

## Teachers' beliefs about teaching and encouraging reflexivity in teaching practices

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### Abstract

*The paper is based on the hypothesis and the assumption that teachers' beliefs and perspectives on teaching have a significant impact on their behaviour in the classroom, as well as that they guide and direct reflexivity in teaching practice. In that manner, the teachers' beliefs and their reflective practice have become the necessary and integral part for the improvement of the teaching quality. The aim of this paper is to explore the connection between the beliefs and behaviour of teachers in the classroom through the analysis of the literature, as well as to consider the possibilities and effects of reflexivity in teaching practices. The results of this research indicate that, despite the different points of view among scholars and numerous studies, there is an agreement on the importance and role of teachers' beliefs and their impact on teaching practice. Furthermore, it was concluded that teachers' reflective practice is a significant step towards improving the quality of teaching and development of teacher competencies.*

**Keywords:** teachers' beliefs, reflexivity, teaching practices, teaching perspectives.

### 1. Introduction

The subject of this paper are teachers' beliefs about teaching, which are among the inevitable topics when considering the issue of the quality of the educational process and the possibility of its improvement. As deep-seated beliefs that teachers hold about the nature of teaching (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylance, 2008), these beliefs guide their perceptions of the teaching situation and shape their actions in relation to that situation (Pratt & Associates, 1998). Some authors (Richard & Lockhart, 1996) define teaching as a very personal activity and it is not unexpected to claim that the teachers bring various beliefs and assumptions about what makes effective teaching (Richard & Lockhart, 1996). In that sense, teaching is much more than a set of abilities and approaches (Larrivee, 2000), and assessments of teaching effectiveness are often made through concrete and visible indicators such as classroom teacher activities or student achievement. The

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papers on effective teaching emphasize the fact that teaching techniques are just the tip of the iceberg and that a deeper perceiving and understanding is necessary, which includes studying the intentions and beliefs of teachers (Pratt & Associates, 1998). Also, authors points to all the complexity of the teaching process which, as a type of professional activity, needs to be built on values, beliefs and knowledge (Solomon & Tresman, 1999).

One of the starting points in the analysis of teaching practice is the teachers' beliefs, which are not always clearly visible, but have a significant impact on teaching. Beliefs and values support most teachers' decisions and actions, and therefore form what is called a "teaching culture" (Richard & Lockhart, 1996, p. 30) and direct teachers' behavior and thinking (Fives & Buehl, 2016). Some of the considerations of teachers' beliefs indicate that they are a result of growing up, a perception of life experiences, or an outcome of the socialization process in schools (Raths, 2001) and have an extraordinary impact on how teachers actually teach (Nespor, 1987).

Today the importance of teachers' beliefs and their influence on shaping teaching practice is increasingly recognized in research (Collins & Pratt, 2011; Milutinović & Anđelković, 2018; Pratt & Associates, 1998; Pratt & Collins, 2000; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996). On the other hand, nowadays there are many discussions regarding the importance of analysing and monitoring one's own teaching practice, where reflexivity refers to the tendency of teachers to question their own actions in the light of their knowledge and beliefs (Schön, 1987). Reviewing the teachers' own practice is essential since it can help teachers to make their actions more effective and improve their work.

In that context, purpose of the paper is a narrative literature review that offers one way of thinking the relationship between teacher's beliefs about teaching and reflective practice, with an emphasis on promoting reflective practice. The research question asked in this paper refers to the consideration and understanding of possible relationships between teachers' beliefs about teaching, teaching practice and reflexivity. The results of theoretical and empirical studies were analyzed in order to provide a wider view of the conceptual definition of teachers' beliefs, but also to present empirical findings about their impact on reflective teaching practice. The paper will first analyze the relevant studies that deal with the relationship between teachers' beliefs about teaching, their teaching practice and the concept of reflective practice, and then perceive the question of reflective practice/reflexivity in teaching and ways to enhance this process. In this sense, the wider theoretical framework in which this paper is placed refers to the current conceptions of professional teacher education, which are based on the concept of the teacher as a reflective practitioner.

