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Teaching Beliefs of Graduate Students in Adult Education: A Longitudinal Perspective

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Abstract

This longitudinal study explores the influence on teaching beliefs from participating in a masters program in adult education. A group of practicing adult educators was interviewed over a two-year period while participating in graduate study. Findings reveal that graduate school had little impact on their prior teaching beliefs. Implications for graduate schools are discussed.

Introduction

Every year, across North America, students complete graduate programs in adult education. Like all disciplines of study, adult education graduate programs profess a “particular discourse and knowledge base about the scholarly dimensions of teaching [adults]—the intellectual substance of pedagogical thought and practice as rooted in the discipline” (Quinlan, 1999, p. 448). Much of what is taught emphasizes an appreciation for the adult learner and the life experience they bring to the classroom. In addition, great attention in the field is given to student-centered teaching, experientially based learning, and critical reflection (Brookfield, 1990; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Mezirow, 2000). However, little is known about whether students’ graduate experience in adult education significantly influences how they think about the adult learner and about their own role as an adult educator. An area of research that could offer some insight is the exploration of how students’ teaching beliefs are impacted by the graduate school experience.

Beliefs are considered mental constructions of experience and in the case of teaching they act as a representation of reality and serves as a basis for action in the classroom (Richardson, 1996). Researchers in the field of K-12 teacher education have come to the conclusion that what and how teachers believe has a tremendous impact on their behavior in the classroom (Pajares, 1992). Research in the field of adult and higher education has begun to draw similar conclusions about teaching beliefs of adult educators (Creeson & Dean, 2000; Dirkx & Spurgin, 1992; Pratt & Associates, 1998). Pratt (1998) concludes that adult teaching, “beliefs and values are not minor, they are fundamental. They are the submerged ‘bulk of the iceberg’ upon which any particular [teaching] technique rests” (p. 16).

When it comes to change in beliefs as a result of a significant educational intervention, there is much debate among researchers in the education field as to the difficulty and the possibility of change (Nettle, 1998). For example, studies have shown that pre-service teachers do not necessarily develop new perspectives about teaching while in a teacher education program they simply become more knowledgeable at defending the beliefs they already possess. In addition, several studies found that change in instructional practice rested on a factor of congruency between the teacher’s beliefs matching the underlying assumptions of the new teaching method (Rich, 1990). Further research has shown that belief change is complex and varies on an individual basis. Some teachers change beliefs, and others do not, or possibly they change in different ways (Hauglustaine-Charlier, 1997). While short-term interventions (e.g., a course on reflective inquiry, field experience) seem to have little impact on teaching beliefs, long-term pre-

service education (a year or more) with an emphasis on personal examination of beliefs appears to initiate some change.

Recognizing the significance of beliefs in shaping practice, hence change in teaching beliefs offers a construct to explore the impact of the graduate school experience. This connection would be consistent with the work of those who see the challenging beliefs systems as fundamental in adult education (Brookfield, 1991; Mezirow, 2000). Although there has been much research on the process of belief change from the lens of transformative learning theory, none speaks in reference to teaching beliefs (Taylor, 1999). Furthermore, there has been little research on master's programs in adult education, which examine what graduate schools are doing to address the importance or impact of shaping teaching beliefs in the development of teachers of adult students. In addition, little is know about the nature of teaching beliefs of entering graduate student, particularly those who are teaching nontraditional students, and how teaching beliefs are influenced by their graduate school experience. As a result, the purpose of this longitudinal study was to explore the nature of adult educators' beliefs about teaching and the impact of graduate study in adult education on those beliefs.

