Beliefs about Classroom Practice: A Study of Primary Teacher Trainees in Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract

This qualitative study sought to gain insights into teacher trainees' beliefs about teaching and learning, and the relationship between their beliefs and classroom practice. A case study methodology was used to examine the beliefs and classroom practice of three primary teacher trainees who were enrolled at a teachers' training college in Trinidad and Tobago. Findings suggest that the trainees seemed to hold well established beliefs about teaching and learning, which were apparently influenced by their experiences in school, in the home, and as teachers in primary schools. There were variations in the extent to which the trainees' beliefs influenced their classroom practice. A number of situational and personal factors seemed to impact the trainees' ability to enact their beliefs about teaching and learning in the classroom. The study underscores the importance of giving teacher trainees opportunities to interrogate their beliefs and the manner in which these beliefs impact teaching practice.

Keywords: Beliefs; teacher trainees' beliefs; classroom practice; primary teacher trainees.

1. Introduction

This study examined the relationship between the beliefs and classroom practice of primary level teacher trainees in Trinidad and Tobago. The inquiry utilized a qualitative case study approach to examine the trainees' beliefs about teaching and learning, and the relationship between the trainees' beliefs and practice in the classroom. This phenomenon was explored through the experiences of three teacher trainees who were studied during and after the completion of their two-year teacher training programme. This study was conducted during a period of change in teacher training at both the local and international level.

The last two decades could best be described as an era in which there has been increased dialogue on approaches that could be used to better prepare teachers for their roles in the classroom. Further, there has been a growing movement at international, regional and country levels to develop approaches for enhancing the quality of training programmes offered to new teachers.

The current study was situated within this milieu of global, regional and local reform of teacher training. In Trinidad and Tobago, the need has emerged for increased research that could help educators better understand the challenges and opportunities in learning to teach in the local educational context. The present study was situated in a microcosm of the broader context and explored one aspect of learning to teach, namely, the beliefs and classroom practice of primary teacher trainees at a teachers' college in Trinidad and Tobago. Beliefs about schools, teachers, teaching and learning are thought to play a pivotal role in what trainees learn in teacher training programmes and what they transfer to their practice in the classroom.

In Trinidad and Tobago, teacher trainees typically began teacher training programmes after acquiring a few years of teaching experience in the classroom.

This was the norm at both the primary and secondary school levels at the time of this study. The tradition of employing teachers before they received full professional training was due in part to a shortage of teachers in the system.

At Brookfield Teachers' College[1] (hereafter referred to as the College), some trainees in the cohort in which this study was conducted, had taught for as many as three years before the start of their training. Thus, teacher trainees in the local context would typically have had prior teaching experience which could be in contrast to trainees in other initial teacher training programmes cited in the literature.

Given the fact that entrants to teacher training programmes at all levels in the local system have some years of prior teaching experience, and given that beliefs about teaching can be shaped during those years, it is critical that we pay closer attention to the beliefs of teacher trainees.

In this study, the term *teacher training* refers to the process of preparing teachers for their work in the classroom and for the teaching profession. Locally, the term *teacher training* has been commonly used to describe the professional development of teachers. Further, the term *teacher trainees* is used to describe candidates in teacher training programmes in the country and is thus also used to describe participants in this study.

Beliefs about teaching and learning are of particular interest to researchers because of the impact they seem to have on what trainees learn in teacher training programmes and what they transfer to their classroom practice later on (Borg, 2003; Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000; Smith, 2006; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Beliefs of Teacher Trainees

It is generally agreed by proponents in the field of teacher training, that teacher trainees' beliefs about teaching, learning, and schooling are rooted in their life experiences. In her review of the literature, Richardson (1996) identified three forms of experience that are thought to influence the development of beliefs about teaching: personal experience, experience with schooling and instruction, and experience with formal knowledge.

Personal experience is thought to include aspects of life that go into the formation of a worldview; beliefs about self in relation to others; understandings of the relationship between schooling and society; and other forms of personal, familial, and cultural understandings. Ethnic and socioeconomic background, gender, geographic location, and religious upbringing may all affect an individual's beliefs that, in turn, may affect learning to teach and teaching.

