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(When) teachers’ pedagogical beliefs are changing?

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Abstract

The article is focused on study of pedagogical teachers’ beliefs who are involved in teacher identity and the factors which are able to change the teachers’ beliefs. The theoretical premises of this research are to be found in the studies and theories on the relationship between society values-beliefs and teacher professional development.

Pedagogical beliefs about professional identity affect pedagogical behavior, resulted in educational style manifested, conception of the educational process and the use of certain methods. An important step in changing pedagogical beliefs and teaching behavior is reflection on their identity, roles and responsibilities in certain stages of the teaching career.

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1. Paper theoretical foundation and related literature

A particular interest, more accentuated in recent years, is manifested in the identification, knowledge and interpretation of the pedagogical beliefs, regarded as prerequisites / basics of teachers’ actions in the classroom. Therefore, it is assumed that different pedagogical beliefs certainly affect the teacher’s decision making when he is planning and designing educational activities. In the present research, from a theoretical point of view, we are interested not in personal beliefs, but in the professional (pedagogical) beliefs held by teachers, which by analogy with personal beliefs are equally motivating and determining teacher behaviour.

Freeman (2002) states that research conducted in the various educational practices focused primarily on

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observable teacher behaviours that influence student learning activity and not what stands behind these behaviours, the “engine” of these behaviours.

The authors of specialized studies (Richards, Gallo and Renandya, 2001; Borg, 2003) consider that these teachers’ beliefs are actually operationalized in the following aspects: how teachers perceive their profession or work, their classroom behaviour, how teachers address the educational process (teaching-learning-evaluation), how they establish educational relationships in the classroom, the quality of social and human interactions, how students are perceived by teachers, etc.

In general, research conducted on teacher beliefs regards the following areas: beliefs about teaching (teaching goals, teaching methods, teaching contents, etc.), beliefs about assessment, about students and their learning, beliefs about the educational relationships established within the classroom context, beliefs relating to personal and professional development (Calderhead, 1996). In a particular vision, we should add the beliefs about education in general, about the evolution of school and the teacher’s role, about their pedagogical values, etc.

A research conducted by D. Beijaard, N.Verloop, J.D. Vermut (2000) on the professional identity and the perception of one’s own professional identity shows that many teachers perceive themselves rather as specialists and practitioners than as pedagogues.

The teachers who consider themselves to be specialists, believe that without sound knowledge in the field, one cannot become a good teacher. This is the basis of the teacher’s authority.

The ones who believe themselves to be practitioners are interested in the conditions of learning, planning and designing the teaching activities

The “pedagogues” are interested in the way that the pupils study and in conducting attractive teaching activities.

Another important aspect in this study was that teacher’s teaching context, experience, and biography are categories of factors that may influence their perceptions of their professional identity.

Understanding teachers’ beliefs requires a comprehensive approach to the operationalization of the term. Obviously, discussing about teachers’ pedagogical beliefs is an extremely generous topic, its area consisting of the entire educational process. According to Price (1969) and Ferre (1988), the sense of faith is defined as an individual’s personal philosophy, which consists of a group of consistent, coherent and appropriate beliefs. From a structural viewpoint, faith consists of a nucleus, which depends on the individual’s personal characteristics or traits, and an “outer shell”, which depends on the individual context, this stating the individual’s history, environment, the community he belongs to (Brown, 1986). Thus, faith is defined as an idea or a principle that could be conscious or unconscious; it is subject to an assessment process in the sense that it is accepted as true by the individual, and therefore it requires a strong emotional commitment; it serves rather as a guide for thinking and behaving (Borg, 2001).

In 1992 Pajares defines faith as "messy construct", citing in support of this assertion the fact that “the difficulty in studying teachers’ beliefs has been caused by problematic defining, poor conceptualization and various understandings of faiths and its structure” (p. 307). Furthermore, he states that all teachers hold beliefs about their work, about the students they teach, about the subject matter they teach or about their professional roles and responsibilities. There is general agreement on the fact that teacher beliefs have a strong impact on how they address the educational process and more specifically, on the way they perform in class. Continuing the analysis, we find that teachers’ beliefs about the teaching process will inevitably affect designing and planning, decision-making, choice of teaching tools as well as the educational relations established in the classroom (Clark and Peterson, 1986).

The studies conducted by Nespor (1987), Almarza (1996), Erkmen (2010) show that beliefs exert a remarkable influence on how teachers actually teach. An example would be that if the teacher believes that mother tongue (or a foreign language) can be better learned by students by investing more time in teaching grammar, the teacher will provide a greater unit of time to grammar.

Yero (2002) defines beliefs as “judgments and evaluations we make about ourselves, about others, and about the world around us (...), generalizations about things, like causality or meaning of specific actions” (p.21). According to Kagan (1992), beliefs are conceptualized in the form of tacit assumptions, which often are at an unconscious level, about students, classroom processes undertaken in the classroom, teaching materials used in the classroom. Belief is also perceived, in Rokeach’s vision (1968), as a simple idea, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says or does. In addition, the same author (1968) describes a structure of beliefs consisting of

three main components: a cognitive one (represented by knowledge), an emotional one (designed to generate emotions) and a behavioural one (activated by the action performed).

