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Teacher beliefs and their manifestation in teaching from the perspective of pre-service teacher trainees

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Abstract

Teacher beliefs play an important role in addressing the issue of teacher training. Teaching philosophy has long been a question of great interest in a wide range of fields in teacher education. There is a growing body of literature that recognises the importance of what teacher trainees or teachers in general think, believe and do in teaching. Studies over the past two decades have provided important information on the possible factors that may impact the formation of teacher beliefs. The paper attempts to explore the relationship between previous school experience and the formation of teacher beliefs among teacher trainees who can provide viewpoints of a teacher and a student at the same time. Moreover, the paper examines teaching methods and techniques that the trainees apply in their teaching as a result of what they believe in as teachers. Data were obtained from semi-structured interviews conducted with pre-service teacher trainees as a part of feedback sessions during teaching practice. By employing qualitative approach, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the formation and manifestation of teacher beliefs in teaching.

Keywords: method, teacher beliefs, teaching philosophy, teacher trainee

Introduction

Teacher beliefs are an important component of a teacher's personality and play a key role in how teachers teach. Scholars have long debated the impact of teacher beliefs on teacher's behaviour and classroom decisions. Thus, a considerable literature has grown up around this topic which has been studied by researchers using both qualitative and quantitative research approaches and various methods. There are several factors which can play an important role in addressing the issue of teacher beliefs formation. Several attempts have been made to examine these factors. Studies on this topic show the importance of these factors in the process of formation of teacher beliefs (Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Borg, 2011). The main challenge; therefore, faced by many researchers is the investigation of how these

factors contribute in the formation of teacher beliefs and how these beliefs are then reflected in the teaching process. Investigation these factors can help us understand what lies beyond teaching practices. Debate continues about other factors which play their role in the process; however, a full discussion of teacher beliefs lies beyond the scope of this study.

This paper aims to unravel some of the aspects surrounding the issue of teacher beliefs formation among pre-service teacher trainees. One of the aims of this study is to investigate the previous school experience as one of the factors affecting the teacher beliefs formation. Exploration of the relationship between previous school experience and teacher beliefs may help to understand the reasons behind teachers' teaching habits and behaviour. Secondly, the paper seeks to explore the pre-service teacher trainees' beliefs about teaching and lastly the emphasis will be put on the specific methods and techniques used by the teacher trainees in order to make the learning process in the classroom effective. Thus, this study is exploratory and interpretative in nature and uses a qualitative approach to illuminate this field of research. This work will generate fresh insight into the problematics as well as contribute to this growing area of research. As to the overall structure, this paper first gives a brief overview of the literature and research on the topic, then it continues with data collection and research sample description, data analysis and research findings.

1 Beliefs as a part of teacher formation

In the past few decades, a considerable amount of literature has evolved around teacher beliefs and their role in the classroom behaviour of teachers (Fang, Z., 1996; Borg, 2011; Farrell & Ives, 2014; Fives & Gill, 2015; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017). According to Zheng (2016), since the mid 70ties the topic of language teachers' beliefs has caught the attention of investigators, "no encompassing theory has yet emerged to describe all these features of teacher beliefs" (p. 20). As the author continues, from the mid 90ties, the field of language teachers' beliefs has evolved.

Before discussing the issue further, it is essential to understand the theoretical concept of teacher beliefs, their typology and factors which greatly contribute in the process of their formation. According to Borg (2003), „teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs" (p. 81). As Zheng (2016) claims, the term "belief" is used in a variety of research fields and, therefore, can have a number of explicit meanings. This term can be generally understood as "a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour" (Borg, 2001, p. 186). Since the teacher beliefs guide and

may affect the behaviour of a teacher, it is important to investigate those beliefs and closely inspect the factors affecting them.

