

The Teaching Philosophy: An Opportunity to Guide Practice or an Exercise in Futility?

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Abstract

This conceptual essay explores the role a teaching philosophy plays in the experiences of K-12 classroom teachers who are firmly established in a school context. We draw on our experiences as in-service teacher educators and K-12 teachers to examine the extent to which teachers make decisions that are grounded in a well-thought out and clearly articulated belief system about teaching and learning. We argue that there are often tensions and disconnections between teachers' fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning and the realities of current mandates and imposed expectations.

Keywords: teacher professional development, teaching philosophy

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The majority of pre-service teachers do not complete their teacher training without first writing a Teaching Philosophy Statement. This assignment affords new teachers the opportunity to articulate their beliefs and understandings about effective teaching and learning by including descriptive examples of how they teach and by providing theory and research-based justifications for why they make particular pedagogical decisions. While the final product is useful for job applications and interviews, it is the reflective process used to create the document that is expected to serve the teacher well in guiding their day-to-day work in the classroom. In fact, Goodyear and Allchin (1998) contend that this statement is a living document that should be used throughout one's teaching career to drive and to continually reassess teaching goals. They state:

In preparing a statement of teaching philosophy, [teachers] assess and examine themselves to articulate the goals they wish to achieve in teaching. . . . A clear vision of a teaching philosophy provides stability, continuity, and long-term guidance. . . . A well-defined philosophy can help them remain focused on their teaching goals and to appreciate the personal and professional rewards of teaching (Goodyear & Allchin, 1998, pp. 106–7).

As in-service teacher educators and K-12 teachers, we wondered about the role a teaching philosophy plays in the experiences of K-12 classroom teachers who are firmly established in a school context. The little research that has been conducted in this area is inconclusive. Some studies show that teachers' beliefs and practices are not in alignment (Polly & Hannafin, 2011; Wilcox-Herzog, 2002), whereas other evidence suggests that teachers' beliefs and practices are concordant (Tsai, 2008). Ultimately, the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices is complex and, as Basturkmen (2012) found in a review of the research related to the work of language teachers, is mediated by

contexts and constraints. Therefore we wondered whether, once in the classroom, teachers experienced any tensions or disconnections between their fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning and the realities of current mandates and imposed expectations.

Our Context and Experiences

Author 1 and Author 2 teach in a Master's Degree program that is designed to develop in-service teachers' capacities to engage in critical pedagogy and critical literacy, school-based and community-based inquiry, collaboration, teacher leadership and continuous improvement. The teaching philosophies of the faculty in this program are strongly rooted in social change, humanistic and progressive approaches, though the concern in exploring the teachers' philosophies was not to measure the extent to which they conformed to the program ideals. Rather, the purpose was to understand the extent to which teachers make decisions that are grounded in a well-thought out and clearly articulated belief system about teaching and learning.

From July 2011 through July 2013 the faculty worked with 41 graduate students who were enrolled in this cohort-based program and who had been teaching in K-12 settings for anywhere from 2-20 years. As part of their focus on teacher leadership, the teachers read *Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders* by Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009). Time was spent reflecting on what it means to be a teacher leader, examining assumptions about leadership, and developing the skills to lead from within the classroom. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) suggest a development model for teacher leadership that begins with teachers doing a personal assessment to better understand themselves in relation to others as both teachers and leaders. Part of this personal assessment is to examine their belief systems about teaching and learning by completing a Philosophy of Education Inventory (PEI) developed by Lorraine Zinn (1999). This inventory contains 15 sentence stems with five phrases to

complete each stem. Each of the five phrases represents one of five educational philosophies: Behavioral, Comprehensive, Progressive, Humanistic, and Social Change. Using a Likert scale, teachers indicate the extent to which they agree with each of the phrases on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Responses are then coded and added to reveal a total score for each of the philosophies.

The teachers completed the PEI after one year of the two-year program. In debriefing the activity, it became clear that many of the teachers' scores did not place them squarely in one or even two of the five philosophies; the majority of them had relatively high scores in multiple categories. Very few disagreed (especially strongly disagreed) with any of the statements. For example, under the sentence stem "The primary purpose of education is:" the five phrases to complete the stem were:

1. To facilitate the personal growth and development of each student.
2. To increase students' awareness of the need for significant change in our culture and society, and to help them contribute to such change.
3. To teach a broad range of content, concepts, and principles that will prepare students for learning throughout life.
4. To increase students' problem-solving skills and ability to fully participate in the society in which they live.
5. To develop students' competency and mastery of specific knowledge and skills, so they can meet certain standards or expectations.

Some teachers strongly agreed with all five of these statements. This puzzled us since the underlying assumptions within some of the philosophies are quite contradictory; within a Behavioral philosophy of education, the purpose of education is "to promote skill development and behavioral change; ensure compliance with standards and societal expectations," while the purpose within a Humanistic

philosophy is “to enhance personal growth and development; to facilitate self-actualization” (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009, p. 184). How was it that our teachers equally connected with both of these philosophies?

