

Exploring the Nature of Pre-Service Teachers' Belief System: A Study

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Abstract

Teacher beliefs and their impact on their practice is a well-explored area. However, the formulation of beliefs and their modification with the theoretical inputs and the practicum experience of pre-service teachers (PSTs) remains relatively unexplored. The study investigates: a) beliefs trainee teachers hold, b) sources of these beliefs and c) beliefs that get revised over a period and reasons for the revision. Fifteen trainee teachers enrolled in the MA ELT programme participated in the study. Data was gathered through a questionnaire and informal interviews. Findings revealed revision in beliefs that offer insights to trainers and trainees.

Keywords: Teacher education, pre-service teachers, teacher beliefs, practicum

Introduction

Understanding teacher beliefs is vital to understanding teaching. Teacher beliefs influence teachers' "consciousness, teaching attitude, teaching methods and teaching policies ... and, finally, learners' development" (Altan, 2006, p. 45). This article investigates the nature of pre-service teachers (PSTs) beliefs and how they are shaped and revised as they undergo a teacher education (TE) programme.

What are Belief Systems?

A belief system includes values, attitudes, and perspectives on issues. Teacher beliefs include knowledge construction, learning, and teaching,

or examination of these from a specific viewpoint, such as pedagogical ideologies, values, and attitudes regarding instructional strategies (Jääskelä et al., 2017). According to Kagan, (1992b, cited in Borg, 2006), beliefs are a form of personal knowledge consisting of implicit assumptions about students, learning, classrooms, and the subject matter to be taught. They are formed either by experience or by the intervention of ideas through the learning process (Ford, 1994, cited in Borg 2006). These may be revised due to input from other professionals and activity type interventions (Diaz & Bastias, 2012). As such beliefs do not require a condition of truth, they are episodic, affective, built on presumptions and have an adaptive function (Erkmen, 2010). Beliefs are a messy construct (Pajares, 1992).

Aim

This study explores (a) PSTs' beliefs regarding teaching and learning, (b) how these are shaped, and (c) why these are revised.

Review of Literature

The construct of teacher beliefs has merited research attention for the past three decades. Wall (2016) examines PSTs' K–12 memories, their initial educational beliefs, and the changes in those beliefs over their TE programme. The data suggested a typical progression from initial idealism to cognitive dissonance, a search for an authentic teaching persona, and confidence in their new role as a teacher. Wach and Monroy (2020) investigated the beliefs of two groups of pre-service teachers (Polish and Spanish) about using L1 in teaching EFL. Both groups felt it necessary to use the L1 in the L2 classroom, but the Spanish group held an unfavourable view about the usefulness of the L1. In contrast, the Polish group had a higher appreciation of the role of the L1. Blume (2019) examined pre-service EFL teachers' behaviours and beliefs regarding digital game-based language learning. While favourable beliefs were inversely related to prior experience in formal school settings, current engagement in-game playing positively affects perceived English language skills and language learning strategies.

Vosniadou et al. (2020) investigated PSTs' self-regulation beliefs of learning from a conceptual change perspective. Findings revealed that the participants' belief systems contained internally inconsistent beliefs about teaching. Tsunemoto et al. (2020) investigated PSTs' beliefs

about second language pronunciation teaching. Findings reveal how PSTs' experience shapes beliefs and assessments, implying that teacher educators must encourage future teachers to hold positive views about the teachability of L2 pronunciation. Reynolds et al. (2022) explored pre-primary PSTs' beliefs about teaching English to very young learners. Findings revealed that beliefs about classroom practices, lesson planning, and learning English as a foreign language were predominant.

Rationale

Exploring teachers' beliefs is a prerequisite to understanding how teachers conceptualize their work. PSTs have preconceived notions of how to teach, and teacher trainers "cannot afford to ignore these beliefs if they expect their students to be open to particular teaching methods and to receive the maximum benefit from them" (Altan, 2006, p. 51). Teacher beliefs, therefore, are significant in conducting teacher education "designed to help PSTs develop their thinking and practices" (Pusparini et al., 2021, p. 147). According to Kelly (2018, p. 110), a priority for teacher educators is to develop educationally sound and socially just beliefs among PSTs and engage them in critical reflection on their beliefs and how they impact their teaching. TE programmes play a crucial role in preparing PSTs "in adjusting their prior beliefs and adapting more flexibly to the reality of a specific teaching context" (Qui et al., 2021, p. 3).