When it comes to understanding the various layers of teacher beliefs, it can be trickier than one might think. "Defining beliefs is at best a game of player's choice. They travel in disguise and often under alias - attitudes, values, judgements, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding, and social strategy, to name but a few to be found in the literature" (Pajares, 1992, p. 309). Thus, the nature of the concept as such should be taken into consideration alongside with its possible "disguises".

When studying the thinking processes of teachers, the following questions are to be addressed: "What do teachers believe about teaching and learning? How is their knowledge organised? What are the sources of teachers' beliefs? How do teachers' beliefs influence their teaching?" (Richards & Lockhart, 1996, p. 30). These and other possible questions might give us an answer to why the concrete decisions are being made by teachers in the classroom.

There are a number of factors which may affect the formation of teacher beliefs, these factors are as follows: "own experience as language learners, experience of what works best, established practice, personality factors, educationally based or research-based principles, principles derived from an approach or method" (Richards and Lockhart, 1996, pp. 30-31). For the purpose of the study, the emphasis will be put on the first two factors, i.e.: previous school experience and teaching experience. Apart from the factors mentioned above, Borg (2011) conducted a study in which he confirmed the considerable, if variable impact of in-service teacher education on the formation of language teacher beliefs. Therefore, the quality of teacher education is essential and, thus, should be emphasised.

Calderhead (1996) recognises five types of teacher beliefs, which are the following: "beliefs about learners and learning, teaching, curriculum, learning to teach, and about the self and the nature of teaching" (as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017, p. 79). According to Devine et. al (2013), "an understanding of (dis)congruence between teacher beliefs and teacher practices is critical in researching teacher effectiveness as it underscores the multifaceted and often messy relationship between what teachers do and what they believe, in contrasting cultural and social contexts" (p. 85). It is thought that in order to direct educators towards proper cooperation with teachers on their way to professional development, knowing what guides teachers when teaching, i.e. their beliefs, is considered essential (Fives & Gill, 2015).

As Holt-Reynolds (2000) claims, the position of a teacher has changed, i.e. teachers are no longer only a source of information, but are required to actively

cooperate with students and enhance their participation in the process which is then enriched with teachers teaching.

Teachers' beliefs may influence teachers' behaviour, development of learners being taught, the process of making decisions as well as the interaction between teachers and their learners (Gilakjani & Sabouri 2017). Moreover, according to Vries et al. (2013), being aware of these beliefs plays a key role in the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers. "Because teachers are crucial to education, and their participation in CPD is an important way to increase their quality, as well as the quality of schools and student learning, knowledge about how teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning is of great importance" (p. 353). Therefore, it may be assumed that the investigation of teacher beliefs can play an important role in improving the quality of teachers as professionals in the field of education alongside with the learning process itself. The following section of the study presents the research methodology and the findings based on the data analysis.

2 Data collection

The study uses qualitative research approach in order to gain insights into the topic presented. One of the most well-known research methods in qualitative research approach is interview. This method was adopted to help understand how teacher beliefs are reflected in teaching, and to allow a deeper insight into the factors affecting the formation of teacher beliefs. Moreover, as it helped us obtain in-depth information, it captures the complex nature of the phenomenon.

For the purpose of obtaining data, semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of the feedback session during teaching practice. This stage of the study comprised semi-structured interviews conducted on the sample of ten pre-service teacher trainees of a teacher training programme - English language and literature (in combination) at master's degree at the University of Prešov. All the trainees had experienced teaching practice and were aged approximately between 21-23.

To investigate their teacher beliefs, the participants were asked the following questions:

1. Have your experience of being a student at primary/(upper-)secondary school had an impact on the formation of your teacher beliefs? If yes, then how?
2. What are your teacher beliefs, i.e. what is it that you believe in as a teacher and try to reflect it in your teaching?
3. What methods/techniques are you trying to implement into your teaching to make the learning process effective?

