

Teachers' Beliefs and Teaching Beliefs

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Abstract

On the premise that teacher education programs, with their emphasis on methods, are largely ineffective in improving current teaching practice, this paper examines ways teacher educators can change some of the beliefs of teachers and teacher candidates early in a program so as to optimize the impact of learning new teaching practices. Three central questions are addressed—what technologies are available to teacher educators for changing candidate beliefs, what ethics come into play concerning changing the beliefs of candidates, and what beliefs should we teach—and the problems posed for changing beliefs. The paper then explores the concept of “dispositions,” suggesting that if teacher educators could conceptualize the problem as one of “weak dispositions” rather than one of “beliefs,” many of the issues would disappear. Three possible dispositions are explored as goals for a teacher education program: knowledge, collegueship, and advocacy.

This essay is based on the premise that teacher education programs are largely ineffective in improving the current practice of teaching. Some programs choose not to improve practice, but instead they strive to prepare teachers who fit into the patterns of current practice. These programs hire practicing teachers to offer methods courses and discourage teacher candidates from studying foundations courses that can serve as a springboard for questioning current ways of teaching. But many of us in the field of teacher education aspire to improve current practice, confident that no matter how effective current practice might be in some schools or in some classrooms, it offers room for improvement. If this premise is correct, it begs the question “Why aren’t we more successful?”

Many years ago, Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) advanced one explanation—namely that the thousands of hours that prospective teachers spend as pupils in the classroom shape their beliefs. These conservative beliefs remain latent during formal training in pedagogy at the university and become a major force once the candidate is in his or her own classroom.

Subsequently, Kennedy (1997) attributed this state of affairs in part to the beliefs that candidates and teachers bring to teacher education. It is not clear what the source of those beliefs might be—a product of their upbringing, a reflection of their life experiences, or a result of socialization processes in schools. Nevertheless, teachers and teacher candidates have strong beliefs about the role that education can play, about explanations for individual variation in academic performance, about right and wrong in a classroom, and many other areas. Kennedy asserts that these beliefs are used to evaluate the new ideas about teaching that teachers and teacher candidates confront in their methods classes. Those teachings that square with their beliefs are recognized and characterized as “what’s new?” Teachings that challenge their beliefs are dismissed as theoretical, unworkable, or even simply wrong.

Kennedy went on to say that one belief that teacher candidates bring to their professional schooling is “that they already have what it takes to be a good teacher, and that therefore they have little to learn from the formal study of teaching” (p. 14).

Bruner (1996) made a similar and related point. He argued that most people have acquired what he calls a “folk pedagogy” that reflects certain “wired-in human tendencies and some deeply ingrained beliefs” (p. 46). This view leads to what Bruner called a new and even revolutionary insight: “[Teacher educators], in theorizing about the practice of education in the classroom, had better take into account the folk theories that those engaged in teaching and learning already have” (p. 46).

If Zeichner, Tabachnick, Kennedy, and Bruner are right, perhaps teacher educators need to take on the task of changing some of the beliefs of teachers and teacher candidates early in a program so as to optimize the impact the program may have on learning new teaching practices. There may be an even more urgent reason for addressing the problem of changing beliefs. Research on attribution theories demonstrates that the attributions that teachers make to their pupils who are doing poorly may reflect their beliefs but also hinder their effective interventions with pupils. So, academic failure often is attributed to external factors in the child’s life—the home, the family, the peer group—rather than reflecting on problematic teaching. Pupils in our schools who are the targets of attributions that narrow the ways in which their learning problems are addressed are victims, one might say, of teacher belief systems. Here is a second reason why changing the beliefs of teachers and teacher candidates should be high on the agenda of teacher educators.

Three Central Questions

What Technologies Are Available to Teacher Educators for Changing Candidate Beliefs?

