well as differences within the same subscale score over time.

Results
Descriptive statistics of subscale scores for three discipline models before and after the full-time student teaching experience were presented in Table 1. Prior to full-time student teaching, the Relationship–Listening, Confronting–Contracting, and Rules and Consequences models received the average scores of 3.53, 4.06, and 4.41 respectively; at the end of full-time student teaching, the average scores were 2.89, 3.95, and 5.15 respectively.

Paired samples t-test results showed that, before student teaching, the average score for the Rules and Consequences model was significantly higher than for the Relationship–Listening model (see Table 2). The average score for the Confronting–Contracting model was also significantly higher than for the Relationship–Listening model. However, the scores for the Rules and Consequences and Confronting–Contracting models were not significantly different when the Bonferroni Adjustment was applied with the alpha level of 0.017 (p = 0.019). T-test results for the post-measurement of discipline model scores showed that there were significant differences between all three pairs of the subscale scores. In other words, the Rules and Consequences model had significantly higher average scores than the other two discipline models, and the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline model</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-RL</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-CC</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-RC</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-RL</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-CC</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-RC</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of pre- and post-measurement of subscale scores for the three discipline models.
Relationship–Listening model had significantly lower scores than the Confronting–Contracting model after student teaching. Paired samples t-test statistics of the changes in discipline model subscale scores over time are also displayed in Table 2. Results showed that there was a significant decrease in pre-service teachers’ preference for the Relationship–Listening model, whereas the Rules and Consequences model reflected a significant increase after completion of the student teaching experience. T-test statistics for the Confronting–Contracting model were not significant, indicating that the subscale score for this model remained steady at the completion of the student teaching.

Figure 2 shows the significant changes in the scores for the Relationship–Listening and Rules and Consequences discipline models over time. Both before and after student teaching, pre-service teachers clearly favored the Rules and Consequences model, while the Relationship–Listening model was their least favorite of the models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PreRL–PreCC</td>
<td>-0.54</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>-3.67</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PreRL–PreRC</td>
<td>-0.88</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>-4.40</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PreCC–PreRC</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>-2.37</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostRL–PostCC</td>
<td>-2.26</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>-14.02</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostRL–PostRC</td>
<td>-1.06</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>-9.44</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostCC–PostRC</td>
<td>-1.20</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>-9.38</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PreRL–PostRL</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PreCC–PostCC</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>0.200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PreRC–PostRC</td>
<td>-0.75</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>-5.89</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Means of subscale scores for the three discipline models by time.
However, the steepness of the post-measurement scores shows that the Relationship–Listening scores dropped even further and the Rules and Consequences scores increased significantly upon completion of the student teaching experience. The Confronting–Contracting scores, on the other hand, did not change significantly.

Discussion and conclusions

This study examined the changes in pre-service teachers’ views toward the three discipline orientations described by Wolfgang (1999, 2001) over the course of their full-time student teaching experience. Overall, the pre-service teachers in this study demonstrated considerable changes in their discipline model preferences upon completion of the full-time student teaching experience. At the beginning of student teaching, pre-service teachers almost equally embraced the Rules and Consequences and Confronting–Contracting models. After completion of the student teaching process, the scores of the more assertive and behaviorist model of Rules and Consequences increased significantly, while there was a corresponding and significant drop in the scores of the more humanistic model of Relationship–Listening. There was no notable change in the scores for the Confronting–Contracting model.

Similar to the findings of Witcher et al. (2008) and Onwuegbuzie et al. (2003), the results revealed that pre-service teachers are less likely to endorse tendencies that are consistent with the humanistic discipline model of Relationship–Listening. In other words, both at the beginning and end of the student teaching experience, pre-service teachers were less likely to believe that students should be allowed to make their own choices, to be in control of their own learning, and to be provided with maximum power to self-correct their inappropriate behaviors. This study presented similar findings as the previous research on the impact of classroom experience on individual orientations toward a more assertive and controlling discipline philosophy (File & Gullo, 2002; Flores, 2006; Huffman et al., 2003; Pigge & Marso, 1997). The current study was limited in terms of identifying the factors behind the shift toward a controlling discipline orientation. However, previous research suggests a few reasons for this shift.

Several studies have pointed out the broad influence of socio-cultural context of schools and classrooms on teachers’ beliefs and development (Flores, 2006; McKinney, Sexton, & Meyerson, 1999; van den Berg, 2002; Williams, Prestage, & Bedward, 2001). Van den Berg noted that “the classroom is a place where many things can happen very quickly, with unexpected twists and in the presence of many people” (2002, p. 601). Coupled with increasing demands and complex changes in student populations, teachers often experience stressful conditions. In addition to their primary responsibility to provide effective instruction, teachers are often expected to fulfill a wide range of other, sometimes conflicting, duties, including maintaining order in their classrooms, supporting the social and emotional development of their students, and meeting the expectations of both the school community and parents (which are often contradictory). Such conflicts can then give rise to new uncertainties and a decreased sense of autonomy for teachers (van den Berg, 2002). Brophy and McCaslin (1992) found that principals tend to rate teachers’ classroom management skills based on their ability to handle disruptive students. Beginning teachers are aware that the evaluation of their effectiveness will depend on how well they control behavior in their classroom, and these teachers are usually uneasy about their ability to perform successfully in this complex area (Stoughton, 2007). Therefore, the tendency to prefer a more controlling discipline
model could be due to pre-service teachers’ attempts to fulfill the expectations of school management or evaluators.