The first question was designed to investigate the impact of previous school experience of the trainees on the formation of their teacher beliefs. Moreover, if the response was positive, the trainees were asked to specify in what way those

experiences affected their perception of teaching. The second question helped to provide the personal viewpoints of the trainees on teaching, i.e. what the trainees believe in as future teachers and what beliefs they intend to reflect in their teaching. The third question focused on the specific methods and techniques the trainees are already implementing and are planning to use as future teachers in order to increase the effectivity of the learning process of the pupils. However, further data collection is required to determine exactly to what extent teacher beliefs influence the actual teaching process itself. Based on the questions asked, the following three categories were recognised: Previous student experience – What we think, Teacher beliefs – What we believe in and Effective teaching – What we do. These categories are discussed further in the data analysis and research findings section.

3 Data analysis and research findings

Once the data were collected and recorded, they were transcribed and analysed. Based on the questions asked alongside with the data analysis, the following categories were recognised: Previous Student Experience – What we think (the influence of school experience on the formation of teacher beliefs), Teacher beliefs – What we believe in (reflection of teacher beliefs in teaching), Effective Teaching – What we do (methods and techniques for increased effectiveness). The following analysis is supported by selected excerpts in which the participants are marked as S1, S2, S3 ... S10.

3.1 Previous student experience – What we think

A variety of perspectives were expressed when asked about the previous school experience and the trainees' point of view on teaching. A common view amongst the participants was that being a student is a completely different position than being a teacher. The behaviours they once perceived as positive are now being looked at with providence. When comparing their opinions, the trainees now understand what it means to be a teacher, i.e. appreciate the profession more than before, as the comments below illustrate:

S1: "... from the student's point of view we looked at it as if it was nothing, just come to class and teach. And now I can see what it is all about ... I really appreciate them more and also what they were doing."

S10: "... I used to have teachers who were phlegmatic, just came to the class, discussed how we were and what news we had, and so on and did not teach us anything. I was happy that we had a free lesson, didn't have to prepare, but it definitely has had an impact now when I am older ... when I look back, I am upset how a teacher like that can even teach. And I would not want that."

A recurrent theme in the interviews was that of teachers acting friendly towards the students without being afraid of losing their respect and authority. When the participants had an experience with such a teacher, they considered it as a positive personality trait and intended to continue in doing so in their future classroom, as two participants stated in the comments below:

S2: "I liked it when teachers were friendly and did not boost their ego on pupils ... so I am also trying to do it that way ... What I appreciated about my teacher was her being friendly."

This view was echoed by another participant who reported:

S6: "I would like to teach the same way I was being taught... we had a lot to be covered, the teachers were strict, but friendly ... when we started we were divided into "stronger" and "weaker", but we finished all the same... I would like to teach at that school."

One participant argued that having two perspectives, i.e. student's and teacher's perspective, helped her adjust the teaching behaviour taking into consideration students' personalities and their impact on how they respond to a teacher during a lesson. That a student does not wish to involve in classroom activities does not mean they have no idea what is going on. Moreover, the participant showed concerns over forcing students to speak and its impact on their overall motivation, as the comment below suggests:

S3: "As a student I am aware of the fact that sometimes I have something to say and yet I stay silent ... I have been focusing on students who were more active because I have a feeling that not everyone wants to talk. Not everyone wants to share their opinion, some are shy ... forcing to speak ... I think they may lose motivation..."

Some issues were identified with regards to a discrepancy between a participants' previous school experience and their teaching practice experience, where one of the participants showed dissatisfaction with the situation in the classroom. When comparing the students' behaviour in the past from own experience and the behaviour of today's students, the trainee expressed great concerns, as explained in the comment below:

S4: "I used to attend a grammar school where all of us wanted to learn. When we were supposed to do something, we did it and when I got here it was a complete opposite, almost everyone was doing what they wanted to and I was not taken as much seriously as their teacher ... that was the biggest shock for me which I had to cope with."

