

A Case Study of Self-Affirmations in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This qualitative study reports on what was learned from two former teacher candidates, who engaged in self-affirmation writing exercises in an education seminar during their final semester in a teacher education program. Self-affirmations, as presented here, are brief psychological interventions designed to enhance the self-integrity of teacher education candidates, so they can persist and overcome challenges and demands encountered during their field placement teaching assignments. The research questions guiding this inquiry are: a) to what degree do self-affirmations minimize stereotype threat among teacher candidates; b) in what ways do self-affirmations help candidates remain optimistic in their roles as teacher candidates; and c) how can candidates apply self-affirmation writing with their own secondary students? A central finding from this case study is that self-affirmation writing sustained the teacher candidates through the challenges they encountered during their field experience teaching. The research participants describe how self-affirmations helps them focus on their own positive inner voice, or whispering self, that encourages self-acceptance and a belief that they are good persons who care for themselves and others. Additionally, candidates apply, or envision how they might apply self-affirmation writing exercises in their own middle and high school classrooms.

Introduction

The present study grew out of a perceived need to support secondary teacher candidates, helping them cope more effectively with the pressure and stress associated with learning how to teach. Worthy (2005) noted that “teaching is a demanding job even with the best preparation and mentoring” (p. 382). The demands of teaching and learning how to teach can threaten a candidate’s feelings of personal adequacy and can reduce a desire to persist in teaching. On a macro level, this study evolved out of the need to counter the high rate of teacher attrition among beginning teachers (Craig, 2013; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001, 2002; Kelly, 2004; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009). On a micro level, this paper examines the emotional domain of two secondary candidates, who discussed the impact of self-affirmation writing in their teacher education coursework.

Learning to teach is more than merely acquiring knowledge and skills for lesson planning, instruction, assessment, and working productively with colleagues, administrators, and parents. It is more than teacher candidates modeling themselves upon their mentor teachers in their school-based field placements, and it is more than asking candidates to complete standardized performance assessments to measure their competence. Learning to teach is an ongoing reflexive inquiry into how to best build productive relationships, so students and teachers can grow intellectually and socially. Teaching is a professional endeavor, yet it is deeply personal and often emotionally charged for candidates who may at times become angry, confused, exhausted, frustrated, and overwhelmed with the many pressures and demands encountered in their school-based, field experiences and their ongoing course assignments.

This study explores self-affirmations (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988) as a tool for implementing essential elements of Invitational Theory and Practice (Purkey & Siegel, 2013). Self-affirmations invoke what has been termed--the *Whispering Self* (Purkey, 2000; Shaw, Siegel, & Schoenlein, 2013), as candidates engage in rich internal dialogues premised on respecting self and others, building trust within caring communities, and nourishing an optimistic, yet realistic perspective on their adequacy as prospective teachers. I will begin by introducing self-affirmations as an intentional frame upon which to establish an invitational stance with oneself and others.

Literature Review

Self-Affirmation Theory

Self-affirmations are a brief psychological intervention based on the idea that “people are motivated to maintain self-integrity” (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 336). Building on the seminal work of Claude Steele, Cohen and Sherman (2014) highlight the three principles of Self-Affirmation Theory as the need for children and adults to: a) perceive themselves as “good persons;” b) feel that they are adequate enough to be considered moral and adaptive within a given domain, and; c) “act in ways worthy of esteem or praise” (p. 336).

In the classroom, self-affirmations take the form of 10-minute writing exercises targeting desired values, such as the importance of feeling supported and loved. Reflective writing on positive values can minimize the negative impact of stereotype threat, which is “what happens when people from negatively stereotyped groups worry they may be judged or treated in terms of a stereotype, or might do something that would inadvertently confirm the stereotype” (D.M. Steele & G. Walton, personal communication, November 7, 2013).

Stereotype threat has been shown to decrease academic learning outcomes (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002; Taylor & Walton, 2011). Self-affirming writing exercises premised on desired values promote greater academic achievement for members of stereotyped groups, including female undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory physics course at the University of Colorado at Boulder (Miyake et al., 2010), African-American middle school students (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006), and others in marginalized groups in school contexts (Yeager, Walton, & Cohen, 2013). Additionally, recent brain research reveals that invoking positive emotions prior to engaging in higher level cognitive tasks, enhances subsequent performance by minimizing amygdalae firing that would otherwise inhibit prefrontal cortex neural activity required for higher-level thinking (Kagan, 2014).