Experience with schooling and instruction is often linked to Lortie's (1975) discussion of the apprenticeship experience which suggests that entrants come to pre-service teacher training programmes with a set of deep-seated beliefs about the nature of teaching based on their own experiences as students. This concurs with Nespor's (1987) notion of episodic memory which argues that critical episodes in an individual's school life can help to shape his/her beliefs about teaching and learning.

Experience with formal knowledge, according to Richardson (1996), refers to perspectives which have been agreed on within a community of scholars as worthwhile and valid. Two types of formal knowledge are of particular interest in learning to teach: the knowledge of subject matter or school subjects and formal pedagogical knowledge. Knowledge of subject matter, in combination with understandings of how students learn the subject matter, forms what is called pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987). Experience with pedagogical knowledge usually begins in pre-service teacher training programmes and relates to the practice of teaching.

An extensive review of the literature on the beliefs of entering teacher candidates done by Brookhart and Freeman (1992) revealed certain patterns in the research designs. The designs were mainly one-shot case studies; one group pre-post designs, with measures taken at the beginning and end of the first education course; or static group comparisons. These writers noted that there were few longitudinal studies that observed the same students through their teacher training. The review identified a number of major shortcomings in the research, one of which was an overemphasis on survey methodology. The vast majority of the studies considered in the review used a survey questionnaire or paper-and-pencil instrument.

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[1] Brookfield Teachers College is a pseudonym.

Brookhart and Freeman (1992) argued that the over-emphasis placed on survey methodology is problematic for studies of teacher trainees' beliefs about teaching. They questioned whether survey items could capture the essence of what an entering teacher candidate really thinks about teaching and how he/she thinks students learn.

Brookhart and Freeman (1992) and Richardson (1996) identified a number of approaches that can be used to explore the beliefs of teacher trainees more fully. Specifically, they stressed the need for: (a) more in-depth studies of teacher trainees' beliefs, and recommended the use of qualitative methodologies and case studies as these have the potential to lead to deeper insights into the beliefs held by teacher trainees during the course of teacher training; and (b) in-depth explorations of the relationship between the beliefs and classroom actions of the teacher trainees.

2.2 The Relationship between Beliefs and Classroom Practice

The examination of teachers' beliefs and classroom practice has been studied in different ways over the years. Fang (1996) and Richardson (1996), in their review of the literature, have identified notable shifts that have taken place in the study of teachers' beliefs and practice. They noted that early research on teachers' beliefs had often conceptualized the relationship between beliefs and practice as a simple, linear-causal one. Such research typically sought to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between beliefs and classroom behavior, and to formulate predictive indicators of teacher effectiveness. Common trends in such studies were the use of quantitative methods of data collection with instruments such as multiple choice tests, inventories and structured questionnaires to determine teachers' beliefs.

Recent studies suggest that the relationship between beliefs and actions is interactive and dynamic in nature. Beliefs are thought to drive actions; and experiences may lead to changes in and/or addition to beliefs (Sheen & O'Neill, 2005; Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson & Fry, 2004). Thompson (1992) posits that the research strongly suggests that the relationship between beliefs and practice is dialectic, not a simple cause-and-effect relationship. He further argued that future studies, particularly those having to do with effecting change, should seek to elucidate the dialectic between teachers' beliefs and practice, rather than try to determine whether and how changes in beliefs result in changes in practice.

Although it is generally suggested that the beliefs of teacher trainees are likely to influence their practice in the classroom, there is little research that seeks to elucidate specific aspects of this notion. A number of studies and analyses of research in the area (Beswick, 2006; Borg, 2003; Minor, Onwuegbuzie, Witcher & James, 2002; Smith, 2006) have commented on the gaps in the research and suggestions have been offered for future research. These suggestions include: (a) the use of approaches that could facilitate in-depth analyses and interpretations of teacher trainees' beliefs and classroom actions; (b) classroom observation of teacher trainees in field-based settings, whereby teacher trainees' beliefs and practices could be examined in actual classroom contexts; and (c) the study of teacher trainees in the first years after the completion of their training.

