Making Connections: Preparing College Tutors to Support the Literacy of Urban Children

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of professional development on strengthening the efficacy and civic engagement of college students tutoring diverse K-5th grade English Language Learners in an urban community. A mixed methods approach including pre- and post-surveys, focus groups, weekly reflections, and supervisor observations revealed tutors' changing perceptions of their efficacy and civic identity after implementing newly learned reading strategies with elementary children. Findings indicate the importance of strategic training for college students (a) to increase their skills and confidence in providing literacy support for children and (b) to understand and connect with the local community. The results of this study will assist educators, university personnel, and community agencies as they train and supervise college-age tutors to work with urban students and engage with local communities.

Keywords: College tutors, Professional development, Urban communities, Literacy, Efficacy, Civic engagement

Numerous studies over the past several decades have reported the increasing achievement gap between students who are from White, middle class and/or affluent backgrounds and their counterparts who are often students of color and/or socio-economically disadvantaged. This gap is widening despite concentrated efforts towards helping minority children of poverty (The Education Trust, 2009). One such identified cause is the decline in literacy skills evident among young minority students, predominantly English Language Learners (Ornstein, Pajak, & Ornstein, 2011). Responding to this need, Federal Work Study programs such as Clinton's 1996 *America Reads* were created to help young children, particularly in urban communities, become successful readers (Morrow & Woo, 2001). Although these types of one-on-one tutoring programs are widely accepted as an effective means to help struggling readers, the degree to which college-aged tutors are trained can affect the value of the tutoring for the student. Moreover, how tutors perceive civic engagement and whether it is a critical part of their role in helping young children can also affect their approach

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to tutoring (Allor & McCathren, 2004).

Preparing college graduates to be active participants in their communities has historically been a core value of higher education across the United States (Knefelkamp, 2008). Education leaders endorse the value of civic engagement but report a lack of strategies to effectively build civic identity in undergraduate students (Hatcher, 2011). The current study addresses this need and involves training for undergraduate college students who are tutoring economically disadvantaged elementary school children in reading within an urban, community-based program. The following research question guided this action-research study: How does professional development, in the area of best reading practices, for minimally trained college tutors affect their efficacy and perceptions of civic engagement?

Literature Review

Best Reading Practices and Literacy Training

When President Clinton first established the *America Reads* challenge, educators were asking whether or not college students with minimal training could actually make a difference in helping children improve their reading abilities (Wasik, 1998). That question was the catalyst for numerous studies that emerged from the *America Reads* challenge (Fitzgerald, 2001). One study examined the Book Buddies program, using individuals typically employed in *America Reads*, to determine whether or not tutors could clearly help improve young children's literacy skills in a high-poverty urban setting. The experimental versus control group study found that children who received the Book Buddies lessons significantly surpassed the control group on measures of accurate word reading in context, letter identification, and word reading in isolation. The study also noted that tutors were more effective due to using well-structured lesson plans and receiving ongoing training and supervision (Meier & Invernizzi, 2001).

These studies contributed to establishing two approaches that have been found effective in preparing minimally trained college students to tutor young children in reading: (a) long-term training in early reading development and tutor effectiveness and (b) intense and directed supervision by supervisors who have received some form of training in reading education (Invernizzi, Rosemary, Juel, & Richard, 1997; Juel, 1996). Studies in which college tutors only received a few hours of training in the use of specific strategies such as shared reading, questioning strategies, and repeated reading resulted in the children making larger gains on word identification, reading fluency, and word comprehension than those in comparison groups (Allor & McCathren, 2004; Baker, Gersten, & Keating, 2000). Knowing how to utilize effective reading strategies is essential but not sufficient. Those working to support the achievement of children, particularly in urban communities, also need to believe that they can make a difference.

Teacher or Tutor Efficacy

Successful urban teachers or tutors have a high sense of efficacy, believing in their own ability to help students improve academically. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) explain that a "teacher's efficacy belief is a judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning" (p. 783). Efficacy can be increased through mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997) in the regular teaching context with additional follow-up coaching (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Providing teachers (or tutors) with ongoing professional development in literacy instruction, opportunities for successful experiences in authentic settings, and opportunities for collaboration contributes to their confidence and belief that they can help even the most academically struggling students (Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011). Can these educators be successful, however, if they do not understand or connect with the community in which the children live?