## **2. Teachers' beliefs and perspectives on teaching**

In this part of the paper, attention is focused on the analysis of the relevant theoretical and empirical studies which conceptualize the concept of teachers' beliefs/perspectives

about teaching and examine the relationship of those beliefs with teaching practice, especially with the concept of reflective practice.

Teachers' beliefs are most often defined as deep-rooted perceptions that teachers have about the essence or nature of teaching (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008) and as such are largely resistant to change (Raths, 2001). Some researchers (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992) singled out two types of beliefs in teachers: *basic beliefs* which are more resistant to changes and can exist for a longer period of time, and *peripheral beliefs* that occur at the beginning of teacher's career, usually are not re-examined, and may disappear in contact with new experience.

Some of the first research was prompted by the idea of the connection of teachers' early educational experiences with their later actions in teaching practice (Lortie, 1977). Lortie introduces the term *apprenticeship of observation* to indicate the impact of experience during the schooling process from the earliest days on the later behaviour of teachers in their practice. In addition, three types of experiences stand out as the main sources of teachers' beliefs and attitudes: own experiences, schooling and teaching experiences, and experiences with official knowledge - school subjects and pedagogical knowledge (Thomas, 2017).

Therefore, teachers have strong beliefs about: what is right and wrong in a classroom, the role that education has, explanations for individual variation in academic outcomes, and many different areas (Raths, 2001). Accordingly, teachers' beliefs shape and guide their perceptions and precede individual reflections and actions. Numerous studies (Lam & Kember, 2006; Milutinović & Anđelković, 2018; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Pratt & Associates, 1998; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996) confirm the influence of teachers' beliefs on almost all aspects of teaching.

Although some authors claim that teachers' beliefs are difficult to change (Pajares, 1992; Raths, 2001), other results indicate that 63% of teachers believe that they change their own concepts of teaching (Alger, 2009). It can be concluded that teachers believe more in changing the beliefs and their own ways of teaching, than that these processes actually take place in teaching practice. Recent research (Maksić & Pavlović, 2019) have found that university teachers rely on experiences from their own schooling, whether they want to repeat them or avoid them. With such an approach, teachers develop their own style of teaching and assessment that is built and re-examined throughout their careers.

Beliefs are assumed to be implicit or tacit because teachers are often unaware of how their personal beliefs affect certain behaviours. Some research findings (Oppell & Von Aldridge, 2015) suggest that teachers are convinced to implement constructivist practices using mostly superficial activities which reflect teachers' limited understanding. In addition, recent research among primary and secondary school teachers (Anđelković, 2017) shows that 49.9% of respondents assess their teaching as closest to a contextualist approach in relation to a realistic and relativistic approach that represent categories of teachers' epistemological beliefs (Shrow & Olafson, 2003). Also,

authors who study teachers' epistemological beliefs indicate that *naive* epistemological beliefs are clearly reflected in practice, while *sophisticated* beliefs are not always obviously related to practice (Kang & Wallace, 2004). In that sense, it is necessary to connect epistemological beliefs, teaching context and teaching goals.

A significant contribution to the consideration and research of teacher beliefs has been made by Pratt and Associates (1998) by introducing the term teaching perspective. Through numerous works (Collins & Pratt, 2011; Pratt & Associates, 1998; Pratt & Collins, 2000), the authors have tried to describe, compose and explain the components of teachers' actions in practice. The concept and term of a teaching *perspective* emerged as a result of several years of studying and researching teacher practice in Canada, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the United States. The main idea of the author is imbued with the need and emphasis on the importance of re-examining one's own beliefs and values in teaching and learning. Based on extensive research, interviews and instrument development, the authors defined five teaching perspective (Developmental, Apprenticeship, Transmission, Nurturing and Social Reform). Accordingly, each of perspectives represents a "legitimate view of teaching, subject only to variations in the quality of implementation, not the nature of their underlying values" (Pratt & Associates, 1998, p. xiii). Also, perspectives determine the roles and idealized image of oneself as a teacher and represent the basis for thinking in practice, while each of the perspectives in teaching represents a complex mix of actions, intentions and beliefs.