In summary, this inquiry sought to fill the void in the understanding of the nature of the relationship (if any) between teacher trainees' beliefs and classroom practice. It did not assume a causal relationship between teacher trainees' beliefs about teaching and learning and their practice in the classroom. It also acknowledged that diverse contributory factors, other than beliefs, might influence the classroom practice of teacher trainees. The study was designed so that any other emerging factors could be considered in the context in which they arose. The main research question formulated to guide the study was: What are primary teacher trainees' stated beliefs about teaching and learning, and what is the nature of the relationship (if any) between these beliefs and their practice in the classroom?

3. Methodology

3.1 Use of a Qualitative Case-Study Approach

The primary objective of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the trainees' beliefs and classroom practice; hence a qualitative case study approach was used. The decision to use a case study approach was based in part on the potential it offers to facilitate in-depth analysis, which was critical to obtaining a fuller understanding of the phenomenon. In the interest of in-depth analysis, it is recommended that just one or a small number of units be studied (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2000). The present study involved in-depth analyses of the beliefs and classroom practice of three teacher trainees during and after the completion of their two-year teacher training programme.

A purposive sampling strategy was used in selecting the participants for the study.   Purposive sampling facilitates the selection of cases that allow the researcher to discover, understand, and gain insights into the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998).

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

To gain a holistic perspective on the trainees' beliefs and practice, a combination of field observations and in-depth interviews was used.   The objective behind coupling observation with interview was to be able to probe more deeply into the trainees' beliefs and classroom practice. The interviews were semi-structured and were all audiotaped, with the permission of the participants. The grounded theory methodology was used for analysing the data, which was done manually. The grounded theory methodology involves: initial or open coding; developing categories of information; interconnecting the categories; creating a 'story' that connects the categories; and ending with a discursive set of theoretical propositions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2000). Throughout the process, data were compared with data, data with category, and a category with other categories, a technique called the constant comparative method.

Consistent with grounded theory methodology, the conceptual categories were developed from the interpretation of the data. The distinct advantage of using this data analysis technique is that it enables the researcher to capture the unique views and beliefs of each participant. Where pre-determined or pre-conceived categories are used in the data analysis, the participants' individual beliefs can be easily overlooked or neglected. To understand the relationship between beliefs and classroom practice, the trainee's stated beliefs about teaching and learning were compared with his/her classroom actions. Further, the data from the three trainees were compared in a cross-case analysis to elucidate any similarities and differences in the trainees' beliefs about teaching and learning, and in the relationship (if any) between their beliefs and classroom practice. In the interest of anonymity, all the individuals and schools in this study have been given pseudonyms.

4. Findings

4.1 Trainees' Beliefs about Teaching and Learning

The trainees, Andrew, Marisa and Lisa, began their training with certain beliefs about teaching and learning that seemed to be shaped by their unique educational experiences. The trainees' beliefs seemed to be based in large part on their recollections of teachers who had taught them in school, and who served as role models in their lives. Lisa spoke fondly about her best teacher in primary school who was a source of inspiration for her:

> She was my best teacher in primary school and I always said I would like to become a teacher like her. I liked how she taught and how she carried herself.

 Marisa remembered only one individual in all her school life whom she considered to be a good teacher, and who served as a positive role model to her:

> Miss Jones, she taught me in Standard 2, she was a real lover of teaching. You could see she was in teaching for the love of it - she was the only teacher that made teaching look attractive…. She used to make me feel as if she was my mother....I felt as if I could come and tell her anything that was bothering me. She had a way she would hold you close to her, and encourage you….Even though I had her for only one year, her contact with me left a life-long memory. She is no longer alive, but I still remember her.

In contrast, Andrew remembered several persons in his school life whom he considered to be good teachers:

> I think fortunately for me, I had a lot of people who I consider to be good teachers.

While the trainees were all able to identify at least one former teacher who was a positive role model, only Marisa spoke of having several teachers in her life whom she considered to be negative role models. She was also the only trainee who appeared to develop a negative view of the teaching profession based on experiences with her teachers:

> On the whole, as I said before, I was not impressed with teachers, on the whole. So I never wanted to become a teacher. I had many teachers that made me feel so sour, and gave me such a fear of school, I was turned off school….Most of the teachers that I encountered, never made me want to come back to school. They never made me feel that I would want to become a teacher either.