Theoretical Framework

For the purposes of this study teaching beliefs are conceptualized within two frameworks. First, is Pratt's (1998) research on teaching perspectives, who has given the most significant attention to teaching beliefs in the adult education field. He has identified three types of beliefs fundamental to a perspective on teaching: epistemic, procedural, and normative. These belief structures form a comprehensive framework for understanding the beliefs of adult educators. Along with Pratt's framework is Mezirow's (2000) work on transformative learning, which provides insight into the transformation of belief structures. Mezirow, not unlike Pratt, sees meaning making shaped by an established belief system, or frame of reference. In particular, beliefs are seen as part of meaning schemes which "are sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes and judgments that tacitly direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, typify objects and attribute causality" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 5). For the purpose of this study, the impact of graduate school will be interpreted from the change in meaning schemes as explained by Mezirow's model of transformative learning.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative longitudinal design. The purposeful sample involved sixteen practicing adult educators who had recently entered masters in adult education program at several locations in northeastern United States. Three interviews were conducted with each participant over a course of two-years. The first interview focused on establishing a relationship and gathering biographical information about past and present school lives. The second interview followed shortly after the first and focused on the participants' beliefs about teaching adults as they were entering graduate school. In addition, a "photo-elicitation" technique was used, where the participants took photographs of the visual images they held about teaching, student(s), and learning. The photographs were used as a prompt in the second interview, as a way to explore the "participants values, beliefs, attitudes, and meanings and in order to trigger memories..." about their teaching experience (Prosser, 1998, p. 124). During the second interview, the photographs were described by the participant (not interpreted by the researcher). As the description of a photographs progressed, questions were raised about the specific content of each image, the process involved in taking the photograph, what thoughts came to mind during its execution, and

what it represented about teaching. The final interview followed roughly two years later with 10 of the 16 participants. There was some attrition from the original sample because a few of the participants withdrew from their program of study during the two-year period. This interview was very similar to the first, involving photographs of visual images taken of the same topics by each participant prior to the final interview. Interview transcriptions were analyzed using a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Findings

The findings of this study focused on the impact of graduate school on teaching beliefs among the participants over a two-year period. Overall the graduate school experience had little impact on the participants' teaching beliefs. This lack of impact was reflected in three significant findings. First, the majority of the participants maintained a teacher-centered view of teaching as shown by the physical location of the teacher in relationship to the student (teacher standing and students sitting), the teacher's role as the classroom authority, and the essentiality of providing a safe and comfortable classroom experience. Second, epistemologically, they continued to view knowledge as separate from the knower, bounded, often residing in text, out there to be discovered, and imparted to the students by the teacher. Third, the participants maintained a belief about learning, viewing it as an increase in knowledge and equivalent to the act of doing. This was demonstrated with an emphasis on direct application of knowledge and hands-on experiences. In the fourth and final category, a change in teaching belief started to emerge among the participants. This was the recognition of student experience as helpful in the teaching/learning experience. Participants started to believe that it was important to engage student's life experiences within the course material because it promoted greater interest and ensured greater relevancy in the learning experience.

A Belief in Teacher-Centered Teaching

Most of the participants in this study maintained a teacher-centered view of teaching throughout the two years of the study. This view reflects a traditional image of teaching, in which the teacher is located most often in the front of the room, standing, and directing classroom activity (Figure 1) and the student sitting (Figure 2). This finding was demonstrated by three subcategories: that of the physical location and action of the teacher in relationship to the student, a belief in the teacher as the authority in the classroom experience, and a belief in the essentiality of ensuring a comfortable learning experience.



Figure 1



Figure 2

A Belief of Knowledge as Separate from the Learner

The second finding, indicative of the epistemological beliefs held by the participants, revolved around the question of what constitutes knowledge in the teaching experience. For most participants, knowledge was seen as external from the learner and something often held by the teacher or the text and imparted to the student. An example of this view is provided by Bill, a computer instructor, who when describing the purpose of teaching, states; “I’d say it is the transfer of knowledge. You have a certain bit of information that you are going to take from one person to another.” In a similar example, Nancy a nurse, describes her image (see Figure 3) of teaching at the end of two years of graduate school. She states “Teaching occurs out of books. I’m sure that’s the goal of the author ...and also learning occurs out of books as the concept of the sponge on top. Hopefully, the sponge is going to be the [student’s] brain that soaks up all the information in the books.”



Figure 3

A Belief of Learning as Doing.

The participants' continued to view of learning as applied and behaviorally oriented task. The best kind of learning involved the direct application and practice of knowledge. When students were doing something, an activity or a task, learning was taking place. For example, when Lesley, a computer instructor with a university library, describes her beliefs about learning there is an emphasis on “doing.” When asked to defined learning in the final interview, Lesley responds consistently with her previous thoughts: “Learning means putting knowledge into action.” Kevin expressed this same understanding of learning. When asked to discuss learning, he responded: “The goal of any student is to learn, and the best concept of learning is doing.”