When explaining the perspectives in teaching, Pratt and Associates (1998) point out the interconnectedness of beliefs and intentions, which give meaning and direct actions in teaching practice. In that sense, these three aspects – beliefs, intentions and actions are at the core of every teaching perspective. Teaching *beliefs* are ideologies, worldviews, and assumptions that are used to interpret teacher experiences. Teaching *intentions* are intended for teacher behaviours in teaching taking into account real-world constraints. *Actions* represent behaviours in teaching that describe teachers' engagements. All three mentioned aspects are interrelated (Collins & Pratt, 2011). Also, studies by Pratt and Associates (1998) have shown that perspectives on teaching are not mutually exclusive; similar actions, intentions, and even beliefs can be found in multiple perspectives. Accordingly, there is not only one answer to the question of what "good teaching" is, that is, that answer largely depends on broader cultural specifics and the context in which teaching is discussed (Lungulov, Milutinović, & Anđelković, 2020).

Researches on teacher beliefs mention a number of different terms such as: orientations, concepts, beliefs, approaches and intentions (Kember, 1997), all of which refer to certain notions and preconceptions of teachers about what teaching is and how it should be to look. However, it is still possible to distinguish between concepts and approaches in teaching. Lam and Kember (2006) define teaching concepts as teaching beliefs that lead the teacher's perception of the situation and as such form actions and teaching approaches, while approaches represent the ways in which beliefs are placed

within practice. In that sense, it can be concluded that teachers' beliefs represent the starting points that are manifested as teachers' behaviours in the classroom.

However, there are different arguments and research findings regarding the question of the correlation of teachers' beliefs and their effects in the classroom. Certain empirical studies (Ho, Watkins, & Kelly, 2001; Kember & Kwan, 2000; Martin & Lueckenhausen, 2005; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996, 2004) show that there is a connection between teachers' beliefs about teaching and their approaches to teaching, that is their action in teaching practice. However, in other empirical studies (Levin & Wadmany, 2005; Milutinović & Anđelković, 2018) a partial inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and actions in teaching practice was determined. Also, there are arguments that little is known about the relationship between epistemological views of the world of teachers, as view related to teachers' beliefs about the nature of knowledge and the process of learning, and teaching practice (Shrow & Olafson, 2003). Strong contextual influences such as external examination syllabi (Lam & Kember, 2006), or a teaching environment that changes teachers' beliefs (Demir, Erdal, Bagceci, Vural, & Müjdat, 2015) are highlighted as causes that can lead to a complete separation between teachers' concepts and approaches.

The analysis of the studied literature allows the conclusion that understanding, researching and monitoring the fundamental beliefs/perspective of teachers about teaching are crucial issues, since teachers' beliefs/perspectives about teaching influence the activities and decisions made by the teacher, which consequently affects the styles of teaching work and the behavior of teachers in classrooms. Accordingly, the studied literature contributes to the view that beliefs about teaching shape teachers' perceptions and evaluations that precede individual reflections and actions. In this sense, reflective practice assumes the willingness of the teacher to become aware of and question his own beliefs on which he builds his actions, which were previously incorporated into his practice without questioning.

### **3. Reflective practice in teaching and ways of its enhancing**

In this part of the paper the focus is on analysis of theoretical and empirical studies which conceptualize the term reflective practice/reflexivity in teaching, where special emphasis was placed on the question of ways to enhance this process, using various activities and tools for reflection.

Introducing the term of reflection into the field of education and pedagogical literature, Dewey (1933) identified reflection as a binding segment of learning and teaching. He believed that, if reflection does not occur, the teaching process becomes static and unchanging, which violates its essential property, and leads to the traditional approach to teaching. The basis of any reflection in Dewey's concept is experience, and he emphasized that "... to reflect is to look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings which are the capital stock for intelligent dealing with further experiences" (Dewey, 1938, p. 87), as well as not to learn from experiences but from reflections on experiences (Dewey, 1933).

Numerous researchers after Dewey, continued to develop the ideas of reflection, reflective practice and the reflective practitioner. Among them, the works of Schön (1987, 1991) stand out, which, among other things, indicate that the awareness of one's own intuitive thinking grows out of practice through articulation with others, emphasizing the importance of cooperation with other colleagues and their role in developing individual reflections. Graves (2002) considers that the most powerful tool of a teacher is reflection, for exploring and understanding their previous teaching experience and redirect their practice.