The trainees' beliefs about teaching and learning appeared to be shaped not only by their early experiences as pupils, but also by their experiences as teachers in the classroom.   Evidence of this was seen in their discourse about teaching and learning where they referred to situations that they encountered in classrooms or schools in which they had taught.

For example, Andrew drew on his teaching experience at Orange Hill Primary School when he highlighted the need to consider pupils' background and home environment in delivering the school curriculum:

> The teacher must take into consideration who he is teaching, the home environment in terms of like where the person is coming from. Like in the Orange Hill Primary area, you had to take into consideration where they were coming from and the problems at home. You had to bear that in mind in teaching the different subjects. In Social Studies, for example, knowing the homes that they were coming from was important when you were addressing issues like drugs. Knowing that some of them were coming from homes where their parents were involved with it.

Lisa drew on her past teaching of a particular concept in her Standard 1 class when she described how she thought pupils learn best:

> Children learn by doing….If a child does something, not only doing it, but enjoying it too, they will remember, they will remember better….I always remember I did a lesson on verbs in Standard 1, before I came to College, and I got everybody to perform some action, from their head.

Irrespective of the point of origin of the trainees' beliefs about teaching and learning, they all shared a common belief that focused on practice that was sensitive to the needs of the learner. They all believed that class work should be relevant to everyday life situations and the pupils' previous experiences. Lisa, in particular, felt that the use of the pupils' prior knowledge and experiences was critical to their learning. In keeping with their thinking on practical approaches to learning, they all advocated the use of teaching resources and hands-on experiences to facilitate pupils' understanding of concepts. For example, Andrew stressed the need to use concrete materials in teaching certain concepts, Marisa focused on the use of natural materials that exist in the environment, while Lisa considered the pupils themselves as a vital resource in their own learning.

Another belief that they had in common was the importance they placed on making the learning experience enjoyable and engaging for pupils. They seemed to believe that this would create a favorable environment for learning.

Each of the trainees was also unique in the nature of beliefs he/she articulated about teaching and learning. Marisa's stated beliefs seemed distinctly different from Andrew's and Lisa's in terms of her focus on pastoral and affective concerns, and possibly the factors that influenced the development of such beliefs. Marisa's beliefs appeared to be strongly rooted in childhood experiences both in and out of school, many of which were negative.

In recollecting her worst experience in school, Marisa highlighted the negative impact of her First-Year teacher, and underscored the need she seemed to have as a young learner to be cared for by the teacher. In an early-training discussion, she stated:

> I think my worst experience was in First Year. I was afraid of that class teacher. She never tried to understand when I came to school without doing my homework. She never cared. Sometimes she would put me out of class, and call me names, it was embarrassing….You see, at home, my mum would be so busy, because they running an inn, and then she have so many children - it was 16 of us, so she can't see about any homework at all. So, everybody was on their own, everybody had to see for himself. It was not easy. So, like most of the days I went to school, not doing my homework and not knowing my lesson. In my experience at Riverside Boys' School, out of a class of 24, two children might know their reading lesson. When they don't know, what yuh going to do? I had to teach the children, pick up the lesson, right. I went the extra mile. Why couldn't this lady have gone the extra mile with me?

Marisa's stated beliefs to some extent exemplified the phenomenon as described by Nespor (1987) who proposed the concept of 'alternativity'. Here, a teacher, for varying reasons might attempt to create ideal or alternative situations that differ from reality and/or from his or her own experience as a learner.

Nespor described how a teacher in his study who had traumatic experiences as a student, attempted to create the ideal classroom environment she had fantasized about as a child – friendly and fun. The teacher in Nespor's study often explained her actions in post-teaching interviews by recalling painful experiences she had as a student and expressing her desire to ensure that her students did not have a similar traumatic experience.