Optimism

Incorporating self-affirmations in classrooms is consistent with Invitational Theory and Practice (Purkey & Novak, 2008), because affirmation writing is grounded in the intentional process of constructing inviting and inclusive learning environments centered on trust, respect, optimism, and care. The co-founder of Invitational Theory, William Purkey (2000) writes:

Even beyond what happens in the classroom, what teachers say to themselves about themselves is vital in itself. It has value regardless of whether or not it relates to their effectiveness as teachers. The teacher’s internal dialogue makes the difference between happiness and unhappiness in the classroom and in life (p. 58).

Completing affirmation writing exercises promotes a positive and realistic self-concept as teacher candidates may feel encouraged and valued through their own inner speech. Purkey (2000) suggests that

teachers engage in “positive self-talk about students... as able, valuable, and responsible” to create invitational learning environments (p. 59).

Purkey and Siegel (2013) point out that: “what people desire most is to be affirmed in their present worth, while being summoned to realize their potential” (p. 27). Maintaining an optimistic, yet realistic perspective about one’s abilities can be achieved through self-affirmations as individuals write about their core personal values and mitigate the potentially harmful effects of negative social stereotypes that pose psychological threat. For example, self-affirmations targeting an individual’s connections with family and friends may generate a sense of optimism and well being that can downplay defensiveness associated with negative socially held beliefs regarding their own identities. This can reduce the amount of anxiety and stress associated with the cognitive task and enhance academic achievement (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006).

Modeling Self-Affirmations

One widely accepted teacher preparation practice involves teacher educators modeling effective pedagogy that candidates can apply in their own K-12 classrooms (Jones & Jones, 2013; Wong & Wong, 2009). Modeling in the teacher education classroom sets the stage for candidates to imagine how they might apply what they are learning in their own field experience K-12 classrooms. Modeling instruction that generates supportive learning environments where candidates feel safe and valued is a vital pedagogical tool and an important means for developing conditions that foster mutual respect.

The application of self-affirmation writing in a teacher education course serves as a model instructional tool that candidates may adapt to foster students’ critical self-reflection and become more mindful of their ability to manage their own thoughts and actions. Applying self-affirmations in middle and high school classrooms may help students to persist in the challenges they encounter in their relationships with self and others as their neurological, cognitive, psychological, and social domains develop (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

Self-affirmation writing assignments, similar to the approach used in this study, have been noted as reducing academic achievement gaps among diverse groups of students in middle school (Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vauhns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009) and post-secondary classrooms (Miyake et al., 2010). If self-affirmations are effective with diverse learners in multiple educational contexts as noted in the research literature, then this study aims to understand the application of self-affirmations in a unique context—the teacher preparation classroom with the goal of decreasing new teacher attrition while simultaneously creating more inviting and thriving classroom learning environments with students and teachers moving toward self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

Methods and Methodology

Context and Participants

This current study took place in Hawaii after the author received formal approval from the Human Studies Program from his home institution. The two research participants, both female and 24 years of age, had recently completed a graduate-level initial licensure teacher education program. During the final semester of the program, one research participant engaged in a paid teaching internship at a public middle school, and the other participant held a non-paid teaching internship at a public high school. They also attended an education seminar in which they completed self-affirmation writing exercises. The research participants have been given the pseudonyms of Mary and Lisa in this paper to protect their privacy and to

maintain confidentiality. Mary and Lisa will also be referred to as teacher candidates, as well as research participants in this paper.

Self-affirmation writing prompts were created by Louise L. Hay (2000) and found on a mobile application (Oceanhouse Media, 2009). A sample prompt was: “I accept others as they are; and they, in turn accept me” (Hay, 2000). Each teacher candidate was asked to write about: a) how the affirmation makes you feel and why; b) to what degree the affirmation relates to your life; c) what you can do to achieve the desired affirmation outcome(s); or d) any combination of the above. They were given the option of putting their name on the paper and they could choose not to turn in their written response.

Mary earned secondary social studies teacher licensure, while Lisa completed requirements for a dual license in secondary mathematics and social studies. Mary had lived in Hawaii her entire life. On her father’s side, Mary was third generation Japanese-American, and on her mother’s side, she was fourth generation Japanese-American. Lisa was an Asian American of mixed ethnicity (Chinese, Native Hawaiian, and Japanese). She was born and raised in Hawaii and completed her undergraduate degree on the US mainland. The author is a white male teacher educator who moved to Hawaii from the US mainland eight years ago.