Before addressing this question, it is appropriate to get an understanding about the size of the challenge. It has been long understood that some beliefs are more important than others to individuals, and the more important the belief is, the more difficult it is to change (Rokeach, 1968, p. 3). It is also understood that if a central belief is changed, other beliefs within the person’s belief system are affected. It has been argued that beliefs that are linked closely to their ego—sense of self—are more important than any others (Rokeach, 1968, p. 4). One can only wonder

how many supervisors have convincingly said to their student teachers, “I’m not criticizing you, I’m criticizing your teaching.” It seems very likely that beliefs about teaching are very central beliefs and as such resist change.

Another line of research that supports this view is that of Markman (1989) in the area of language development. She argues that “very young children are capable of forming object categories that are so stable, available, habitual, and familiar that they achieve special status. These basic categories resist change.” It is possible that some of the basic “concepts” that all children acquire having to do with justice, learning, and even teaching are learned early and as “basic concepts,” in Markman’s terms, are difficult to change. In my work with first- and second-year teachers at the University of Delaware, I have collected a number of “autobiographies” in which these teachers tell of their first awareness of teaching as a possible career. It is interesting to note how many speak of “loving to teach” at age 6. Here is a story that reflects many others: “When I returned home from first grade, I would go to my bedroom and line up all my dolls as pupils. Then, I would teach them a lesson. I loved being a teacher, and it was especially enjoyable because my dolls were so well behaved.”

This teacher and many of her colleagues reported “learning how to teach” in this manner. It is possible that the beliefs about teaching, learned at an early age, were both linked to a sense of self and were “basic” in Markman’s sense—making them extremely difficult to change. Tatto’s (1996) important work on beliefs concluded “lay cultural norms [beliefs] among enrollees [in teacher education] are strongly ingrained and that most teacher education, as it is currently structured, is a weak intervention to alter particular views regarding the teaching and management of diverse learners” (p. 155). With this caveat, it is time to review the technologies available to us.

Belief as Criterion for Admission. In a sense, avoiding the challenge, we could change the profiles of our candidates’ beliefs by having at least one of the criteria used to admit candidates into teacher education be that of holding the beliefs the faculty has identified as important. Would medical schools

accept candidates who did not believe in the germ theory or the scientific method? Would dental schools accept candidates who did not believe in novocaine?

Confronting the Candidate with Dissonance.

Dissonance theory suggests that if we engage teacher candidates in activities that arouse dissonance—beliefs might change (Festinger, 1957). One of the sources of dissonance identified by Festinger is “past experience” colliding with new cognitions. It is this source that is perhaps most relevant to teacher education. Of course, there are other standard responses to dissonance—one of which is to discredit its source. Some of the harsh things that are said or felt about teacher educators might well be understood as responses to dissonance. If dissonance is going to be effective, teacher educators will need to address their own and their program’s attributes that make it easy to dismiss what is being taught. Perhaps, for instance, professors should all be successful, experienced classroom teachers so candidates cannot ask derisively, “when was the last time you were in a classroom?”

Apprenticeship Experiences. In apprenticeships, “novices and experts are from different worlds and a novice gets to be an expert through the mechanism of acculturation into the world of the expert” (Farnham-Diggory, 1994, p. 466). We have used apprenticeships in teacher education since the beginning, perhaps expecting that in the acculturation process, our candidates will “catch” the correct beliefs (Farnham-Diggory, 1994). Of course, this hope will be realized only if we place our candidates in settings that activate the targeted beliefs. There is some hope that the culture of the Professional Development Schools, as envisioned by the Holmes Group (1995), will work as a positive force in the acculturation of our teachers. The data are not yet in on this question.

Promoting Professional Development. One could argue that primitive and naive beliefs, “folk pedagogy” in Bruner’s terms, reflect developmental stages. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) describe various “ways of knowing” that they consider “developmental.” Teacher educators could work with their candidates to promote advancement to higher-level stages. Unfortunately, in their case studies describing how people moved from one stage

to another, no systemic interventions seemed to operate. Instead, each person studied had a story about what prompted a change in the way he or she “knew,” but nothing that seemed to give insight to teacher educators.