Civic Engagement

A Federal Work Study program (FWS) can be a "powerful educational, career-preparation, and community service internship program" that benefits all partners: the college student, the university, and the community members (Davidson, n.d., para.1). A community-based FWS program emphasizes civic engagement and social responsibility to develop the college students' civic identity and foster a stronger commitment to the public good. Interaction with others is an important component in the development of personal civic identity (Strayhorn, 2008). Additionally, a stronger sense of civic identity, combined with a cultivation of purpose and the ability to put knowledge into responsible action, results in increased civic engagement (Colby & Sullivan, 2009). The goal of most universities is to prepare civic-minded individuals with a disposition toward being involved with their communities and being socially responsible citizens (Hatcher, 2011).

Method and Data Sources

Participants

The *ABC Reads/Writes/Counts* program (pseudonym) employs approximately 30 college student workers each semester in order to serve as many as 350 K-5th grade students from the local Southern California school district whose students are 90% Latino/Hispanic, 33% English Language Learners, and 76% socio-economically disadvantaged (eligible for free or reduced lunch). The *ABC Reads* portion of the program was chosen as the focus of this study because research has shown the importance of building literacy skills at an early age (Allor & McCathren, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2001; Morrow & Woo, 2001; Wasik, 1998). Among the 30 undergraduate college tutors in the reading, writing, and math program, there were 13 reading tutors, and nine of the 13 reading tutors

volunteered for the study. Five of the tutors self-identified as being Latino/Hispanic and four of the tutors self-identified as being White. Among the nine tutors, three were sophomores, three were juniors, and three were seniors. All nine participants were females which was representative of the program in which 28 of the 30 tutors were females. Additionally, females represented 67% of the overall undergraduate student population.

It should also be noted that three of the nine tutors were born and raised in the city, three came from similar communities, and three were from communities that varied greatly from this particular city. Each college student tutored approximately 20-30 children over the course of the study.

Procedure

The college tutors were provided with several professional development activities over an eight week period to enhance their ability to provide literacy instruction and increase their sense of efficacy and civic engagement.

First activity: Professional development mini-sessions on reading practices. The researcher conducted four mini training sessions for the tutors on best practices for reading instruction including phonemic awareness and phonics, reading comprehension strategies, high frequency words, and vocabulary building models. These trainings were each 35-45 minutes in length; conducted during the second, third, and fifth weeks of the study; and presented to small groups of three to four tutors to allow for discussion. Additionally, the mini-sessions were scheduled in between blocks of tutoring session times so that tutors could immediately implement the new strategies.

Second activity: Bi-weekly reflection journals. Tutors were given bi-weekly journal prompts, throughout the study, to complete by the end of the week. The prompts were created and distributed in order to help tutors think more deeply and reflect upon all three main focus areas of the study: reading practices, efficacy, and civic engagement.

Third activity: Reading relevant articles around reading practices, efficacy, and civic engagement. Three of the bi-weekly journal prompts were based on articles and excerpts about reading practices, civic engagement, and efficacy. The readings were provided in order to guide tutors' responses and encourage deeper reflection on the particular topic regardless of whether or not they had background knowledge in the subject.

Fourth activity: Peer observations and discussions. During the sixth week of the research study, tutors observed one another for one hour and recorded exactly what was said and done by the peer tutor during the tutoring session. Additionally, tutors provided written feedback as to what went well and also suggestions for improvement in the future. As the tutors discussed their observations and feedback with one another, they collaboratively developed

creative solutions for challenges.

Fifth activity: Bi-weekly coaching sessions with the researcher. During the second, third, fifth, and seventh weeks of the study, the researcher observed tutors as they implemented the newly learned reading strategies. Specific observations were made on how tutors implemented the strategies and how the children reacted to the new strategies. After the tutoring session, the researcher met with each tutor to provide specific feedback and praise on the implementation of the strategies.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative methods were primarily utilized for this study; however, some quantitative methods were also included. Each set of data will be described and analyzed separately.