The author served as Mary and Lisa’s internship seminar instructor and field supervisor for the semester leading up to their graduation. Mary completed her teaching internship at a large Title I high school comprised mostly of students of Filipino descent. As a Title I school, more than 40% of the students were eligible for free or reduced price lunches, due to the low incomes of their families. Mary taught Participation in Democracy, US History, and Anthropology at a high school. Lisa’s internship was held in a Title I middle school enrolling many first generation immigrants. She taught mathematics for English Language Learners [ELL] at a middle school. Mary and Lisa, along with the other enrolled candidates, took part in self-affirmation writing exercises at each of the seminar meetings. Affirmation prompts were short, positive value statements regarding personal worth, such as caring for oneself and feeling supported by others.

Data Sources and Procedures

The participants volunteered to take part in two semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews, approximately 60 minutes in length after grades had been submitted for the internship seminar. As a result, participating in the research held no bearing on candidate academic outcomes in the teacher education course or program at-large. Interview guides (Patton, 1990) were developed to focus conversations. However, the use of the interview guides allowed participants to speak on related topics that they felt significant to their understanding of the topics under discussion. Generative dialogues took place during the semi-structured interviews, allowing the author to focus on topics and issues that were significant to the participants. In this manner, the author learned what the research participants were thinking (Galletta, 2013). Data consisted of direct and indirect quotes from research participant interviews.

Data Analysis

A constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) was used to identify thematic patterns from the interview transcriptions. Emerging themes from the first interview were member-checked by the research participants during the second interview. This design enabled participants to elaborate on and clarify issues introduced earlier. Since the emerging self-affirmation themes were authentic and credible to the lived experiences of the research participants, the findings and conclusions were more likely to be

trustworthy in the minds of readers (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). As proposed by Galletta (2013), “engaging my participants in clarification, generation of meaning, and critical reflection furthered my analysis of the data, increasing their depth and complexity” (p. 103). Finally, the paper was reviewed by the research participants prior to submission for publication to ensure that their voices were fairly and adequately represented in the text.

Findings

Findings are based on the lived experiences of the research participants who shared their thoughts and feelings regarding the affirmation writing exercises from the teacher education seminar. While responding to discussion guide prompts, participants offered critical reflections that were emotionally relevant to their lived experiences. The findings presented below are organized into recurrent themes based on participant feedback. Self-affirmation themes include: belonging, teacher identity, application, and intersection with Invitational Theory and Practice.

Belonging

Mary: When discussing stereotype threat, Mary spoke about her race and ethnicity as a Japanese-American teacher candidate. She went on to say that she incorporated her ethnicity in her high school social studies lessons. When asked to consider if her students may have stereotyped her as a woman of Japanese ancestry, Mary mentioned that they were surprised to learn that she could not speak Japanese. Mary continued that when she was teaching World War II and discussing the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that initiated US entry into the war, one of her students unexpectedly blurted out: “Why don’t you go back then?”

Mary felt offended and hurt from the “why don’t you go back then” comment. As a teacher candidate who expressed a strong desire to build caring and empathetic relationships with students premised on respect and trust, the aggressive and mean-spirited comment alienated her in the classroom. When the other students also sat in silence after the comment was raised, Mary could almost feel that she had been “Given Notice” to pack up and vacate, just as many Japanese-Americans was forced to do in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor in response to President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066. In Mary’s mind, the irony was that her great grandfather who was living in Hawaii at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack had, in fact, been given notice and deported to a Japanese internment camp on the US mainland in early 1942. He remained there for the duration of the war that caused him and his family personal suffering and hardships.

Lisa: Lisa saw herself as young, female, and Asian. She emphasized her youth and inexperience in teaching at this early stage of her career. Like Mary, Lisa wanted to build a caring and warm classroom community. She acknowledged her lack of teaching experience and the desire to improve. A critical incident during her internship occurred when she began a learning activity by asking her middle school students to change chairs and sit with someone who had the same home language for an upcoming learning activity. In response, one of the more vocal students was from Micronesia and began directing students to move to different locations in the room. Then he pointed out where he and another student from Micronesia would sit, by exclaiming: “and the cockroaches should sit over there.”

Lisa was shocked and caught off-guard by this disparaging remark. She felt that the fact that this student made fun of his own Micronesian identity might negatively impact his academic learning and social engagement in the classroom. Lisa wanted to build an ELL classroom community premised on trust whereby all individuals in the room cared for and respected themselves and one another regardless of their

race, ethnicity, and other identifying traits. As a young and inexperienced teacher, she was unsure of how to respond to the “cockroach” comment when it occurred. Lisa wanted to learn how to properly address this kind of hurtful language and decrease the likelihood of it from reoccurring.