Another issue lately arisen is the possibility or impossibility to change teachers' pedagogical beliefs. Numerous studies have focused on this issue and the results are contradictory. On one hand, some studies have indicated that teaching beliefs can be resized / changed through training (Bramald, Hardman, & Leat, 1995; Nettle, 1998; Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000), on the other hand, more have shown that changes in the beliefs are very limited, concluding that training programs involving teachers are neither efficient, nor sufficiently influential for the change of beliefs (Peacock, 2001; Mathioudakis, 2007). In addition, the scientific contributions made by Johnson (1994) and Brown and McGannon (1998) reinforce the idea that teachers' beliefs are difficult or rather hard to change during a training program.

Therefore, this study takes the form of an initial reflection on the issue of teachers' pedagogical beliefs, intending to identify the factors / conditions that could lead to change of pedagogical beliefs.

2. Can pedagogical beliefs be changed?

Teachers' beliefs about teaching, learning, assessment, etc. are objectified in the teaching behaviour and this is a proven fact, upon which most experts agree. One of the “hot” issues is about the change of teachers’ beliefs underlying their behaviour. In connection with this topic the following questions can be addressed: Can pedagogical beliefs be changed? Under what conditions can this be done? Under the influence of which factors?

In connection with the first question, it seems that change in pedagogical beliefs is very subtle and hard to “measure” objectively. And yet, under the influence of certain factors related to social changes, changes in education, as a result of personal experiences, changes in pedagogical beliefs can be achieved.

Apparently, reflecting on pedagogical beliefs is the first step in changing them. In a series of research papers related to Romanian teachers’ identity (Voinea and Palasan, 2014), we have concluded that teachers’ reflection on their own identity helps defining it more clearly. In the study of the reflection on teachers’ pedagogical beliefs, we adopted Korthagen’s ALACT model (2005). The ALACT model consists of five phases 1) Action 2) Looking back on the action 3) Awareness of the essential aspects 4) Creating alternative methods of action 5) Trial. It is a spiral model starting and ending with an action, and basically the first and the fifth phase are same.

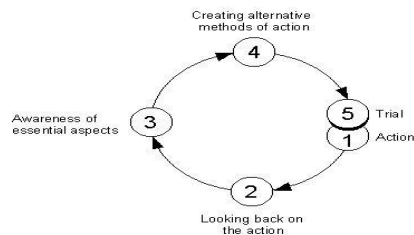


Fig.no.1 Korthagen's ALACT model

The capacity to reflect is very important for the teaching career because the „core reflection (when reflection extends to the two deepest levels in „the onion model”) enhances professional growth” (Korthagen, Vasalos, 2005). In accordance with to the cited authors, we emphasize the role of reflection in the change / refinement of beliefs underlying teacher behaviour.

Purpose of Study

The theoretical premises of this research are to be found in the studies and theories on the relationship between society – values- beliefs and teacher professional development of Pajares (1992); Beijaard, D., Verloop N., Vermunt J.D.,(2000); Voinea, Pălășan (2014); Korthagen, F., Vasalos, A., (2005).

Our aim is to investigate most frequently teachers' self-beliefs and the relationship between reflection and teachers' self-beliefs .

We presumed that reflection on professional identity will change teachers beliefs about their own pedagogical behaviour.

Methods

For this study we developed a questionnaire-based survey who was called “The teaching beliefs inventory” consisting of open items targeting professional identity, values, roles and responsibilities of teachers.

The teacher’s beliefs inventory contains 104 items grouped into several categories – the first 19 items aim at statements / beliefs about school and teachers, beliefs which must be ranked on a Lickert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (totally agree); the second part of the inventory aims at ranking 10 pedagogical values (perseverance, creativity, empathy, etc.); the third part aims at beliefs about the roles of education, teachers, school in a projective manner, the subjects being asked to fill out some statements regarding the future of education, and the last part aims at beliefs about their own pedagogical qualities and skills related to teaching style, assessment, communication.

We conducted two focus groups with two categories of subjects: 100 students who are in initial training, as future teachers and 20 teachers (10 teachers with less than 10 years of experience and 10 teachers with an experience of over 10 years in the field).

Findings

The results collected stress the idea that reflection on beliefs entails some changes in the use of an educational style. These changes are more obvious to teachers in the early stages of the teaching career, compared to those at their peak.

In a first phase of the analysis, there have been identified the teachers’ most common pedagogical beliefs, the way they perceive themselves in different roles of their teaching career (as evaluator, as designer of the training process, etc.).