Qualitative

Qualitative data included the following: (a) pre- and post-surveys with the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) Civic-Minded Graduate (CMG) Narrative prompt (Hatcher, 2011) and six open-ended questions asking tutors how well they knew the city, how they perceived civic engagement, to what extent they felt they were effectively helping students, and what types of reading strategies were most needed to help students achieve; (b) four journal reflection entries from each tutor on the topics of reading practices, efficacy, and civic engagement; and (c) three focus group interviews (taped and transcribed), each with three tutors, with five questions asking tutors to expand upon their knowledge of the city and its citizens, their understanding of civic identity and engagement, the factors that influence their effectiveness as tutors, and the literacy needs of the students of the program.

All of the qualitative data gathered were analyzed using a constant comparison method to determine common patterns and themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Triangulation of data occurred through the comparison of the various sources of qualitative data.

Quantitative

Quantitative data included the following: (a) eight Likert scale items on the pre- and post-surveys assessing tutors' knowledge of the residents and community; (b) fourteen Likert scale questions on the pre- and post-surveys based on Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (2001) Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale, used to gauge the tutors' sense of efficacy; and (c) eight Likert scale questions on the post-survey asking tutors to rate how beneficial each of the study activities were to their tutoring. At the conclusion of the study, descriptive statistical analysis was utilized to compare the pre- and post-survey question responses.

<center>**Results**</center>

Qualitative

The qualitative data reveal that overall, tutors' sense of efficacy and commitment to their civic identities were strengthened as they utilized the newly learned reading strategies with students.

Tutors' efficacy was enhanced through implementation of reading strategies. At the beginning of the study tutors were asked, "To what extent do you believe you are effectively helping your students and what factors affect your students' reading successes and/or failures?" A range of responses represented factors that were external or out of the control of the tutor, while others reflected internal factors or the tutors' direct influence on the children and their academic growth.

Several tutors commented on external factors such as parental involvement, language barriers, and schooling as major influences to student success:

> One big factor that affects a student's reading success is if English is the first or second language…and whether or not parents can speak the language at home. (Pre- survey)

> The students who are succeeding seem to go to a good school and their parents read with them at home. (Pre- focus group)

Other responses indicated that college tutors attributed the elementary students' academic progress to internal factors such as the tutors' ability to serve as role models and encourage the children:

> I feel as though I am an effective tutor because I do my best to encourage them, show the students that I care, and am patient with them during our tutoring time. (Pre- focus group)

By the end of the study, tutors' responses indicated an increased sense of efficacy as a result of utilizing the reading strategies that were presented throughout the research study. While tutors still recognized the impact of external factors on the success of the children, they acknowledged the power of their own influence on academic improvement.

Some tutors noted their ability to make a difference through the use of their newly learned reading strategies during tutoring sessions:

> Learning the different strategies and how they have been proven to be effective in classrooms helped me to provide something tangible for students so that they can improve during our sessions together. (Post- survey)

<center>129</center>

At times it can be discouraging because outside of our tutoring session, I know their lives are difficult. But when they're with me, I now have something more to offer them. I know how to better utilize the reading strategies we've learned and I can see students engaging in the text more and growing in their literacy skills. For that short amount of time, I'm making a difference and that difference counts. (Post- focus group discussion)

Tutors also commented on increased confidence as they saw progress in the children's reading abilities:

When I first filled this [pre-survey] out, I might have been a bit negative. I felt like I couldn't make a big difference with these kids in such a short amount of time. But after learning these strategies, I now know that they work and they're proven to be effective. I had more confidence working with my kids because I saw little and big changes in the students' reading abilities as I used the strategies. (Post- survey)

Tutors' perceptions of civic engagement were transformed as efficacy was strengthened. Prior to the study, tutors were asked to respond to and explain the following statement regarding how they perceived their civic responsibilities to the community: "I have a responsibility and a commitment to use the knowledge and skills I have gained as a college student and as an *ABC Reads* tutor to collaborate with others, who may be different from me, to help address issues in society." All of the tutors agreed with the statement; however, very few of them responded with an explanation that reflected a sense of personal civic engagement.