Teacher Identity

Mary: Self-affirmation writing enabled Mary to vent her frustrations but also reflect on how far she had come in her teaching journey. One of the demands she faced during her internship was teaching out of her licensure field without much support from the high school’s administration. On one occasion, during her internship, she followed school policy by asking a student to put his cell phone away. The student replied “*expletive deleted*” in a sarcastic tone that was loud enough for her to hear. This remark caused Mary to question her own authority in the classroom. In Mary’s words: “the boy was angry, acting tough, and wanted his phone out. Maybe I had no business telling him to put his phone away.”

In response to challenging classroom management issues and the lack of administrative support during this out-of-field placement, Mary had this to say about the importance of self-affirmation writing:

As a teacher, you go through so much in a given day. Maybe you have issues with students, faculty, and assignments. Sometimes it is just good to vent, and share what you are going through such as how you have changed and how you have grown including setbacks you overcame to help improve the future.

For Mary, self-affirmation writing offered her an opportunity to reflect on the day’s events and consider how she had grown from the challenges she faced.

Lisa: As a self-described *young* teacher, Lisa sought ways to build connection and empathy in her classroom. She felt that the positive, optimistic nature of the affirmation statement was a way to build her confidence and ability as a teacher. According to Lisa, “whatever you shine a light on grows.” Focusing on the positive aspects of oneself creates a positive feedback loop further enhancing good feelings and actions.

Application of Self-Affirmations

Mary: Mary used self-affirmation writing with her students in her internship classroom, soon after being introduced to the assignments in the education seminar. She felt that the affirmation writing exercises were a good non-content break from her regular social studies assignments. “Kids like talking about themselves and what they have gone through,” Mary said. She prompted her high school students to write about what they could do to improve their course grades as well as writing about accepting themselves and recognizing others who cared for and supported them.

Self-affirmation prompts, according to Mary, could be created that were consistent with values that underlie the social studies curricula. For example, if Mary were teaching a unit on Imperialism, she might design self-affirmations statements for reflection such as: “How did it feel when someone took something that was yours because they thought they were better than you?” In this way, she could build upon students’ social cognition memory in understanding human intention and action as they interpreted historical events.

Lisa: In Lisa’s words, “teaching is an act of social justice and an opportunity to use tools to help everyone be successful.” She believed that self-affirmations promoted positive attitudes in the classroom as

students acknowledged and supported themselves and others. In her mind, students would be encouraged to think positively about their own ability to overcome hardships and difficulties in their school and personal lives.

Intersection with Invitational Theory and Practice

Mary: Mary believed that reading another person's self-affirmation response was a very personal matter because the writer opens up to another person. This form of personal sharing requires an invitational stance premised on respect and trust among students and teachers. Mary noted that "affirmation writing encourages risk-taking on the part of students as they describe the problems they encounter in life and how they could work with their issues to make it better." This form of receptivity to the whispering self and personal sharing thrives in inviting spaces where it has become a formal policy and enacted practice to become personally and professionally inviting with oneself and others.

Lisa: Lisa would like to use self-affirmations with her students in the future. She stated that, "She wants students to feel invited in the space, and students can be more authentic on paper." She noted that affirmation writing can "show students that you are caring, and it [affirmation writing] communicates to them that you are interested in who they are." Self-affirmations are a tool to develop intentionally inviting classrooms where all members are invited to value and care for one another.

Lisa felt that the feedback on affirmation writings in the education seminar was a powerful way to quickly build trust with the instructor. Feedback on self-affirmation writings showed that the instructor cared about her as a person and about her personal and professional issues and concerns. Feedback on affirmation writing was seen as intentionally inviting and made her feel supported.

Analysis

The research participants in this study were under intense pressure to qualify for full-time teaching positions after their internships. Lesson planning, instruction, assessment, classroom management, and positioning themselves as classroom leaders were incredibly challenging experiences for the research participants. They struggled with a number of issues including a lack of proper teacher and administrator support, teaching out-of-field, and classroom management concerns that threatened their decision to become teachers.

A central finding from this study is that in the eyes of the two women-of-color research participants, stereotype threat was equated more with a kind of occupational threat as they grappled with many responsibilities and tasks required of full-time teaching during their internships. In their minds, race, ethnicity, and gender appeared secondary in terms of the immediate threat to their goal of becoming capable and effective teachers.

A secondary, yet important finding addressed the lack of self-understanding as a person of color, as Mary seemed surprised by her students' initial hostility toward her as a woman in a position of authority and as a person of Japanese ancestry. This may relate to a form of gender and ethnic blindness, given her Japanese ancestry and her immersion in a largely Japanese-American community in Hawaii. Mary may have perceived herself as a person in the majority and not fully cognizant of the degree to which some adolescent students might judge her as "other" based on her ethnicity. She also may have been unfamiliar with the ingrained patriarchal beliefs that some male adolescent students held regarding women in positions of authority.