Not surprisingly, Marisa's stated beliefs about teaching and learning focused to a large extent on affective concerns, as in nurturing pupils and investing in their learning to bring them to their full potential as learners. Her view of what teaching involved was consistent with the stereotype of the female primary school teacher as one who is caring and nurturing. Marisa saw herself as a mother figure to her pupils, which seemed to be a deciding factor in her preference for teaching at the lower school level:

> I like the little ones, from Infants to Standard 2. You know why? I remember my life at those ages, and I remember how I was longing for somebody to love me and care for me, and I want to be that person in those children lives.

In educational literature that discusses primary level teachers, there is the stereotypic profile of this group as kind and caring individuals. This description of teachers is consistent with the dominant cultural images of teachers (George & Quamina-Aiyejina, 2003; Goldstein & Lake, 2000; Noddings, 1986; Weber & Mitchell; 1995). Unlike Lisa's and Andrew's cases, Marisa's brought to the fore the influence that personal factors such as family background can have on the formation of beliefs about teaching and learning.

The findings of other studies on beliefs suggest that the family can have a profound effect on the development of a person's beliefs. Rokeach (1960), for example, found that differences in belief systems of individuals as well as personality factors such as anxiety could be traced to differences in childhood experiences. More recently, using a case study approach, Entwistle, Skinner and Entwistle (2000) explored the cultural and family influences on primary student teachers' beliefs about good teaching. The findings suggested that beliefs about good teaching were influenced in part by early experiences within the family, religious background, and significant teachers all of whom left a lasting impression on the learners' lives.

In contrast to Marisa, Lisa's stated beliefs about teaching and learning centered largely on pedagogical concerns. Although Lisa's stated beliefs were largely pedagogical in focus, she did demonstrate concern for the emotional wellbeing of her pupils. Like Lisa, Andrew held beliefs that centered in large part on pedagogical concerns. He stressed the need to engage the learners during instruction and teach subject matter content in a manner that would facilitate pupils' learning. A noteworthy finding of the present study was that there might have been little or no interventions and/or opportunities in the curriculum for teacher trainees to interrogate their beliefs about teaching and learning, to reflect on the origins of same, and to explore their beliefs in the classroom setting.

4.2 Trainees' Classroom Practice

The findings revealed variations in the level and ways in which Andrew's stated beliefs about teaching and learning were enacted in his classroom practice. A number of personal and situational factors appeared to impact Andrew's ability to act out what he believed in his teaching. Personal factors such as confidence, experience, knowledge and skill in a given area, and the willingness to "take risk" acted as facilitators to enactment of beliefs about teaching and learning. Certain factors, for example, the willingness to "take risk" applied in large part to his experience during the period of training. Situational factors that facilitated enactment of beliefs about teaching and learning during the period of training centered on the interactions he had with others in the school-based setting. These included collaboration and consultation with fellow trainees as well as feedback and assistance from his College supervisors.

The stated beliefs most often demonstrated in Andrew's teaching were his engagement of pupils using strategies such as storytelling, drama and extempore calypso[2], and his attention to making the learning experience interesting and exciting for pupils. Andrew's ability to act out these beliefs in his teaching could be attributed to a number of factors, one of which might have been the strong affective component in these beliefs. The latter was often reflected in his discussions about teaching and learning. For example, after teaching a lesson on triangles in which he used a story on a party theme, Andrew expressed delight about the outcome:

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[2] This is a calypso that is composed on the spur of the moment on a given topic

> I think it was good…. the whole idea of the story….How it captured their imagination….The party, the party captured their attention….The idea was to create excitement about the new shape we were going to look at.

The implication of the affective feature of a belief for practice is that it could determine the amount of energy a teacher will put into an activity and how he/she will expend the energy (Nespor, 1987). The high affective component in Andrew's stated beliefs could have contributed to the relative ease with which he acted out these beliefs in his teaching.