The current study provides an opportunity for PSTs to critically examine their beliefs to enable them to rationalize their decisions as future teachers. Since teachers are constantly engaged in "the act of becoming" (Olsen, 2016, p. 33), it is crucial to explore their past experiences not just to determine how they "align to present practice" but to examine "the stories that constitute" their identity (Davin et al., 2018, p. 140). Zeng (2018) posits that PSTs' beliefs and teaching behaviours are closely related. These ideas form the core of the present study since it examines the beliefs of PSTs and why they are revised.

Methodology

The study was carried out at *The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad*. Fifteen students—eight female and seven male—enrolled in the MA ELT Programme participated in the study. Data was collected through a questionnaire on PSTs' existing beliefs¹ and interviews to

understand their revisions. The data was analysed and discussed in three parts: A) Existing beliefs, B) Sources of these beliefs, and C) Revised Beliefs.

Existing Beliefs of PSTs

The existing beliefs of PSTs fall under three factors, teacher, learner, and classroom.

Beliefs on teacher factors include notions of 'good'/'bad' teachers and 'effective'/'ineffective' teaching. The qualities of a good teacher are mapped into four major categories: a) subject-matter knowledge, b) pedagogic content knowledge, c) classroom management skills, and d) personality factors. Perceptions of what makes a bad teacher include teachers who show a lack of these four categories. One of the PSTs' remarked that it is very *demoralizing if teachers like students only by their marks and consider the students who get good marks to be more capable and smart than others*. Effective teaching is where content is relevant and interesting. Primacy is placed on discovery learning.

Learner factors include teachers' beliefs about "good/bad' learners and 'effective/ineffective' learning. These beliefs are described in four categories: a) commitment/attitude to learning, b) motivation, c) classroom behaviour and d) personality factors. What strikes as interesting are qualities such as readiness to learn things that are "seemingly irrelevant" and curiosity to "acquire things around them". Qualities of a bad student include—lack of commitment, lack of motivation, disruptive classroom behaviour and negative personality traits. PSTs consider learning effective when one can connect real-life with concepts learnt. "Textbook-based and marks-oriented" learning are considered ineffective.

Classroom factors deal with beliefs on conducive/non-conducive classroom environments. According to the PSTs, a non-threatening, psychologically safe classroom environment is conducive to learning. It should be well-ventilated and spacious with movable seating and afford physical comfort.

Sources of Existing Beliefs

Several factors shaped the beliefs of PSTs. Apprenticeship of observation and prior language learning experiences are the major factors that

contributed to belief formation (80%). Grades and marks (10%) emerge as the least contributory factor. Exposure to the theoretical inputs also significantly contributed to the formation of PSTs' beliefs (70%). Institutional culture, home and social context, readings in the field and personality factors have all equally shaped their beliefs (each factor marked by 60% of PSTs).

Revised Beliefs

Informal interviews helped us get an understanding of the revised beliefs. The revised belief themes that emerged from the interview were related to teaching, classroom management and the teacher.

Under teaching, the subthemes covered were the belief in using resources other than the textbooks, understanding students' learning, and valuing feedback for development.

These are presented below using the teacher's voice.

I used to believe that teachers must strictly adhere to the textbooks and the activities given in it. This belief was revised through my experience in this institution, where teachers usually do not use one prescribed textbook. Through the various courses that I have taken across semesters, I have realized how teachers used texts from various sources and helped us apply the knowledge in real-life situations through application-oriented tests, practicum, etc.

Understanding learners: As a student, I was quick to judge, especially during my school days. Low marks were directly proportionate to low effort. However, I now believe that there could be many reasons for a student's unsatisfactory performance, and as a teacher, I should be observant and search for a method to help the student. After observing my students, I realized that some needed pushing and that fewer marks do not equal less effort. With extra efforts and special attention, the underperforming students became more responsive in the class.