A few tutors' responses showed a commitment to service that was at times based on compliance to external expectations. These tutors identified with the desire to give back to the community, but did not note any connection between being engaged in the community and their work in tutoring the children:

I completely agree with this statement because I think it is very important for me to use what I have learned to help others. (Pre- survey)

I used to think my education was for my own but I've come to realize that I have to do something with my education. (Pre- focus group discussion)

At the end of the study, most of the tutors' responses illustrated a stronger awareness of civic identity and responsibility within the context of their work and deeper commitments to continued service in a more optimistic yet realistic manner.

Some tutors acknowledged feeling more equipped to make a difference as they saw students improve through using the strategies tutors learned throughout the study:

I agree with this statement even more than before. It is my commitment and responsibility, and now I feel better equipped to make a difference in these students' lives, especially after having seen the kids improve when I utilize the strategies we learned. (Post- survey)

Other tutors made the connection that through helping children learn and develop literacy skills they were making an active difference in addressing challenges in the world:

With the new skills and knowledge I have gained, I know that I'm actively taking part in addressing societal issues by helping the kids gain access to greater knowledge and literacy skills. (Post- focus group discussion)

As I'm looking at graduating, I've been more reflective. I realized that walking out, I have greater knowledge of this community and its issues, and I also have greater knowledge of what solutions could look like. Wow – that means I'm that much more equipped and that much more ready to do my part. (Post- focus group discussion)

Reflection led to greater implementation of reading strategies, enhanced levels of efficacy, and a stronger sense of civic identity for the tutors. At the end of the study, many tutors' responses demonstrated how their participation in the research study affected their effectiveness as a reading tutor. Some of the college participants were able to see the connection between their own development as tutors and the influence they had on building children's literacy skills:

Simply having the knowledge that I was a part of a research team helped me to become very aware of my teaching style…as we reflected on how we utilized the learning strategies, I was better able to understand how I was helping the kids. (Post- focus group discussion)

This process caused me to reflect on my own practices. I felt challenged to improve myself as a tutor. I felt a sense of purpose when I tried implementing new things I learned. I saw that I was doing something very important in the kids' education. (Post- survey)

Other tutors acknowledged the connection between how their work with the children contributed to the betterment of the community:

It's really valuable to reflect on what we're doing in this job…being involved in this research has really made me realize what I'm doing…it's not just work, I'm working with the community. (Post- focus group discussion)

Quantitative

       Tutors' knowledge of the community and how to effectively engage in it increased. The first three questions of the civic engagement section of the surveys asked tutors to rate how well they understood the city, the most pertinent issues of the city, and how to be an effective citizen in the city. The data indicated changes among tutors from the pre- to post-surveys.

       Figure 1 highlights how tutors who were from the community had the same level of knowledge regarding the issues of the city before and after the study; however, Figure 2 illustrates how those same tutors reported a greater awareness as to how they could be more effective citizens in their community from pre- to post- study.

       Additionally, Figures 1 and 2 both demonstrate how tutors from outside the community reported the greatest amount of growth from pre- to post- results in their knowledge of the issues of the city and how to be an effective citizen in the city.