Another reason for the shift towards a more assertive discipline view could be the incongruity between theory and practice. Witcher et al. (2008) indicated that many teacher education programs focus on components, such as having subject expertise or being a competent instructor, whereas pre-service teachers regard classroom management over these components. Several studies revealed that pre-service teachers feel poorly prepared in the area of classroom management (Clement, 2002; Jones, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Meister & Melnick, 2003; Pilarski, 1994). It might be the case that the pre-service teachers in this study lacked a comprehensive understanding of various classroom management strategies, thereby accounting for the significant changes in preferred discipline management models after the completion of their student-teaching experience.

Previous research also highlights the influence of cooperating teachers (or mentors) on the pre-service teachers’ impression of classroom management (Moore, 2003). The nature of student teaching in this study, as described in the Context section, required student teachers to be placed with teachers who were identified by their principals as having successful classroom management skills. It is possible that these teachers may have had more assertive discipline styles, which may have resulted in the pre-service teachers being influenced by their cooperating teachers’ discipline orientations.

Results of this study might serve to spotlight possible recommendations for teacher education programs, specifically in the areas of teacher preparation as well as the integration of theory and practice. As established by previous research (Martin, 2005; Martin, Chiodo, & Chang, 2001; Meuwissen, 2005; Smith, 2000), the complexity of classroom dynamics and behavior management should not be underestimated; rather, it should be stressed by teacher education programs. As Stoughton (2007) indicates, behavior management is related closely to the classroom culture and influenced by the ethical values of the teachers as well as their commitment to working with children. Pre-service teachers need to realize the complexity of behavior intervention and, consequently, need to be open to a variety of ways to manage their classrooms, rather than only simplistic, one-dimensional management practices (Stoughton, 2007; Wolfgang, 1999, 2009). Therefore, perhaps more coursework on classroom management, along with practical application examples, would be beneficial in preparing teachers to create positive learning environments in their classrooms.

The initial stages of teacher development are critical. Throughout these stages, teacher educators may assist student teachers in their real-life experiences regarding discipline by combining practice and theory. Moore (2003) suggests that pre-service teachers may benefit from a “practice to theory” approach that emphasizes a reflective and systematic examination of many daily teaching and learning situations. Furthermore, teacher educators should provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to discuss openly any incongruities they identify between their teacher education programs and real classroom experiences, thereby allowing them to revisit their knowledge about the domains of teaching and learning (Meuwissen, 2005). Research indicates that beginning teachers feel unprepared once they enter a classroom, especially when confronted with handling disruptive students and students with special needs (Meister & Melnick, 2003; Smith, 2000). Therefore, it is recommended that teacher preparation programs focus more directly on these areas.
Finally, partnerships between schools and universities are crucial in closing the gaps between teacher education programs and classroom practices. Meuwissen (2005) and Moore (2003) recommend that opportunities for classroom teachers, university faculty, and pre-service teachers to convene and openly discuss learning situations are valuable experiences. By routinely examining and reflecting on real classroom situations, individuals with different experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives can help provide a vehicle for integration of theory and practice.

Future research might focus on the qualitative aspects of preferred discipline models at various stages of the teaching experience. The reasons for the shift toward an assertive discipline orientation might be identified through an in-depth analysis of pre-service teachers’ experiences during the student teaching process. Witcher and colleagues (2001) note that pre-service teachers should not only become aware of their discipline styles but should also be aware of factors underlying their discipline preferences. As Pajares (1992) asserted, belief inventories might be limited in terms of understanding the context-specific nature of the beliefs. Therefore, to capture these factors, professional interviews, journal entries, and reflective writings may be helpful for pre-service teachers to examine the reasons behind their personal discipline beliefs. Moreover, it would be worthwhile to explore the relationship among the teachers’ self-efficacy, their discipline beliefs, and their classroom practices. Finally, the discipline views and reflections of pre-service teachers should be compared to those of cooperating teachers in order to identify to what extent pre-service teachers’ discipline beliefs are influenced by their mentors.

In conclusion, this study showed that the beginning teachers become more assertive and controlling as a result of their actual classroom experience. The results indicate that time spent in field experience might facilitate a more realistic view of working with children and the classroom context. A dose of ‘real world’ teaching, per se, appears to significantly affect the pre-service teachers’ personal preferences for a classroom discipline model. Though it is assumed that their beliefs are unique and highly individual, this study shows they can be altered through real classroom experiences. Certainly, we can speculate on the contextual events precipitating change, which, we suspect, are as unique as each experience. Identifying the critical factors that serve as change agents could serve to enhance classroom management.

References