In terms of barriers, a limited knowledge of and/or skill in a given area sometimes impacted Andrew's ability to teach in accordance with his stated beliefs about teaching and learning. Situational factors such as time limits for lesson delivery, class control issues, and the pressure and/or need to conform to programme requirements appeared to be key barriers to enactment of beliefs about teaching and learning during Andrew's training. In some ways, Andrew seemed better able to enact his stated beliefs about teaching and learning in the year after the completion of his training. But in other ways, there appeared to be no significant difference. Variations were also gleaned in the extent and ways in which Marisa's stated beliefs about teaching and learning were enacted in her classroom practice. A number of personal and situational factors seemed to impact Marisa's ability to act out what she believed in her teaching.

Personal factors such as commitment, determination, and the desire to "make a difference" in the lives of her pupils seemed to facilitate enactment of beliefs about teaching and learning. This was more evident in Marisa's classroom in the year after her training than during training. Situational factors that facilitated enactment of beliefs about teaching and learning during training centered largely on the interactions she had with others. These included assistance from fellow trainees, demonstration and/or modelling of techniques by College lecturers and cooperating teachers, and motivation from her pupils. The motivation from learners as well as the opportunity to observe and learn from a more experienced class teacher also acted as facilitators in the year after training.

The stated beliefs most closely reflected in Marisa's teaching were the use of praise, seemingly intended to build pupils' self esteem and make them feel good about themselves, as well as her focus on creating a caring and non-intimidating learning environment. The ability to enact these beliefs in her teaching could be attributed in part to the nature of the belief. This appeared to be a key factor in Marisa's capacity to act out what she believed in her practice. Marisa's stated beliefs appeared to be strongly rooted in the experiences that she had as a young learner, many of which were negative. As a teacher, she seemed committed to provide for her pupils a learning experience that was different to the negative experiences that she had as a learner:

> You see, my whole teaching is based on what I went through as a child, and what other children have to go through, particularly the weaker ones. I want to give them a different experience to mine.

As mentioned earlier, Nespor (1987) used the term 'alternativity' to describe this kind of belief. Here, a teacher, for varying reasons, attempts to create an ideal, or alternative, situation that differs from reality and/or from his or her own experience as a learner. Nespor described how Ms. Skylark, a teacher in his study who had traumatic experiences as a student, attempted to create the ideal classroom environment she had fantasized about as a child – friendly and fun. Ms. Skylark often explained her actions in post-teaching interviews by recalling painful experiences she had as a student and expressing her desire to spare her students such traumas.

In terms of barriers to enacting beliefs in practice, a lack of knowledge and skill in a given area sometimes impacted Marisa's ability to teach in accordance with her stated beliefs about teaching and learning. Her lack of confidence and a sense of hopelessness might also have acted as barriers to practice. Evidence of the latter was gleaned moreso in the year after her training when she had a challenging class to teach. Situational factors such as time demands of the College and the pressure and/or need to conform to programme requirements appeared to be barriers to enactment of beliefs during her training. The lack of an instructional structure or framework in which to develop her practice was another factor that seemed to hinder her enactment of certain stated beliefs about teaching and learning. This was evident mainly in the year after training. In some respects, Marisa seemed better able to enact her stated beliefs about teaching and learning in the year after graduating from College. But, in other respects, there appeared to be no significant difference in the degree to which she was able to enact her stated beliefs during and after training. The findings revealed variations in the extent and manner in which Lisa's stated beliefs about teaching and learning were enacted in her classroom practice.

A number of factors, both personal and situational, seemed to impact Lisa's ability to enact what she believed in her practice. Personal factors such as knowledge, skill, desire and confidence acted as facilitators in some cases and barriers in other cases. This applied both during and after the period of training. Situational factors that facilitated the enactment of beliefs about teaching and learning, particularly during the period of training, centered on interactions with others in the teaching/learning setting. These factors included collaboration with peers, assistance from cooperating teachers and inspiration from learners.

The beliefs most often demonstrated in Lisa's teaching were the use of pupils' knowledge and experiences and to a lesser extent the interaction with pupils to make the learning experience enjoyable. The ability to enact these beliefs in her lessons could be attributed to a number of factors. One might have been the strong affective component in these beliefs, which was reflected clearly in her discussion on this subject. For example, after teaching a lesson on the uses of plants and animals to man, she commented:

> The children were excited about the topic. The excitement comes from knowing that…we use plants for food and they have the experiences in the home where they use plants for medicine and other things….That is what creates the excitement.