Figure 1

Pre- and Post- Survey Results Regarding Tutors' Knowledge about the City
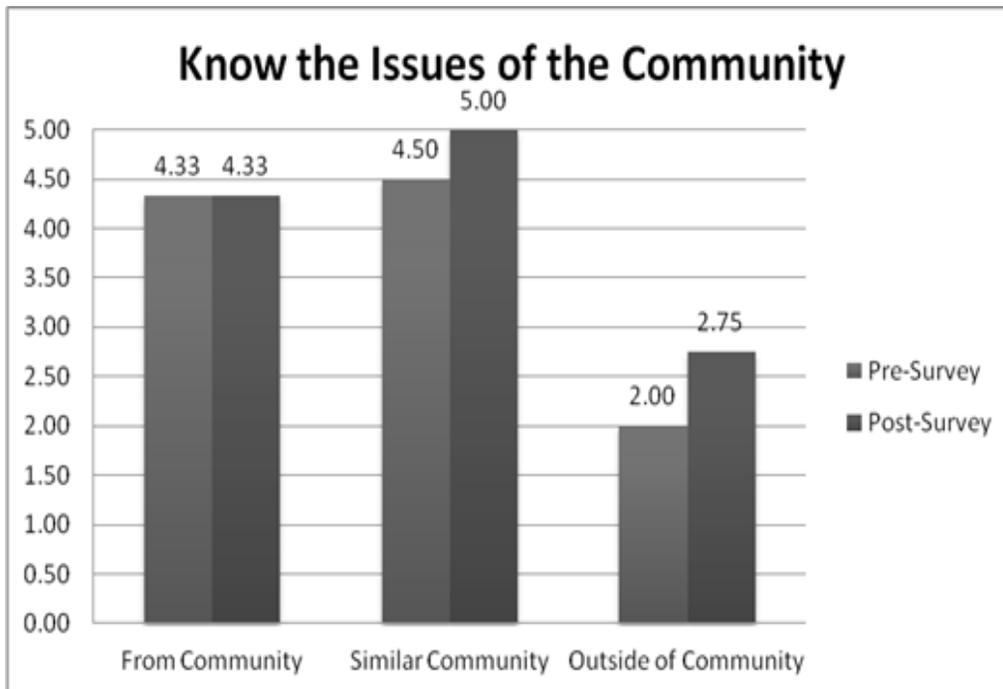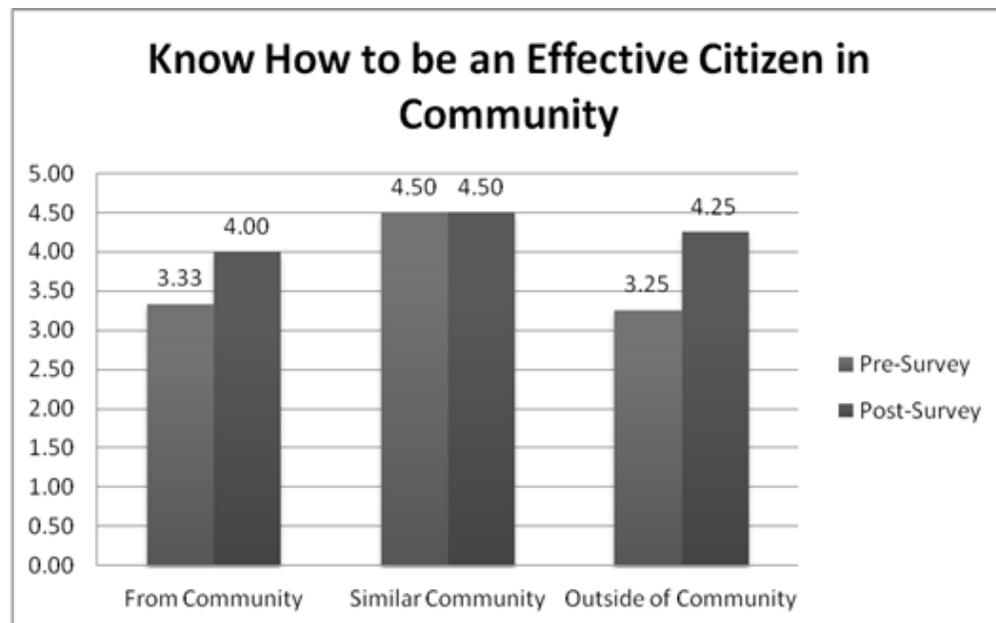
Figure 2

Pre- and post- survey results regarding tutors' knowledge of how to effectively engage in the city

Tutors' sense of efficacy was enhanced as they utilized the new reading strategies. The pre- to post-survey results revealed an average increase of 0.65 on the nine-point Likert scale rating across all 14 efficacy-related questions among the nine tutors. The question about efficacy with the highest increase (1.22) on the Likert scale ratings from pre- to post-survey asked, "How much can you do to modify your reading strategies to the proper level for individual students?" Figure 3 indicates how six of the nine tutors reported an increase of one to three points from the beginning to the end of the research study. The other three tutors remained at the same high level of ability throughout the study.