Commenting on this question, one of the participants reported that even though the school experience had not affected his teacher beliefs to a great extent, but rather it had helped him realise his own teaching preferences. He came to a conclusion that teaching older students would suit him more than teaching younger students, as the comment below shows:

S7: "I just confirmed myself that I would like to work with older students. I am not saying I don't want to work at primary school / lower-secondary level, but if I were to choose, I would go for upper-secondary level."

There were some suggestions that school experience with former teachers – role models – has played a key role in the career decision process, i.e. having positive experience with teachers has pushed the participants towards the teaching career, as explained in the comment below:

S5: "At upper-secondary school I liked our Slovak and English language teacher and because of her I have decided to study what I am studying. So, I can say that because of some role models. I think this has had a great impact on me."

This result is somewhat counterintuitive. Not only positive, but also a negative role model helped the trainees realise what they want to avoid doing as future teachers. The comment below demonstrates the impact of a negative student experience towards a positive change in one's behaviour.

S9: "... a teacher who was truly trying to engage, talk to us and trying to do so in English only has given us most. And when I was thinking about becoming a teacher, I wanted to be ... to have as interesting lessons as she did. On the other hand, the former teacher we used to have, we did not like her, and I even told myself that because of her I did not want to be a teacher"

S8: "... I started to realise during my master's degree studies that the teacher was sticking to the textbook all the time ... but I think that it is not so good to stick to the textbook because it can quickly turn into a routine, and I am trying to avoid that".

As can be seen from the excerpts above, previous teaching experience plays an important role in how trainees perceive teaching in general. Moreover, not only positive but also negative experience pushed the trainees in the right direction, i.e. helped them realise what they want to do differently compared to their previous teachers.

3.2 Teacher beliefs – what we believe in

If we now turn to the part when the trainees were asked to share their teacher beliefs which they wish to be reflected in their teaching, the trainees were unanimous in the view that teaching does not involve the process of giving and receiving knowledge only, but the emphasis ought to be put on the whole-person learning and raising students, helping them on their way to become full-fledged professionals in the field, as the two of the participants reported in the comments below:

S1: "... be sure not to focus just on the pupil gaining the knowledge, but also to affect them ... to raise them ... we should not be focusing only on covering as much content as possible ... better to cover less and do it well than to cover a lot without understanding ... "

S9: "I believe that what I am teaching is important and I want to transfer it to students so they also realise that what I want to tell them and teach them, or what they are to learn will be applicable in the future because that's the problem they have. They think that it is useless."

Moreover, as the participants continued, the issues might arise when students, in general, do not consider the content they are learning applicable in real-life and everyday situations. Therefore, the practical application of knowledge was emphasised in the interviews, i.e. showing the students meaningfulness of the content they are learning, which plays a key role in the learning process itself.

Some participants believe that learning equals fun, e.g. a language can be learnt without realising it. This way students can learn the language not only consciously, but also unconsciously. Moreover, teaching students how to express themselves in a proper way was considered as one of the essential parts of learning, which can also be influenced by teacher's qualification. Talking about this issue, two participants reported:

S4: "Maybe the fact that they do not have to memorise some things, but I am trying make it more about fun, for instance a competition, to make learning fun and maybe also teaching English without them realising that they are learning."

S3: "Maybe a better behaviour of pupils, verbalisation predominantly, I am trying to teach them that it is important to express themselves in a right way, since I am also studying Slovak language, and to have an opinion and provide arguments to support it ..."

The majority of participants agreed with the statement that trust between a student and a teacher is necessary for creating a pleasant learning environment without fear. Moreover, a friendly attitude of a teacher was highlighted among the trainees as it can enhance the learning experience of students without losing any authority or respect, as the comments bellow illustrate:

S5: *"I would like to get the respect, that is the key, but also to be friendly to the extent that they know if they have some kind of personal or family issue, they can come to me with no fear ... this is going to be challenging, in my opinion."*

S2: "I choose friendliness ... not to seem hostile ... and not to look lofty ... to make learning English fun ..."

