Who should teach pre-K and Kindergarten when grade levels for certification are overlapped: Perception of teacher candidates from B-K and p-5 programs

In Georgia, teachers who have a certification for Birth to Kindergarten (B-K) or for preschool to 5th grade (p-5) are certified to teach for pre-K and Kindergarten children. Each state designs its own teacher certification levels and it is often set by the needs of public schools. Therefore the voices of principals of public schools have been influential in setting grade levels for certifications (Bueno, Darling-Hammond, & Gonzales, 2010). The problem with current grade levels for certifications in Georgia is that principals in public schools might prefer to hire teacher candidates with the p-5 degree rather than ones with the B-K degree to teach their pre-K and K classrooms because, compared to the latter ones, the former ones can teach a wider range of grades as well as the pre-K and K.

The voices of various stakeholders in deciding certification levels in a state are often ignored and it becomes concerns for the teacher candidates studying the B-K program and the educators of teachers in the program. As far as this researcher knows, there is not a single study that investigates the perceptions of teacher candidates on the appropriateness of prearranged certification levels. When there is a conflict of interest in terms of securing jobs for teaching pre-K and K between teacher candidates of B-K programs and the ones of P-5 programs, what are teacher candidates’ perceptions about who should teach pre-K and K levels, their preparedness of teaching these grades, and the appropriateness of GA certification levels prescribing the overlapping grade levels of pre-K and Kindergarten?

Methods

Using the Survey Monkey, teacher candidates in a B-K program and a p-5 certification program in one of the largest state universities responded to a survey asking
an appropriate credential that should teach the pre-K and K levels, preferred level of grades that they would like to teach, their preparedness of teaching pre-K and K levels, and the appropriateness of grade levels set by the GA certifications. The total of 149 teacher candidates responded to the survey (N = 174). Thirty-two candidates were from the B-5 program and 117 candidates were from the p-5 program. The differences in perceptions between teacher candidates in the B-K program and ones in the p-5 program were investigated using chi-square (χ²) statistical analysis.

Results

Candidates’ perceptions about who should teach the pre-K and K levels: There was a significant difference between the majors as to whether or not teachers with P-5 certificate should be allowed to teach pre-k or K when there are teachers with B-5 certificate are available in the same school. While 53% of candidates majoring B-K were either not sure or thought that candidates majoring p-5 should not teach pre-K, only 20% of candidates majoring p-5 had the same thought (d.f. = 2, χ² = 23.21, p < .0001). While 28% of candidates majoring B-K were either not sure or thought that candidates majoring p-5 should not teach K, only 8% of candidates majoring p-5 had the same thought (d.f. = 2, χ² = 8.11, p < .01).

Preferred level of grades that they would like to teach: Differences between B-K candidates and p-5 candidates were found in terms of their preference for teaching pre-K (d.f. = 4, χ² = 23.66, p < .0001). While 59% of candidates majoring in B-K are “Very Willing” to teach pre-K, only 17% of candidates majoring in P-5 are “Very Willing” to teach
the grade. When candidates were asked to choose their best three choices of grades to teach, the similar finding was observed. While 44% of candidates majoring in B-K chose pre-K as one of their favorite grade to teach, only 6% of candidates majoring in p-5 chose the grade as one of their favorite grade to teach \((d.f. = 1, \chi^2 = 29.60, p < .0001)\).

**Preparedness of teaching pre-K and K levels:** The perception of candidates majoring B-K was different from the one of candidates majoring p-5 when candidates were asked whether p-5 candidates were adequately prepared to teach pre-K \((d.f. = 4, \chi^2 = 17.26, P < .001)\) and Kindergarten \((d.f. = 4, \chi^2 = 32.58, P < .0001)\). While 21% and 9% of candidates majoring p-5 reported that they were either not sure about their own preparedness or not adequately prepared to teach pre-K or K respectively, 50% or 44% of candidates majoring B-K reported that either they were not sure of the preparedness of candidates majoring p-5 or they thought that candidates majoring p-5 were not adequately prepared to teach pre-K or K respectively.

**Appropriateness of GA certification levels:** The majority of candidates majoring p-5 (78%) preferred the current certificate level as is while the majority of candidates majoring B-5 (63%) preferred a change in the State of Georgia certification level either to K-5 or 1-5 \((d.f. = 4, \chi^2 = 28.45, p < .0001)\).

**Conclusions**

In terms of setting grade levels for certifications, various stakeholders’ voices should be heard in terms of deciding the policies. This study was done to survey
teacher candidates who should be included in the policy-making processes as one of major stakeholders and their perceptions of the policies. While most p-5 candidates thought that they are well prepared to teach pre-K level and preferred no changes in current grade levels for the GA certifications, most of B-K candidates thought that the p-5 candidates are not adequately prepared to teach pre-K and preferred changes in setting grade levels for certifications from p-5 to K-5 or 1-5. The significance of the study is that this study might be the first study that investigates the perceptions and concerns of teacher candidates on the relevance of their credentials in terms of teaching pre-K and K levels. In the future, when Georgia decides to change grade levels for the certifications, this study might guide policy makers to make an appropriate decision for the state and many stakeholders including teacher candidates of B-K programs.