> Her desire to make the learning experience enjoyable for her pupils is seen clearly in this statement:
> I talk with the children, we relax, we have fun, and I always like to see my children enjoying the lesson. You see that concept, it's the best, and I learn like that.

As mentioned earlier, the affective feature of a belief is thought to determine the amount of energy a teacher puts into an activity and the way in which he/she expends the energy (Nespor, 1987). The high affective component in these beliefs could have contributed to the relative ease that Lisa demonstrated in acting out these beliefs in her teaching. Situational factors such as time and the pressure and/or need to conform to programme requirements seemed to be key barriers to the enactment of beliefs during her training. In some ways, Lisa seemed better able to enact her stated beliefs about teaching and learning, in the year after the completion of her training. But in other ways, there appeared to be no significant difference.

5. Discussion

The trainees seemed to hold well established beliefs about teaching and learning that were apparently influenced by their experiences in and out of school, and their prior teaching experiences in primary schools. The findings highlight the lasting impact that childhood experiences both in school and in the home could have on an individual's beliefs about teaching, learning and schooling in general. Across the cases, there were similarities as well as striking differences in stated beliefs about teaching and learning. A major factor in the differences gleaned seemed to be the influence of the family and childhood experiences in the home. A noteworthy finding was the difference in stated beliefs of the two female trainees, one of whom exemplified the stereotypic profile of the nurturing primary school teacher, while the other did not. The findings highlight the diversity of beliefs in a group of just three trainees and the need for educators to take cognizance of such diversity in the provision of teaching/learning experiences.

The findings in all three cases indicated variations in the enactment of stated beliefs about teaching and learning in the classroom. Beliefs that were enacted to a high degree in teaching appeared to have certain key attributes, namely, a strong affective component and/or an 'alternativity' feature described by Nespor (1987). The insights point to a number of factors, both situational and personal, that could have impacted the trainees' ability to enact their stated beliefs in the classroom. The situational factors fell into two broad categories: (a) institutional and/or organizational factors, which included the guidelines and practices of the College programme as well as those of the schools in which the trainees practised; and (b) relational factors, which included the trainees' interactions with significant persons in the teaching/learning setting. The interactions with College supervisors, fellow trainees, cooperating teachers, and the pupils appeared to impact the trainees' ability to teach in accordance with their stated beliefs about teaching and learning.

Relational factors seemed to have a fairly positive influence on the trainees' ability to teach in accordance with their stated beliefs about teaching and learning. Personal factors served as facilitators in some cases and barriers in others. Worthy of note was the trainees' knowledge and skill in a specific area, which featured as a common and key factor in the trainees' ability to enact, or not enact, their stated beliefs in the classroom.

The findings seem to indicate that barriers to the enactment of stated beliefs about teaching and learning were primarily institutional and/or organizational factors. These included the need to adhere to the specified time limits for lesson delivery as specified by the College and to a lesser extent class control. A similar finding was reported in a study conducted in the USA by Moore (2003) who investigated the field experiences of 77 elementary pre-service teachers in a three-week practicum. The participants were enrolled as senior education majors in a language arts practicum. Moore, who was a university professor in the language arts programme, found that the trainees' concern with time, among other things, seemed to have a major influence on their performance in the practicum. This was so despite consistent reported efforts by the university professors to help the pre-service teachers to focus on an examination of theory and practice during the practicum. The findings of the present study as well as that of Moore's point to the influence that trainees' concern with time issues could have on their classroom practice, and underscore the need for this factor to be given serious consideration in the preparation of classroom teachers.

The findings of this study point to the need for interventions and/or models that place the trainees' beliefs and experiences at the center of the teaching/learning experience. Such interventions could focus on providing opportunities for trainees to interrogate their beliefs about teaching and learning through reflection and dialogue with others, and through interaction with the learners in the natural settings of the classroom. The latter approach could help to empower trainees by helping them to develop the habit of interrogating their beliefs when faced with the realities of the classroom and making changes as necessary.

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