Reflexivity is defined as a higher level of the process of learning and teaching that arises through the awareness of personal beliefs and ways of acting in the classroom, whereby it presupposes the ability and readiness of teachers to change in order to improve student and personal development. As a response to the question why reflection is defined as the essence of the teaching process, the explanation can be singled out that "unless teachers engage in critical reflection and ongoing discovery they stay trapped in unexamined judgments, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations" (Larrivee, 2000, p. 294). Reflection is a consequence of considering the inner beliefs and thinking of the teacher, which is expressed through actions in the classroom. At the basis of the reflection process is the essential question of how an individual can improve teaching practice and thus their own professional development and learning outcomes of students.

Teaching can be conceptualized in a number of different ways because it is a complex process (Richard & Lockhart, 1996), while reflection is a strong and deep deliberation on teacher actions from initial planning to realization of ideas in practice with reliance on experiential learning. Reflection is thus considered a feature of quality teaching and proactive action in teaching practice, suggesting that a trigger for deeper understanding of teaching is critical reflection (Richard & Lockhart, 1996). It is also significant that Dewey (1938) pointed out that an open mind, responsibility, honesty and immediacy are important for reflective practice, which in part indicated the connection between the personal characteristics of teachers and reflexivity. In this context, Larrivee (2000) emphasize that reflection is a distinctive feature of the reflective practitioner, and that the term *critical reflection* combines critical inquiry, conscious consideration of ethical implications and consequences of teaching practice with self-reflection, deep examination of personal beliefs and assumptions about potentials of human being and learning.

Over time, reflection has become an important aspect of the study of teaching practice and the subject of numerous studies, which further emphasizes the importance of encouraging a constructivist approach to teaching and the active role of students and teachers. The key tendencies of teaching improvement are characterized by the transition from the model of knowledge transfer to the constructivist model that emphasizes the personal experience of students (Milutinović, 2016). The results of the research confirm that constructivist teachers have a richer repertoire of strategies compared to non-constructivist teachers and that they strive to use teaching strategies that are potentially

more effective in encouraging conceptual change (Hashweh, 1996). On the other hand, some research suggest that teachers believe that they implement constructivist practices even though they are using mostly superficial activities which reflect teachers' limited understanding (Oppell & Von Aldridge, 2015).

The professional development of teachers thus begins with awareness and re-examination of beliefs and existing ways of working. There are five stages in the development of reflective practice (Bartlett, 1990), with each stage focusing on specific issues that help the teacher determine his or her beliefs and actions: 1. Mapping (What I do as a teacher?), 2. Informing (What is the meaning of my learning?), 3. Competition (On what base my teaching was created?); 4. Assessment (What can I do and how can I teach differently?); 5. Action (What and how I will teach now?).

Furthermore, when it comes to the possibilities of developing reflective practice, it is significant to discuss the implementation of various activities and tools for reflection. Activities and tools for reflection make it easier for teachers to answer the question - how can I review my work? The purpose and aim of reflective tools is to provide teachers with the opportunity to independently explore certain phenomena, processes and circumstances in their classrooms. Since the activities and tools for reflection facilitate the reconstruction of the experience and actions of teachers, as well as the evaluation of their own teaching, they enable teachers to plan their further work. Numerous recommendations and suggestions to teachers for the application of certain reflective tools, understanding the meaning and possibilities of improving reflective practice can be found. For example, nine dimensions of reflective practice are defined which enable reflexion through action research, use of literature, review of their beliefs, use of new strategies, etc. (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012). These recommendations relate to conducting a systematic evaluation of teaching practice and can be summarised as suggestion for teachers to: 1. study their own teaching; 2. systematically evaluate their teaching through classroom research; 3. link the theory with their practice; 4. question their own personal theories and beliefs; 5. consider alternative perspectives and possibilities; 6. try out new strategies and ideas; 7. maximise the learning potential of students; 8. enhance the quality of their teaching; 9. continue to improve their own teaching (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2012).