We began to develop several potential hypotheses based on what we were seeing. Perhaps the survey was not particularly valid; was it truly measuring teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning or was it actually measuring teachers’ practical survival strategies for navigating the standards movement that left them with very little autonomy to teach what they believed? Did our teachers mix their responses, sometimes answering in reference to their personally held beliefs and sometimes responding on the basis of this survival practice? Do our varying results illustrate discordance between a teacher’s philosophy and practice? Were the teachers trying to please us by responding in a way they thought we expected based on our program’s content? Do teachers tend to take a both/and rather than an either/or approach to maintain a macro philosophy that attempts to take into account the wide-ranging and comprehensive expectations of education writ large? Evidence suggests that individuals are especially likely to respond in a socially desirable way when the subject of the survey is considered important by the surrounding culture (Helmets & Holden, 2002).

Perhaps the survey was not reliable: were the statements so general that responses were overly contingent on the teachers’ choice of context (e.g., “During reading instruction I would take this particular approach, but during math instruction I would take a different approach”)? Bos, Mathers, Dickson, Podhajski, and Chard (2001) also found that teachers endorsed a wide array of differing philosophies when using a Likert scale.

We decided to dig deeper and asked the teachers to write a teaching philosophy narrative as part of their final portfolio for the program. We hoped this would obviate the concerns raised by the use of

the Likert scale and wondered whether describing and elaborating their beliefs would produce a more focused, coherent philosophy of education. This is where Author 3 and Author 4, two graduate research assistants joined the research team. They are both embedded in school contexts, one as a high school math teacher and the other as an elementary school resource teacher. They read through the teaching philosophy narratives and analyzed them using the five philosophies identified by Zinn in the PEI survey as etic codes. Consistent with the survey results, the narratives seem to indicate that individual teachers embraced more than one established philosophy. Many teachers appeared to strongly affiliate with at least three of the five philosophies in their teaching philosophy narratives and in their survey responses, contrary to Zinn's contention that "most educators have a clear primary philosophical orientation, or else they share two that are stronger than others" (as cited in Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009, p. 183). Zinn explains that typical combinations include philosophies that are closer together on the continuum such as progressive and humanistic and that combinations like behavioral and humanistic are unlikely. Even so, many of our teachers seemed to embrace contradictory philosophies.

For example, Samantha used phrases such as, "My initial teaching method was and has been for a few years, lecture, model/demonstrate, and practice. The student objectives are posted as each topic changes as well as the year-long objectives by strand" and "students need structure, confinements, boundaries, and consequences." These statements suggest that Samantha believes very much in the behavioral philosophy, which expects all students to reach the same mastery level for the same standard on the same assessment without differentiation; this philosophy is also reflected in her high behavioral inventory score. Throughout the teaching philosophy narrative, Samantha indicated that she relies on direct instruction and then practice to convey knowledge. Later in the narrative, however, she discussed using project-based assessments and allowing students to convey mastery in different ways. These strategies are consistent with a more progressive education philosophy (and her high progressive score

on the inventory mirrored these progressive statements in her narrative), despite the seeming contradictions between a progressive and a behavioral philosophical stance.

Suzy stated at least one strong belief in *each* of the five philosophies with the progressive and humanistic philosophies seeming to prevail. The progressive and humanistic philosophies are close to one another within the spectrum and it is not uncommon that educators' beliefs overlap two philosophies that share some of the same tenets. However, the additional statements endorsing behavioral and comprehensive beliefs in the philosophy narrative suggest potential contradictions in practice.

When we noticed these disconnects in their philosophy narratives, we asked the teachers to respond in writing to the following prompt as additional feedback:

One of the purposes of writing your teaching philosophy is as a means for professional growth since it requires you to give examples of how you enact your philosophy, thus requiring you to consider the degree to which your teaching is congruent with your beliefs. As you engaged in developing this section of your portfolio, did you find total congruence between your beliefs and your practices, or were there disconnects? How do you know if your practices and philosophies/beliefs are congruent? In what ways do you struggle to make that happen? If there were disconnects, what do you attribute those to?

This additional feedback afforded teachers an opportunity to reflect on some of these contradictions, as exemplified by Sheri, Claire, Suzy, Hannah, and Aubrey. Sheri explained that the disconnects come from having the desire to teach in a certain way but lacking the professional knowledge to teach in that way. The narrative implies that she identifies mainly with the progressive and humanistic philosophies. Although her philosophy supports student choice, individualism, and student-centered learning, Sheri said that "implementing student-centered learning and incorporating a culturally relevant framework are two methods in which I am getting used to". Aside from Sheri, who

wishes to gain more professional knowledge to work towards a more progressive and humanistic teaching practice, the majority of the teachers cited obstacles such as time, curricular and testing mandates, and the demands placed on educators as reasons why their beliefs and practices are not congruent.

Throughout the teaching philosophy narrative, Claire identifies primarily with the humanistic philosophy with some statements suggesting endorsement of a social change philosophy as well. She indicates that she would like to foster individual student growth in the classroom and help students to determine how they can advocate for themselves, each other, and society. Claire wrote:

I think I do still see some disconnects in my philosophy in my teaching, and believe it's largely due to the demands placed upon us, and my hesitations to go against the expectations and 'rules' from my superiors. As I become more of a teacher leader and understand just how to go about making change I feel I will push back more against the things that do not match with my philosophy and will integrate more things that do match.