The most frequently encountered beliefs are shown in the table below:

Table 1. The teachers’ most common beliefs

Statements / beliefs	Frequency
Teachers are important for the education of the society	100%
Teachers are a model of moral behaviour	35%
Teachers are very competent people who train children, therefore the future	28%
In a good school, teachers are dedicated to the job	27%

As seen from the data above, the belief that “the teacher is the most important agent in educating young generations”, in a traditionalist view, especially specific to the magistro-centrist education dominates. Because of the frequency of these beliefs, regardless of experience or the subject matter taught, we believe that they are strongly rooted in teachers’ minds.

In connection with the dominant values, the situation is presented in the chart below: (Teachers selected the pedagogical values who are important in their career: perseverance, creativity, responsibility, asserting their own opinions, critical thinking, planning, self-confidence, decision-making power, empathy, ability of reflection)

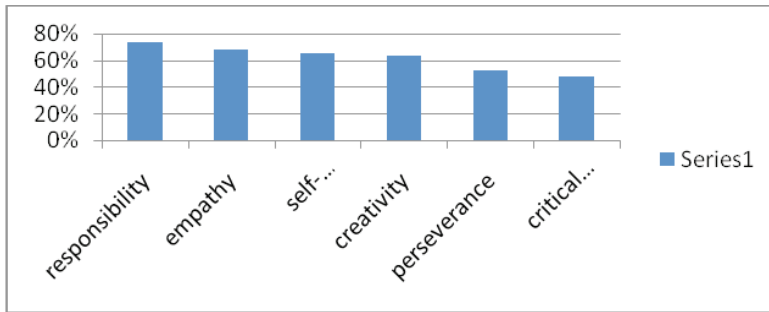


Fig.no.2The teachers' pedagogical values

With regard to the beliefs about the evolution of education as given in the third part of the questionnaire, they are more heterogeneous. Generally, they can be divided (given their content) into two categories: *optimistic beliefs*, 48% (I think that in 10 years' time Romanian education: will be more "settled") and *pessimistic beliefs*, 52% ("I think that in 10 years' time Romanian education will be tangled among its many meaningless changes").

As concerning their own professional image, the overwhelming majority of teachers surveyed (85%) estimated having abilities to communicate, evaluate and teach as "to a large extent".

The analysis of the data collected via the focus group highlighted the following issues as regarding changing pedagogical beliefs.

Teachers with less than 10 years in education state to a larger extent than those with more experience that their pedagogical beliefs have changed as a result of the reflection on their own teaching behaviour, especially as a result of examinations they were subjected to or because of classroom experiences. "I have thought for long time about how to help a little girl overcome a personal event affecting her so much that she no longer learned. Then I understood what it meant to know the child and not rush to evaluate him or her".

Teachers with more than 10 years' experience tend to nuance conceptions depending on their experience: "If I had to start all over again, I would not change anything about me. Maybe I would pay more attention to my relationship with the students. The key to success is an authentic communication –that is what I have learned from my 20 years of teaching career" (N., primary school teacher).

For both categories of subjects, the changes in education are occasions for reflection, which sometimes can lead to changes in behaviour in the classroom. One of the changes frequently invoked was related to the national assessment (in 2013) or the one related to the introduction of "A Different School" programme in 2011, which led to changing pedagogical beliefs, too: "I understood how important it was to be an objective evaluator, during last year's national assessment. I was nervous for my students, and therefore I tried to change my way of assessing so as not to cause any "shock" either to students, or to parents" (C.D., primary school teacher with 15 years' experience) or "Although at first "A Different School" week did not seem like a good idea, I gradually realized how important it was for students to have opportunities for learning outside the school. It was a moment that changed how I see learning and the role of the school" (C.V., primary school teacher with 23 years' experience).

One of the claims frequently encountered is: "Students today are different today". But "different" is translated in various ways by each teacher, according to his or her teaching beliefs.

For example, for an experienced teacher who has as teaching values creativity, critical thinking and shares the belief that "education will change along with society, it will not disappear", nowadays "different" students are: curious, self-confident, with a high achieving potential, with more courage of expressing themselves (M.S, primary school teacher with 15 years' experience).

For an experienced teacher who has work, responsibility, planning as values and does not "see a very good future for education", today's students are undisciplined, lazy, much too fascinated by technology.

Conclusions:

Although the present study does not have a great power of generalization, it outlines valuable research directions of research on teachers' pedagogical beliefs throughout the teaching career and the factors that cause change in the pedagogical beliefs.

One of the conclusions of the present study is that reflection on one's own pedagogical beliefs, on the projections on their teaching career and the teacher's role may not necessarily lead to change in beliefs, but especially to their nuancing, restructuring, and the restructuring will result in a flexible, appropriate to the context and innovative teaching behaviour.

Change occurs over time, the actual behaviour being "the material support" of reflection, and reflection will produce in turn nuances of behaviour. So we can say that between the capacity for reflection and behaviour there is a close relationship, but not causal in nature. Between thought and behaviour there are interposed a series of variables, such as experience, type of experience, the school culture where they accumulated experience, social context, etc.

Another practical conclusion is that building teachers' capacity of reflection can lead to nuancing, modelling, possibly confirming certain pedagogical beliefs that support effective teaching behaviours.

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