S5: *"I would like to become a teacher like those I liked at upper-secondary school. On one hand they had authority and respect, on the other hand they did not spread fear..."*

It was suggested that teachers should not forget that they had been students once. Also, the relevance of reference questions, i.e. to which there is not only one right answer, was pointed out. One of the participants highlighted the importance of tackling students' curiosity since people had always been naturally curious regardless of their age. These viewpoints are reflected in the following comments:

S6: *"I am trying to remember that I also was a student ... I was trying to ask them questions to which there is no wrong answer... to tell me their experience ... every answer is a good answer."*

S7: *"I believe that a man is curious by their nature and can be interested in anything. So, I believe that if something is presented in an interesting way, it may catch attention..."*

"Halo effect" is one of the classroom situations that can happen. According to Forgas and Laham (p. 276), "... a tendency of judges to assume that once a person possesses some known good (or bad) characteristics, their other, unrelated and unknown characteristics are also likely to be consistent...". Talking about this issue, one of the participants pointed out the fact that teachers should not let themselves believe that bad behaviour must go hand in hand with student's performance and achievements. Furthermore, one of the teacher beliefs was the belief in ones' capacity to teach, i.e. teacher's self-efficacy. The comments below give a detailed explanation on the matter:

S8: *"even though they can have some kind of behaviour, I will not let it influence my evaluation of their achievement or my expectations about their performance. I am trying to avoid that ... And also, to give space for everybody to make mistakes, and to express their knowledge."*

S10: *"First of all, you need to believe in yourself ... I think self-confidence is very important. When I believe in myself that I know something, I can also explain it to pupils."*

As to the previously mentioned concept of self-efficacy, it can be understood as "... a motivational construct based on self perception of competence rather than actual level of competence" (Ghasemholanda & Hashim 2013, p. 891). Teachers who believe in their teaching competence and skills may also serve as a positive motivational factor for their students.

3.3 Effective teaching – What we do

Talking about this issue, the participants agreed with the statement that visual aids, practical application, discovery processes and personalisation are crucial on the way towards effective teaching. Other responses to this question also included showing "the human side" of a teacher, i.e. revealing something from teacher's life as well as discussing topics that are current and up to date. The following excerpts confirm what was previously mentioned:

S1: *"So I try to give them as much help as possible, such as visual aids, so that it is not only that we say something, write it, but they can also try it themselves and I also like when they can come up with something on their own and I don't have to say anything, but they deduce it somehow."*

S3: *"Well, especially a discussion. I am trying to catch their attention by revealing something about my life or saying how I perceive it ... so that they could*

also express their opinions ... so it is especially personalisation and also topicality ... to have current topics.”

Similarly to what has been discussed, practical application, everyday use, finding the connection between knowledge received at school and its application in real life situations were echoed by a number of participants. It is widely known that practical application of knowledge can reinforce the learning process (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009) and the participants were fully aware of that fact, as the following comments indicate:

S6: “I am asking or providing some examples from their life, when I am teaching something. That way they can remember it better, if they connect it with situations from their lives.”

S2: “I am trying to provide everyday examples ... for them to see the connection between school ... with reality behind the school gate ...”

In the learning process, group work can be beneficial in many aspects, such as: “students get more practice, higher quality of practice, more speaking time for students, individual interaction, collaboration – students can be supported by their partners, comforting for shy students, higher motivation and autonomy in decision-making, varied contributions” (Straková, 2013, p. 114). On the other hand, it may have certain disadvantages, such as students “hiding” in the group and letting more extrovert students “do the work”. Giving students space to talk goes hand in hand with creating appropriate conditions that would ease the whole process and erase the language barriers. This can be done through dialogues, asking about opinions, etc. If there are language barriers, it may be more appropriate to start with dialogues, groups and after that frontal discussion. This pyramid discussion “gives students time to practice speaking in smaller groups before facing the whole class” (Esfandiari & Knight, 2013, p. 22). The comments below provide the participants’ points of view on the issue discussed:

S4: “I am trying to engage them in the first place, so that there is not only one student speaking for the others ... through group work ... more activities and exercises.”