Although stating at least one belief in each of the five philosophies, Suzy identifies mainly with the progressive and humanistic philosophies. She explained the disconnects of philosophy and practice:

Reconciling beliefs and teaching practice is a constant struggle for teachers, mainly due to time constraints and pressures from those who have more power. Sometimes the resources are not available to follow through on great ideas that make beliefs more consistent with practice. Closing the door and doing what is best for my students is a belief but may not always be possible, especially during an evaluation year. But I know that I will persist with a new confidence as a more reflective, informed, and cultural teacher leader to match my beliefs to my practice.

Hannah identifies most with the progressive philosophy with a touch of humanistic:

The biggest disconnect is wanting to run with topics my students show interest in, such as the solar system or dinosaurs. Unfortunately, because of the demands of quarterly testing and the state standards, I have to fit in what I am expected to teach in order for the students to do well on their assessments. I am so short on time each day to do what is required, let alone to have my students explore topics that are off the SOLs.

Aubrey articulated beliefs related to four of the five philosophies and explained possible disconnects with her practice:

The disconnects I found was that my perfect teaching situation does not really have the possibility to happen due to the lack of time in the school day and the lack of time we have to spend on each standard. There are also so many tests to be taken throughout the year it is hard to focus on a given standard for longer than a week. Therefore, you will always have students that struggle with a topic. The program has changed my way of thinking from focusing on the negatives I cannot change to looking for the positive things. The negatives I can change and have the ability to change will fade in time as long as I keep an open mind and search for solutions.

The teaching philosophy narratives and teachers' explanations of disconnects between beliefs and practice demonstrate that educators are struggling with the bureaucratic structure of schools and the policy regulations placed upon them and their students. Once inside the system, it seems that many educators are either forced to abandon their education philosophy or take on several different belief systems, despite possible contradictions. As a result, teaching philosophies are not being used as they were intended – to set goals and guide practice.

Emerging Questions and Theories

Because of the results of the inventory and the analysis of the narrative data, the four of us are starting to question even more the impact of the current culture of public education on both new and experienced classroom teachers. With the heightened focus on standards and accountability based on student test scores, teachers find themselves on the receiving end of mandates and scripted curriculum.

Such demands have changed curricular and instructional practices. The curriculum has narrowed to create more time for instruction in the tested subjects (Dee, Jacob, & Schwartz, 2013; Hamilton, 2007; Pace, 2011), and teachers regularly forgo content instruction to make time for teaching test taking skills (McNeil, 2000; Musoleno & White, 2010). In order to maximize test passing rates, teachers also find themselves focusing more of their effort on students in the academic middle, leaving advanced students to fend for themselves and deserting the lowest students who do not seem to have a chance of passing the tests (Hamilton, 2007). The use of pedagogical methods is also affected. Although teachers recognize the value of student centered teaching, they find they use more teacher-focused, direct instruction in preparation for state tests (Au, 2011; Faulkner & Cook, 2006).

High-stakes testing creates philosophical conflicts for teachers when they have to use instructional methods that are different from their own personal teaching philosophy. Many teachers struggle to maintain their own pedagogical beliefs under the pressure of testing and accountability (Patchen & Crawford, 2011; Gunzenhauser, 2003). Shapiro and Thompson (2008) argue that NCLB and constructivism are “poles apart philosophically, theoretically, and in educational practice.” In fact, Zull (2002) uses evidence from neuroscience to argue that “deep learning” is dependent on more constructivist approaches. Drawing on the work of Kolb (1984), he describes a learning cycle that depends on experience followed by reflecting, developing abstractions, testing those abstractions, and

finally circling back to concrete experiences (Zull, 2002, p. 17).

How then does a constructivist teacher manage the discordance between her beliefs and the current educational environment? Do teachers simply accommodate themselves and their philosophies to the demands of state mandates? Do they negotiate, sneaking in their own pedagogical approaches whenever time allows? Or do they rebel and follow their own methods regardless of state expectations? (Eisenbach, 2012) Have our teachers developed a flexible “toolkit” of philosophies, accessing the appropriate methodology to match the instructional exigencies of the moment?

How can teacher educators best help teachers to build their knowledge and skills to navigate this terrain? If we support teachers to be autonomous professionals who are strongly grounded in a research-based philosophy of education, do they struggle in these prescriptive, disempowering environments or do they use their well articulated and supported beliefs to empower themselves to do what they believe is right for children? Or is it actually better for them to be chameleon-like, being able to morph into whatever the school system demands in that moment? Ultimately then what is the point of the “Teaching Philosophy Statement?” Is it just a futile exercise that means very little once teachers become a part of the system?

At this point, we are motivated to explore these questions further. We recognize the limitations of using inventories and open-ended questions and plan to add teacher interviews and observations to our data collection in order to better understand the ways that teachers connect their teaching philosophies to their practice as well as the ways they articulate the disconnects they encounter. We believe that this additional information gathered systematically from teachers will help to inform the educational community and will help us, as teacher educators and K-12 teachers, to revisit our own teaching goals and practices.

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