Learning and the implementation of reading strategies was rated as the most beneficial training for tutors. At the end of the eight week study, the tutors were also asked on the post-survey how beneficial each of the training strategies had been in helping them become more effective *ABC Reads* tutors. Figure 4 illustrates the average ratings of all nine tutors for the six training activities at the end of the study (on a scale of 0-5, with 5 being of the highest benefit). The data revealed that the *implementation* of learned reading strategies was perceived as most beneficial to tutors, while training on the reading strategies and supervisor observations were also seen as highly beneficial.

133

Figure 3

Pre- and Post- Survey Results Regarding Tutors' Perceived Efficacy Regarding their Abilities to Modify Reading Strategies for Students (pseudonyms used)
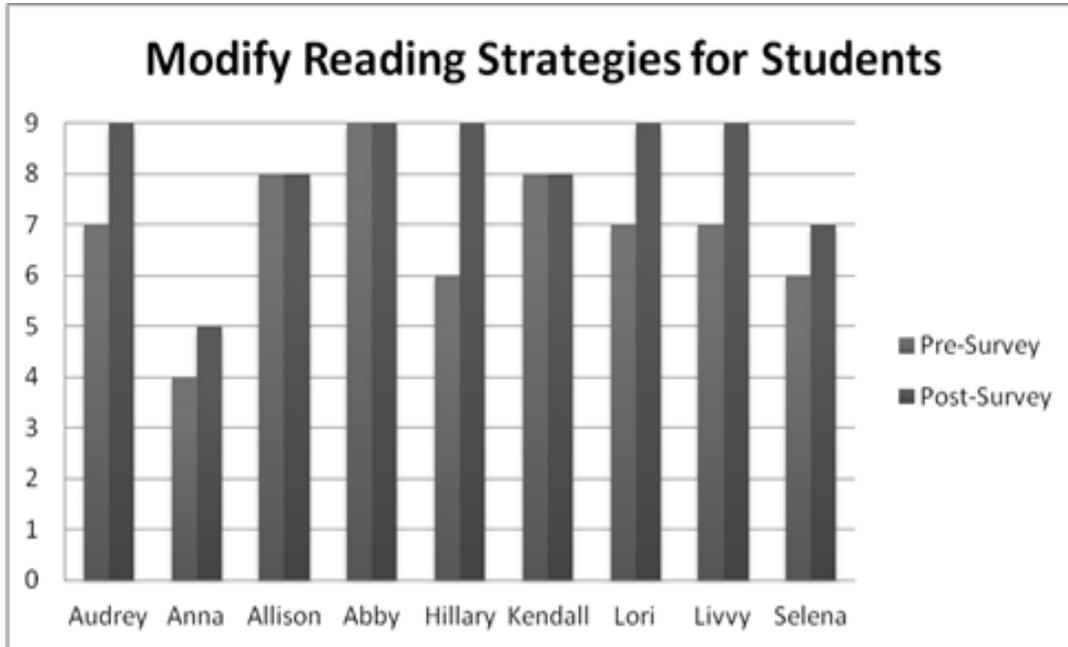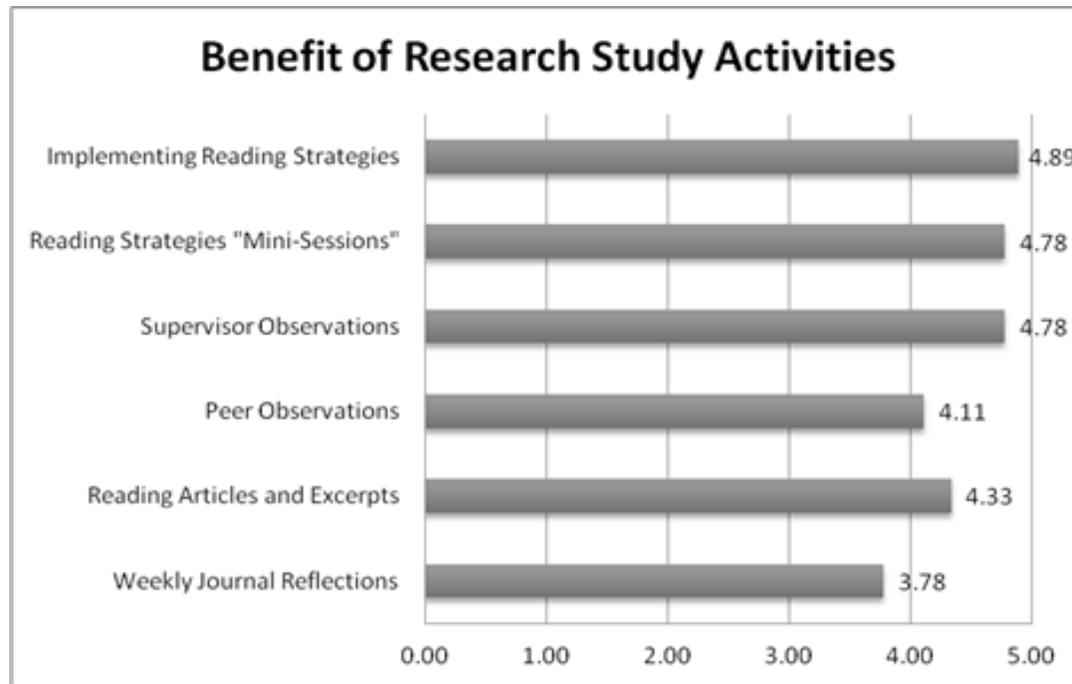