Values Clarification. L. E. Raths advocated a theory of values that suggested people hold beliefs when they are not fully examined. Only after they are examined and re-accepted after considering alternatives, anticipating consequences, and trying out their implication in life itself can a belief become a value. His procedures for moving beliefs to the category of “values” was called “values clarification” (Raths, Harmin, & Simon, 1966). In the few experiments carried out at the college level, advocates of values clarification found that the process was slow and not always successful.

Case Study. In her doctoral thesis written at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, McAninch (1993) posited an interesting hypothesis. She advanced the notion that if teacher education candidates were to study cases of instruction through different lenses—the lens of their own beliefs, of constructivism, of direct instruction, and of the project method—changes in belief systems might develop. McAninch derived her hypotheses mainly from the work of Joseph Schwab (1978) who described the process of examining phenomena with different lenses as “polyfocal conspectus.” McAninch also built on the work of Belenky et al. cited above. While her ideas seem promising, McAninch’s hypotheses have not been formally tested.

None of these approaches is easy or quick. If they did work, and if they were feasible, and if they were ethical, the interventions would probably take considerable time, with the exception of the first one.

What Ethics Come into Play Concerning Changing the Beliefs of Our Candidates?

What are the ethics involved in making a concerted effort to change the beliefs of another person? During the Korean War, such efforts on the part of the Russians and North Koreans to alter the political beliefs of American soldiers who were being held as prisoners of war were well known. While there was

always a threat of physical punishment and other deprivations, the brainwashing techniques were often a combination of some of those suggested above—dissonance, social pressures, and immersion in a new culture. POWs were inundated with “facts” about injustices in the United States, how rich people were benefiting from the war, and how the capitalist system had many contradictions and problems. While such efforts were generally seen as obscene and decidedly “un-American,” American universities on occasion ask professors and administrators who are accused of sexism or racism to attend “sensitivity” classes to improve their attitudes and presumably their practices. Even now, 50 years later, any effort to alter the beliefs of audiences or individuals is frequently characterized as “another form of brainwashing.” There is something inherently wrong with working to change the beliefs of others, especially from a position of power.

On the other hand, we have felt open to teaching people skills. The wonderful thing about skills is that people who learn them may, because of their belief systems or other reasons, elect not to use them. While brainwashing implies fashioning some permanent and decisive thinking patterns in the minds of teacher candidates, skills are far more external—to be used or not at the whim of the learner. This relaxed attitude about “skills” is reflected as well in our willingness to disclose our skills or to ask others to disclose their skills. Some people would surely object if a teacher took a poll of his class concerning their beliefs about abortion, about race in America, or the nonavailability of health insurance for so many poor people. But to quiz them on their skill in taking a square root, or in asking higher-level questions, or computing the reliability of a teacher test is another matter. This distinction between teaching values and teaching skills prompted Bereiter (1973) to write a book titled *Must We Educate?* The thesis of the book is that public schools should not educate, that is deal with beliefs, but should only train—work with skills.

Why are we willing to uncover our skills but reluctant to share our beliefs? Perhaps it has something to do with the idea that skills represent only a capacity to act, while beliefs reflect dispositions to act. And it is one’s dispositions that are at the heart of our personhood. In sum, there are difficult ethical ques-

tions to answer if we are going to systematically go about changing the beliefs of teacher candidates.

What Beliefs Should We Teach?