Value of feedback: I never believed that teachers sought student feedback, let alone act on it. I realized that a good teacher seeks suggestions for improvement from students and implements them. After seeing a teacher handout feedback form, I formulated this belief and noticed differences in the teaching approach in the following classes. This improved our learning experience as well as our approach to the teacher. The topic I taught was interesting; the class was more involved and interactive.

Engaging students: A constant engagement with the students will make them feel more responsible for their learning. One of the teachers asked us what kind of test we wanted to take at the end of the semester, the portions, etc. We felt as if we were actively responsible for this process.

Another teacher shared the importance of the negotiation between teachers and the learners in terms of what they are going to learn and how they are going to learn. In one of my courses, we were asked to share ideas about what we are going to learn and how we are going to learn. Previously, I believed that it's only the teacher who should design the course and there's no scope for students there.

A third teacher expressed that I used to believe that it was the teacher's sole responsibility to make a learning experience better. However, I realized that a class could not be successful without the learners' participation. I had to teach an exhausted class once. It was almost impossible for me to get them to participate in the lesson. Most of them were asleep and those awake were too tired to respond. The teaching goal could not be met despite my best efforts.

Changes in beliefs about classroom management: I believed that a teacher should always be strict to control her students until I experienced how our professors at EFLU guide and teach us. A teacher gains respect from her students when she maintains a professional relationship with her students where she can be friendly outside the classroom and a bit strict inside the classroom. One of the PSTs made a realistic comment: every classroom cannot possibly become a positive environment all the time. Learners can have off time too.

Recognizing that teaching is a complex task: It is not easy to teach English! I would see my teacher walking in during my school days, delivering the lecture, and walking out. There were no interesting questions and this was a period used by most of us to complete their homework or play some silly game. Probably it is easy to deliver mundane lectures, but I believe in taking the road not taken. So, when I stood behind the desk as a teacher during the practicum, I realized that teaching English is not an easy task. Another teacher shared that they all (teachers) looked so professional to me. It always comes off as an effortless potential that a teacher possesses. However, now that I am being trained to be one, I have realized that teaching is not an easy task and that a teacher has to be dedicated to improving and even developing self-confidence.

One PST summed up her beliefs about teaching succinctly: Teaching is not a job where one can prepare and use the same lesson for all the years. Teaching is learning to teach different learners.

The description of PSTs detailed above clearly shows that the practicum and the theoretical inputs offered through the MA Programme have resulted in the modification of beliefs that PSTs held.

Limitations

- The number of participants is limited.
- The views of the teacher educators are overlooked.

Implications

- PSTs, articulating their beliefs help make sense of how teaching and learning are (to be) transacted in the classroom. The ability to reason out why one holds a particular belief provides a rationale for teachers' decisions in the classroom leading to informed practice.
- Teacher educators should urge PSTs to examine their beliefs critically. They should create teaching opportunities that allow PSTs to experiment with teaching ideas, resulting in assimilation and integration of new beliefs into the existing belief system.

Further Research

- A case study of one or two pre-service teachers can be conducted to describe the belief reformation identifying specific experiences that resulted in these through a thick description.
- A longitudinal study can track the actual teaching practice of the PSTs to investigate if their classroom behaviours reflect their stated beliefs—revised or strengthened—during the TE programme.

Conclusion

Pre-service teachers enter teacher education programmes with an extensive set of beliefs. Some of these undergo revision based on theoretical inputs and the practicum they experience. The merit of a TE programme lies in that it can reinforce those beliefs geared towards effective student learning and discourage those that are detrimental to learning. Furthermore, what transpires in real classrooms when PSTs embark on actual teaching will also shape and reshape their beliefs. Restructuring one's belief systems is thus a continuous process and are the hallmark of all teaching practice.

Note

1. The questionnaire for student teachers is in https://docs.google.com/document/d/1eZKps_dazjxQFEBtLprstcFiFhi6L3AzrWUV9Gbfmly/edit?usp=sharing

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