

Pre-service teachers' beliefs about initial literacy

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Abstract

As part of a four-year research project aimed at tracing pre-service teachers' beliefs, the study reported in this paper investigated the beliefs about initial literacy, displayed by prospective teachers studying to work at the kindergarten and primary school level. In particular, it tapped into the beliefs that emerged from interviews conducted among first-year students of teacher education in the years 2012-2013. With a relatively small number of participants (16), each student was interviewed and those interviews were analyzed, taking into account models of discourse-in-interaction. The results show differences as well as similarities between the two groups. At the same time, they indicate the recurring nature of some beliefs, such as the widespread assumption that the sooner children begin learning to read and write, the better they will be, or that by the time students arrive at primary school, they should have already mastered these skills in order to fully benefit from formal schooling.

1. Introduction

Learning to read and write is an essential part of education in any literate society. In Spain, traditionally, this responsibility is in the hands of the school that, at the same time, has to deal with the social pressure involved in the development

of literacy. Teachers' role in this process is indisputable, as is the fact that their actions are influenced by their cognitions (Cambra 2000). Some researchers have suggested that teacher education programs do not have an impact on teachers' beliefs (Kagan 1992; Peacock 2001). This is the main reason why the focus of the present paper is on initial teacher training and on the beliefs manifested by prospective teachers.

In the late 1970s, Lortie (1975) talked about the importance of socialization in teacher education. In particular, he distinguished between three different scenarios of this process, of which the most important for teachers is formal schooling. Specifically, he wrote about *apprenticeship of observation*, which is the consequence of school attendance, because by the time children enter college they will have spent more or less 13,000 hours in the classroom (Lortie 1975: 61). Since then, many authors have emphasized such early socialization as a fundamental factor which explains a lack of change in educational contexts. Chong, Wong and Queck (2005) link this petrification of educational systems to the absence of research on teacher's beliefs in initial teacher education. When discussing *unrealistic optimism* identified in pre-service teachers, Weinstein (2000) also points to such exposure to educational systems as the main factor underlying these rigid attitudes. In a study conducted in the Faculty of Teacher Training of the University of Barcelona, Cambra (2008) set out to explore pre-service teachers' beliefs during their mandatory practice period at school. On the basis of the results, she concluded that the impact of teacher training program was marginal. Even though the program itself had undergone a number of changes to reflect the Bologna Process, it turned out that they were insufficient to have an influence on the students' beliefs.

In order to investigate teachers' cognitions, the present researchers adopted as a starting point Woods' (1996) system, based on beliefs, assumptions and knowledge (BAK). Several revisions of this system have been made but the version proposed by Cambra (2000) is used here as a point of reference because of its completeness. This modification involved taking into consideration the concept of social representations (Jodelet 1994) as well as adopting a broader perspective on the concept of beliefs and knowledge. The research project represents a response to Borg's (2003) and Richard's (2009) appeal for more longitudinal, qualitative studies which have the potential to provide more valid insight into what happens as pre-service teachers engage in their training.

2. The study

2.1. Aims

The study reported in the present paper represents part of longitudinal research which aimed to follow pre-service teachers in the course of their university education. More precisely, the main objective was to explore the manner in which teacher education impacts students' beliefs with a view to better understanding the processes that take place in the course of such training and offering guidelines on how such education can be improved.

2.2. Participants

The research project was conducted at the University of Barcelona and involved 16 pre-service teachers who were divided into two groups. The first group ($n = 8$) was composed of students preparing to become kindergarten teachers (from 0 to 6 years), while the second ($n = 8$) was made up of participants studying to become teachers in primary school (from 6 to 12 years). They were in the first year of their program and had the benefit of both theoretical subjects in methodology or pedagogy, and teaching practice during which they were required to observe and conduct lessons in regular schools for a mandatory period of time.

2.3. Method

Barcelos (2003) points out that one of the best ways of obtaining qualitative data is by means of semi-structured interviews. Therefore, in order to address the research questions listed above, the researchers conducted interviews which included preset questions but also left room for additional queries that could come up in the course of the conversation. This design ensured that the same themes would be covered in each interview but without the danger of losing the personal touch of qualitative data collection. The researchers carried out 16 in-depth interviews, one with each of the participants, which were approximately 15 minutes in length. Here, what has to be taken into account is the dynamic character of beliefs (Dufva 2003), which indicates that the results reported below are reflective of a specific moment in the students' lives, the moment in which a particular interview took place. It should also be noted that the described beliefs represent only some of the patterns that emerged from the collected data. Finally, the analysis presented in this paper is confined to the first round of data collection that took place at the end of the first year of the teacher training program that the students were offered.