If we decided that we knew how to change beliefs and if we decided that it was ethically appropriate to change the beliefs of teacher candidates when and if certain conditions were met, the next question becomes “which beliefs” do we want to teach? For example, we could ask candidates to respond to the following beliefs (or others, mine are just examples) on a Likert scale, from strongly agree to strongly disagree. How would we want our candidates to respond at the end of the program? Notice how some “ideals,” notably items 4 and 5, appear to be contradictory:

1. All children can learn.
2. Pupils should be treated as clients.
3. Children have to be prepared to “read up to grade level.”
4. Children should be treated equally, as a matter of justice.
5. Children should be treated differently, each in terms of his own needs and interests.
6. Learning should be fun.
7. Diversity in a classroom is a strength and not a problem.
8. The teacher is accountable for what is learned or not learned in a classroom.
9. Children should be given praise and recognition in terms of what they have earned and deserve.

Another approach to characterizing the beliefs of our candidates is asking them to respond to the following items taken from Tatto’s (1996) interesting work:

1. When pupils are successful in achieving intended goals or objectives, that success is often attributed to one of the following sources (see below). Which do you believe is the most powerful determinant of success? Circle the letter of your choice.
 - a) Pupil home background
 - b) Pupil intellectual ability
 - c) Pupil enthusiasm or perseverance

- d) Teacher attention to pupil interests and abilities
 - e) Teacher use of effective teaching methods
 - f) Teacher enthusiasm and perseverance
2. When pupils fail to achieve intended school goals or objectives, the failure is often attributed to one of the following sources (see below). Which do you believe is the most powerful determinant of school failure? Circle the letter of your choice.
- a) Pupil home background
 - b) Pupil intellectual ability
 - c) Pupil enthusiasm or perseverance
 - d) Teacher attention to pupil interests and abilities
 - e) Teacher use of effective teaching methods
 - f) Teacher enthusiasm and perseverance

It is likely that reliable measures could be obtained if these items were offered in a paired-comparison format—asking candidates to choose “which one of each pair” is the more powerful.

I am trying to suggest that arriving at a set of beliefs in which a faculty group believes and that are considered so important that it is decided that all candidates should acquire them is almost impossible to imagine. So even if we had the technology available to us for changing beliefs, and even if we agreed that it was ethical to change the beliefs of our candidates, deciding on which particular beliefs to advance in our program would be difficult. In sum, in spite of the insights of Zeichner through Bruner cited above, changing candidates’ beliefs looks like a hopeless task.

Shifting the Focus

The previous paragraphs suggest in the main a dead end here. If our candidates have beliefs that interfere with their learning new ideas about teaching and learning, and if those beliefs can actually do harm to their pupils, certainly we are obliged to change them. But a review of the technologies available to us is not promising. We are not sure which are “better” beliefs, and if we knew, we do not have a way of changing them.

Lilian Katz offers us an insight that may lead us out of this conundrum. She introduced to the field the notion of “dispositions” (Katz & Raths, 1985). In her framework, beliefs can be considered “pre-dispositions.” She used the term dispositions as a summary of actions observed (p. 302). Perhaps we would benefit from changing our focus away from beliefs per se to “dispositions.” It may be more tolerable to say to our candidates and to ourselves, “we mean to strengthen certain dispositions in our candidates’ repertoire”—dispositions that almost surely already exist in our candidates. We would not be in the business of change—but of “strengthening.” The dispositions might include:

1. Making setting attributions and not trait attributions.
2. Making efforts to meet children’s needs.
3. Working to clarify children’s ideas instead of judging them.
4. Rewarding approximations.

It is surely the case that these few examples are grounded in beliefs that are not made explicit. However, if we adopted the notion of “dispositions” as the frame for our goals, we could ask that our candidates behave in ways consonant with these dispositions or others we might select, regardless of what they “believed” about them.

There is a problem with my listing—the entries constitute a collection and not a set. It would be so much better, from a conceptual standpoint, if we had thoughtful categories to prompt our identification of dispositions. Here is an attempt to make the selection of the dispositions we plan to strengthen into some sort of rationale.