S7: “I am trying to engage the students as much as possible. So that it is not just me speaking and them taking notes and memorising at home, but I am trying to engage them in the process itself, to make them learn during the lesson. So it is more like dialogues, discussions, asking about opinions ... in the language class I am trying to give them space to talk ...”

As to the fixation part of the learning process, repetition was highlighted and emphasised by the participants. Repetition as such plays an important role in the learning process, according to Larsen-Freeman (2012). What is more, repetition does not necessarily have to take place during the lesson, but a teacher can ask students to repeat what has been discussed on the whole at the end of the lesson, as one of the participants reported:

S5: "... maybe repetition ... for the lesson content fixation ... to recall it when needed."

S8: "... now I tried for the first time to ask them at the end what they managed to remember from the lesson ... maybe that's also a kind of efficiency test, but I am not sure about it".

Finally, feedback is an inseparable part of the effective teaching and learning. It is crucial that teachers get feedback from their students and, thus, can adjust the teaching methods, techniques and activities during the learning process itself. Moreover, oral feedback can be enriched by observation of the classroom. This way teachers can notice students' behaviour in order to evaluate teaching processes. In addition, the fun element should not be omitted regardless of students' age, as one of the following comments confirm:

S9: "After every activity I am trying to get some feedback. I mean, I would like to do it after every activity, to find out if they were satisfied with the activity, whether it was helpful in some way, but that is more time-consuming."

S10: *"Maybe to innovate it somehow. For example, yesterday, when I used the song, I could see that the students were impressed ... they were having fun, it was definitely more interesting for them."*

The participants on the whole demonstrated that they were fully aware of their own teacher beliefs. Even though the trainees have only begun the journey of becoming the professionals in the field of education, (in accordance with their assumptions, beliefs and opinions), it is important to investigate this initial period for it can guide and direct their teaching path followingly.

Conclusion

In this investigation, the aim was to explore the formation and reflection of teacher beliefs in teaching on a sample of teacher trainees. The data were obtained from semi-structured interviews conducted as a part of the feedback sessions during teaching practice. The qualitative approach helped us collect in-depth data suitable for the following analysis.

The relevance of previous school experience (both positive and negative) and the teaching experience of the trainees (as possible factors affecting the teacher beliefs formation mentioned by Richards & Lockhart, 1996, pp. 30-31) has been supported by the study.

One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that the participants are aware of what being a (good) teacher means to them. The findings also suggest that trust and positive learning environment play an essential role in the learning process alongside with feedback, repetition, meaningfulness, real-life situations, group work, open-ended questions, personalisation, activation of discovery processes, practical application of knowledge learnt, tackling students' curiosity and whole-person learning. The data reported here appear to support the

assumption that authoritative perception of a teacher is becoming overshadowed with a more of a partner-like role of a teacher. Rather than creating a barrier and emphasising the two distinctive roles – a teacher and a student – there is a tendency towards blending those roles and thus perceiving them on the level of a partnership. As Straková (2013) claims, “the teacher – facilitator suggests rather than directs, encourages rather than asks and advises and prompts students into mutual interaction rather than a one-way communication” (p. 37). Based on the data obtained, it may be assumed that the trainees perceive themselves as facilitators rather than controllers.

Since the study was limited to its sample, these findings can be less generalisable and, thus, caution must be applied to interpret these data. In addition, further investigation of the topic is recommended, especially with the use of quantitative research approach. A possible area of future research could be the investigation of other factors which contribute in the process of teacher beliefs formation or comparison of the beliefs of in-service teachers and senior teachers, since the teaching period naturally extends as it continues.

It is believed that the findings will make an important contribution to the field of English language teaching methodology as they have a number of important implications for future practice, e.g. for the understanding of how teachers think, i.e. what lies behind their teaching decisions.

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