Figure 4

Post- Survey Results Regarding Level of Benefit of Research Study Activities for Tutors

Discussion

The data collected from the study provide strong evidence that there are connections among professional literacy development, sense of efficacy, and perceptions of civic engagement for minimally trained college tutors. Specifically, the data reveal that successful implementation of the reading strategies heightened tutors' self-efficacy. Tutors' responses indicated that utilizing the reading strategies and seeing students succeed helped them better understand their influence and effectiveness as tutors. This finding supports Bandura's (1997) research that among the four factors (mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states) that influence efficacy, authentic mastery experiences are the most influential as they build a more robust sense of one's efficacy.

The data also indicated there is an evident, yet complex connection, between efficacy and perceptions of civic engagement. As tutors experienced a stronger sense of efficacy by helping children improve and succeed, their commitment to making a difference and engaging in their communities was strengthened. However, the quantitative data depict fluctuations in efficacy and perceptions of civic engagement that add another layer of interpretation to the qualitative data. This variance in self-efficacy aligns with Wheatley's (2002) findings that doubts or changes in self-efficacy can be beneficial for the kind of reflection that is necessary to gain new insight. Additionally, the tutors' growing commitment to civic engagement supports Strayhorn's (2008) findings that a strengthening of civic identity cyclically fosters a stronger commitment to the public good.

Conclusion and Educational Significance

Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to partner with their surrounding neighborhoods to cultivate stronger connections between the assets and resources within the community. This is particularly true in urban areas where human resources of the university can be used to impact the future of a community through powerful programs designed to close the achievement gap for the youth. Increasing children's literacy skills through college tutoring is one identified means (Fitzgerald, 2001). Enhancing the knowledge and skills of the tutors strengthens the success of the program as they gain the tools to develop the children's literacy, become more efficacious about their work, and increase their sense of civic commitment through their experiences (Meier & Invernizzi, 2001).

The overall results of this study illustrate that college students can be guided to better support urban students' academic success and engage in their local communities. Experiences in programs such as *ABC Reads* provide the learning opportunities, times of reflection, and spaces to put learning into action that are necessary to develop a strong civic identity and commitment to the public

good. The results of this study will assist educators, university personnel, and community agencies as they develop programs or utilize existing resources to train and supervise college-age tutors to work with diverse students in urban communities.

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