Also, certain procedures for developing reflexivity have been proposed, which include the use of professional literature, class recordings, surveys and questionnaires, class observation, and action research (Richard & Lockhart, 1996). Those procedures include different strategies that teachers can use in order to reflect and improve their teaching: 1. Teaching journals 2. Lesson reports 3. Surveys and questionnaires 4. Audio and video recordings 5. Observation 6. Action research (Richard & Lockhart, 1996, p. 6).

Additionally, reflective journals are suggested as important tools for developing reflective practice (Göker, 2016; Ho & Richards, 1993) because they are primarily aimed at recording specific classroom events and a variety of reflections, allowing teachers to discover their own assumptions and beliefs guided by teaching work. Given the current intensive digitalization of the teaching process, digital tools are being developed more

and more, which enable the development of reflectivity in teaching practice. In that sense, it is recommended to create professional blogs, use social networks, and participate in discussion groups, interactive microblogging, use electronic textbooks and other resources that are useful digital tools in the development of reflexivity (Williamson, Mears, & Bustos, 2015).

Since the attempt to consciously introduce questioning into everyday work can be very demanding for teachers, it is important to point out the challenges that teachers may face in the process of reflection. In that framework, when it comes to the subject of teacher reflexivity, it is significant to address the potential risks that teachers should become aware of when reflexively observing their own teaching (Graves, 2002). The first risk refers to monitoring the reflection process without taking any action based on the obtained data, while the second concerns simply considering reflection as a process through which the observed problem has already been solved, although the main goal is to find the basic reasons that led to the problem. Therefore, reflective practice is a practice that is developed through deep re-examination through one's own analysis, but also discussions with colleagues about the ways of working in teaching, with an emphasis on improving one's own development, student achievement and teaching quality. Noticing one's own weaknesses but also virtues is one of the characteristics of a reflexive approach by which a teacher directs and plans their own professional development. In this way, reflective learning occurs by approaching one's own weaknesses as opportunities that can be further developed and improved. The reflexive approach is based on existing beliefs that change through processes of critical reflection, while shared experiences are valuable resources in encouraging teachers to work and act more successfully.

The analysis of the studied literature allows us to conclude that reflective practice is a process through which the teacher first analyzes and then enhances his own teaching practice. However, researching the literature allows us to state that this process is not simple, especially when it comes to teachers at the beginning of their career. In this sense, the activities and tools for reflection that can help them in reviewing their own practice are of particular importance. It is also significant that, regardless of whether it is about the using of tools, such as, journal writing, self-reporting or making recordings of lessons, the goal is for the teacher to become aware of the beliefs on which he bases his teaching practice so that he forms a coherent system of beliefs that can manage and guide the way in which the teacher implements the teaching activity.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Teachers' beliefs and their assumptions about teaching and learning have a certain impact on the process of learning and the teaching efficiency, and therefore it is crucial that teachers discover and understand the beliefs and values on which they base their own teaching practice. However, in order to bring certain changes in education, it is not enough to merely present existing research and theories to teachers, but it is necessary



for teachers to build their own teaching theories based on personal knowledge, skills, training and experience during lectures (Richard & Lockhart, 1996, p. 203). Also, the recommendation for creating education policy is to enable teachers to do self-reflection and to re-examine their beliefs in the context of education reforms (Fives & Buehl, 2016).

Reflection is a process which includes a number of reflective tools and that improves the quality of teaching and teachers' competencies. Reflection is also an integral part of improving the education quality and the professional type of obligation that contributes to the growth of professional activities, teaching practices and thus the development and progress of students. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers are encouraged to reflect, to become aware and to re-examine their own beliefs and actions in order to influence changes in everyday practice. It is about the fact that the reflective approach includes changes in the way teachers think, act and experience the teaching process using their own and the experiences of other colleagues. Reflective analysis, reports, recording lessons are just a part of the repertoire of reflective tools that provide opportunities for improving the quality of teaching. Taking into account all the above, the recommendations refer to the need to develop and apply reflective practices in the education programs of teachers and education professionals, as well as to encourage and train practitioners to use various reflective tools to support awareness of teaching beliefs on what their actions are based.

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