A teacher is a professional. There are at least three elements that separate professional persons from those working in careers that are not professions. The first has to do with knowledge. Professionals not only act with knowledge, they value the knowledge they possess. One set of dispositions to strengthen in our candidates is to value knowledge. The second has to do with collegiality. Professionals reach out to consult with one another, to unite in associations to advance professional goals, and to collaborate in the best interests of their clients. We could choose to

strengthen dispositions on the part of our candidates to work with others to achieve common goals. A third general area associated with professions is that of advocating for clients in their care. For teachers, this advocacy means not only watching out for pupils assigned to their classes, but also for the poor, the disadvantaged, and the downtrodden in our communities. Ideally, professions are not guided by a profit motive. Instead, they are concerned with issues of justice, fairness, and the well-being of their clients and for others who may become clients. In this respect, professionals in all fields give their time and dedicate their concerns on behalf of their principal clients and for those in our society who are less fortunate. This third area, advocacy, could become another source of dispositions that we take on as goals.

Let me illustrate how this might work: Taking these categories as a starting point, consider the following dispositions we might take on as goals for a teacher education program:

Knowledge

1. Given a problem or issue, our candidates wonder about what the literature has to offer. They are disposed to look up references and read what research summaries have to say about the problem or issue. They demonstrate learning new ideas from books, pamphlets, professional journals, and from each other.
2. In discussing a problem or issue, our candidates use vocabulary in the field, not to distance themselves from pupils or parents, but to convey with precision the meanings they attach to phenomena.
3. Given a problem or issue, our candidates ask for the data that support potential solutions and ask what alternatives are available to consider.

Colleagueship

4. Our candidates associate with other colleagues in professional study groups, professional associations, and in unions for the purpose of solving problems, improving personal skills and understandings, and contributing to the betterment of society through joint actions.

5. Given a problem or issue, our candidates are disposed to seek help from colleagues, supervisors, administrators, and from other professionals in the community.
6. Given a problem or issue, our candidates raise questions about ethical principles and concerns.

Advocacy

7. Given a problem or an issue, our candidates are sensitive to notions of justice, fairness, and equity as they affect their own pupils and all pupils within the community.
8. When analyzing the behaviors of pupils or parents, our candidates initially look to “setting” factors rather than “trait” factors to account for the behavior.
9. In any and all experiences involving pupils or their parents, whether incidental or planned, teachers seek ways to transform them into educational opportunities.
10. Our candidates relate what is being taught to the lives and experiences of their pupils, teaching in ways that are sensitive to the contexts in which pupils live and with which they are familiar.
11. In relating to their own pupils, our candidates demonstrate that pupil views are important.

Of course, this set of dispositions is an example. A faculty that adopted these dispositions or a similar set as goals would also need to teach other skills and understandings, some of which are prerequisites for these dispositions. One cannot have a disposition without an associated skill.

The advantages to aspiring to change the dispositions of our candidates seem to be the following. First, because dispositions are closely related to skills and practices, the focus seems to move away from the dicey topic of beliefs. Second, because dispositions can be written at a convenient level of abstraction, not “micro” and not “macro,” teacher educators might more likely agree on a set as a focus for a particular program. Finally, dispositions can be strengthened by modeling and through apprenticeship experiences. Focusing on dispositions might be a way out of the dead end my analysis of the literature on changing beliefs suggests.

Summary

This paper cited authorities such as Kennedy (1997) and Bruner (1996) as asserting that the prior beliefs of teacher candidates can hinder learning about teaching. The implication that seems reasonable is that teacher educators must uncover and change particular beliefs that hinder the efficacy of teacher education. Next, problems associated with changing beliefs—technical problems, theoretical problems, and ethical problems—were cited. Finally, it was suggested that instead of conceptualizing the problem as one of “beliefs,” if teacher educators would see the problem as one of dispositions, many of the issues would disappear. The reader must decide if that is the case.

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Note

A version of this paper is available in the spring 2000 issue of *Early Childhood Research & Practice (ECRP)* available at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v3n1/raths.html>.

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