Lisa was of multi-ethnic background, and she downplayed the importance of her own race and ethnicity in identifying stereotype threats. In her mind, the “cockroach” comment exemplified a kind of pervasive racism that some immigrants from Micronesia internalize while living in Hawaii. Lisa commented that some of her middle-school students viewed her as a woman with less authority than they might judge a male teacher. Some of her ELL students grew up in families that emphasized patriarchal power and granted less status to females in leadership positions, including teachers.

In spite of being hurt by sexist and racist comments from students, both Mary and Lisa worked diligently at building caring and productive relationships with their students, out of their deep-seated belief that they needed to create classroom policies and practices that made their classrooms safe, inviting, and democratic. The participants set out to build warm relationships with students to maximize their engagement and learning, in order to enhance their sense of belonging and purpose in the classroom (Worthy & Patterson, 2001).

The research participants felt that the self-affirmation writing exercises were a powerful way for teachers to connect with their students. This was due in part to their participation in the writing exercises in the education seminar, as well as Mary’s adoption of self-affirmation exercises in her high school placement classroom. Lisa felt closer to the seminar instructor, due to the feedback she received from her affirmation statements.

Self-affirmation writing exercises were seen as a way for instructors to build inviting classrooms premised on respect, trust, and optimism. The research participants believed that listening to their own inner voice, or their whispering selves, was a way to unwind and relax at the end of the workday. They felt that self-affirmations helped them feel like they belonged in the seminar course. Although they did not share their writings with seminar peers, they felt a sense of intuitive rapport with others in the seminar, perhaps born out of the common experience of the self-affirmation writing exercises.

Conclusions

This study set out to examine self-affirmation writing in the context of a teacher education seminar for candidates who were engaged in teaching internships and preparing to launch their teaching careers. The outcomes reveal that self-affirmation writing served as an effective tool to promote candidate optimism in light of their vulnerability as entry-level secondary teachers.

In a practical sense, having candidates engage in self-affirmation writing in their teacher preparation coursework may help them overcome perceived threats in their field-based school classrooms and to facilitate their own decision making and problem-solving as student teachers and interns. However, self-affirmation writing is more than a pedagogical tool to structure student thought and action; it is also a formal co-curricular exercise that has the potential to enhance the development of classrooms as empathetic places, where all members of the learning community feel personally invited to care for themselves and each other.

Conducting this research project with Mary and Lisa has taught me the importance of setting the “regular” curriculum aside at times to offer candidates opportunities to reflect in writing on the people, places, events, and symbols in their lives that support who they are and who they want to become, so they may “act in ways worthy of praise” (Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 336). In my mind, Cohen and Sherman (2014) have it right when they note that self-affirmations allow writers to maintain their self-integrity when they face occupational dilemmas that seem perplexing and impossible to deal with.

Areas for further research include offering affirmations that specifically target candidates' valued domains, whether these include recalling cherished relationships with family members and friends, resilience in the face of hardships, or other positive aspects of candidates' lives that sustain them and make them feel worthy when they face challenges in the classroom. Understanding how these kinds of personalized affirmations impact a candidate's sense of adequacy as a teacher, could generate insights into how best to support each candidate. Another area for continued research includes having candidates engage in self-affirmation writing immediately before and after their teaching. The effects of self-affirmation writing at these critical moments could offer insights into how self-affirmation writing can serve as a means to generate hope, encouragement, and perseverance in light of stress associated with upcoming or previous lessons. A third potential area for continued study involves embedding self-affirmation writing exercises in dialog journals that are passed back-and-forth from candidate to teacher educator for ongoing written reflections on affirmation statements and responses. Dialog journal applications of self-affirmation writing could emphasize sustained teacher educator feedback to candidates, based on themes raised by candidates.

Final Remarks

Self-affirmations can be applied in the teacher education classroom for candidates like Mary and Lisa who struggle with the occupational demands of learning how to teach. Learning to teach can be a joyful, yet difficult experience for some teacher candidates as they encounter broader social inequities and injustices that are represented in the thoughts and actions of their students. Confrontations with students and lack of administrator support may threaten a teacher candidate's sense of personal and professional adequacy. However, with psychological interventions like self-affirmation writing, learning to teach may become an opportunity for candidates to center themselves and to persist through both minor setbacks and major defeats, that might otherwise tear down their self-image and threaten their confidence and motivation to teach.

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