A Belief of Teaching as an Instrumental Task

Participants' continued to emphasize the instrumental, or technical, nature of teaching. This finding emerged from one of the few questions that asked the students directly about their graduate school experience. As they began their program of study in graduate school, many hoped to acquire more effective methods and techniques for teaching adults. This overarching goal seemed to persist throughout their program of study. When asked what they had gained most from their graduate school experience, they replied that they had learned new methods or skills to more effectively work with and teach adult students. For example, Robin, an ABE instructor, stated at the beginning of the study that she hoped to learn “better ways to teach adults, give me more insight on what adult learners expect ...[and] being able to find ways to motivate them to want to learn and to keep them interested.” At the completion of the two years of study, when asked how her graduate school experience had affected her practice, she replied:

It's just given me more ideas, more resources to draw from. One class we had was called Group [Dynamics].... [It provided] just different things to do as a group, and to get to know

the class or to do things as a group, instead of individualized instruction. Just different things like maybe different teaching methods or different teaching ideas, things like that.

A Greater Recognition of Student Experience

An emerging teaching belief was seen in a number of the participants at the end of the two years. There was a growing recognition and appreciation of the importance of engaging student experiences in the classroom. The student's life experiences were seen as way to make the learning experience more interesting and relevant. For example, Avery, a training specialist for a financial institution, stated in her second interview: "What I appreciate is the life experience they bring...Like if we're talking about a subject, they [trainees] can say, 'I know what you're talking about, in my position I have to do this,' and they can relate so it makes it easier for them to relate some specific things."

In response to the same question, Nancy states: "probably the importance of flexibility and the need to draw from the experiences...see the students as resources in there own right." When asked for greater clarification and she responds:

We have people from such varied backgrounds in this program that probably 40 to 50% of what I learned was from sharing information within that group, in addition to what came from the teachers. I mean, if you know what resources you have there, you can get an awful lot of information.

Greater recognition of student experience was the only significant change in beliefs about teaching that emerged over the two years. Furthermore, this change did not seem to have an impact on their views of how knowledge was constructed or learning took place among students.

Discussion and Implication

This study found that the participants held strongly to their teacher-centered beliefs about teaching and learning throughout their graduate school experience. Even though participants were beginning to give greater attention to their students' experiences in the classroom, this emphasis was used more as a technique and was not indicative of a new understanding of how knowledge is constructed. This traditional view of teaching is consistent with the literature on teaching beliefs of students entering in other educational settings. In addition, the visual images portrayed by many of the participants in this study also support a teacher-centered perspective of education. These photographs are similar to what has been found in other studies where visual images have been used to understand individual conceptions of teaching (Weber & Mitchell, 1996). Also, despite the participants' conception of learning as rooted in experiential and interactive forms of teaching, the findings reveal that teaching for these participants is about finding ways to make the act of imparting knowledge more interesting and engaging. From a transformative perspective, this seems to reflect reaffirmation of meaning schemes as opposed to an acquisition of new schemes or a change in present schemes (Mezirow, 1995). Also, possibly most significant, is the lack in significant change in teaching beliefs found among the participants during their graduate school experience. On first brush, it might be possible to conclude that these particular students are unique and did not take advantage of their graduate school experience. However, research offers a response that is quite contrary to that conclusion. Teachers teach as they were taught and, like these adult educators, their belief about teaching were developed long before they entered college (Lortie, 1975; Pajares, 1992). Unlike future doctors and lawyers who embark on their professional training relatively unaware and unskilled about their inevitable responsibilities, future educators already have a well-developed conception

of the role of the teacher before entering the classroom. We could also speculate that adult educators would be more likely to rely on their prior school experiences for making sense of their practice than K-12 educators, since most adult educators enter teaching with little formal instruction in the field of education. The significance of this study is great, such that it further demonstrates the importance of teaching beliefs and their relationship to practice; it offers a window into a long neglected area of study; adult education graduate school and the impact it has on practice. Furthermore, it further confirms the essentiality of critically engaging teaching beliefs in the education of adult educators.

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