A slightly modified version of the discourse-in-interaction model proposed by Kerbrat-Orechioni (2005) was employed in the analysis of the data. The initial model includes three dimensions of analysis: (1) the *interlocutive dimension* concerns to whom the message is addressed; (2) the *thematic dimension* focuses on topics that are touched upon; and (3) the *expository dimension* places emphasis on how the message is conveyed. For the kind of data collected in this study, that is interview data, the most suitable dimensions to work with are the last two. On the one hand, the thematic dimension underlines the topic, the key words or the cluster words, among others. On the other hand, the expository dimension allows the researcher to analyze discourse by determining what kind of connectors and pronouns are used, identifying personal markers of positioning, detecting the use of metaphors or verbal periphrasis, etc.

Once all the interviews had been analyzed in accordance with the model, the students' beliefs were inferred from a holistic, emic perspective. In the next section, the most common six beliefs will be presented for the two groups. Only the beliefs which appeared a minimum of three times are included. When a particular belief was identified on a few occasions, the number of times is indicated in brackets.

2.4. Results

Tables 1 and 2 present the most common beliefs for the two groups of the pre-service teachers who participated in the study. As can be seen from Table 1, which shows the findings for the prospective kindergarten teachers, some of the beliefs, such as A or F, are very general, which means that they are valid not only for developing literacy but also for other types of learning, while others correspond to learning how to read and write. Basically, they pertain to timing, as is the case with B, which is related to when reading should be started, or C, which refers to the fact that children starting to attend primary schools should already be able to read and write. D constitutes a reflection of the common assumption that the sooner children start learning, the more effective this process will be. Finally, belief E concerns social pressure, a phenomenon which was mentioned in the introduction.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">A. The kid must be interested when learning.B. Children should start to read and write when they are 4/5 years old.C. When children arrive at primary school, they should know to read and write.D. The sooner children start learning, the better (4).E. There is social pressure in learning to read and write.F. Multilingualism and multiculturalism are positive phenomena (5). |
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Table 1: Common beliefs among kindergarten pre-service teachers.

Table 2 presents the six most common beliefs manifested by the pre-service teachers preparing to teach in primary school. Also, in this case, the beliefs are very general as they are connected with broader educational issues, which can be seen in G or L. Others concentrate yet again on the issue of timing, with H concerning when children should be able to read and write and J referring to the optimal age for starting to develop literacy. In fact, belief J is particularly interesting because it was displayed the most frequently in this group. Also, in this group of pre-service teachers, we can identify the conviction that an early start in learning is likely to produce better results (I). Finally, K makes a reference to future education and the fact that knowing how to read and write is indispensable in this respect.

- G. The kid must be interested when learning.
- H. When children arrive at primary school, they should know to read and write (5).
- I. The sooner the children start learning, the better (4).
- J. Children should start to read and write when they are 3/4 years old or 4/5 (6).
- K. Such learning is basic because future knowledge will come in a written form.
- L. Multilingualism and multiculturalism are positive phenomena.

Table 2: Common beliefs among primary school pre-service teachers.

As can be seen from the analysis, some beliefs are shared by the two groups, as is the case with A/G, C/H, D/I or F/L, whereas others are very similar with only minute differences, as evident in B/J. The students in both groups share the conviction that developing initial literacy is a gradual process and it takes time to achieve this goal. There is no agreement on the exact age when children should start learning, as the difference concerning the optimal time for this to happen amounts to two years. The students generally believe that children need to be interested in what they are learning and they emphasize the necessity of motivating them. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they are convinced that by the time children begin primary school (at the age of 6 or 7), they should already know how to read and write.

3. Conclusion

One of the interviewees was quite explicit in declaring that she would teach in the same way in which she was taught, which clearly demonstrates the influence of what Lortie (1978) called *apprenticeship of observation*. For this reason, teacher training needs to incorporate instructional approaches which differ from those that students experienced as school learners. At the same time, students should be made aware of their previous learning which they typically experienced when attending school, and encouraged to make comparisons between the old and new ways.

Some contradictions were also identified in the participants' responses to the interview questions. First of all, while the students were aware of the social pressure involved in learning to read and write, they would themselves exert such pressure, as evident from their conviction that children should be able to master these skills at a particular time. Also, their beliefs concerning the positive value of multilingualism and multiculturalism need further investigation in order to see if they are simply an expression of a politically correct assumption or a genuine conviction. This is because the participants failed to provide in-depth arguments in support of this view. Finally, the students in the two groups maintained that by the time children arrive at primary school, they should have already learnt to read and write, even though the starting age at some schools is six.

What is unquestionable is that teacher education needs to exert a real impact on pre-service teachers' beliefs. The crux of the problem, however, is how students should be made cognizant of their beliefs. Several authors have suggested reflection as a means of awareness-raising. However, while Peacock (2001) talks about guided reflection, Cambra (2000) places emphasis on reflective practice. It seems obvious though that what surely needs to be done is to introduce changes into Spanish and Catalan teacher training programs as only in this way can it be hoped to enhance their effectiveness.

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