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The Development Of Critical Thinking In Primary School: The Role Of Teachers' Beliefs

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Abstract

This paper refers to studies and research concerning teachers' knowledge and beliefs. From the 1980s researchers have examined several aspects of teachers' thought processes [1], [2], [3]. Teachers' beliefs are considered in order to understand how teachers conceptualize their work, how they make decisions and how they choose their practices. Some definitions and the nature of teachers' beliefs are about teaching, learning and intelligence. A growing body of research argues that teachers' beliefs should be examined in context, considering the influence of culture [4], [5]. In spite of all the social factors which might influence teachers' beliefs, many authors ask themselves if teachers' beliefs can be changed and how. There are some models of conceptual change and alternative models of belief change [6], [7]. I am currently investigating these arguments as a PhD student. I planned a research project considering the implications for teachers' education and ways to improve that. My research questions are: What is the relationship between teachers' beliefs about intelligence and learning, and the use of critical thinking activities in the classroom? Is it a relationship influenced by the teachers' self-efficacy? I prepared a questionnaire for primary teachers using validated instruments: the critical thinking beliefs appraisal [8]; the teacher beliefs survey [9]; the learning inventory [10]; the teachers' sense of efficacy scale [11] and the implicit theories of intelligence scale [12]. I have started handing out the questionnaire and I am proceeding with data analysis.

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1. Introduction

During the past three decades research on teachers' knowledge and beliefs has grown rapidly. This new line of research has generated a considerable area of inquiry on the nature of teaching. From the 1980s research on teacher

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thinking aim to describe teachers' beliefs and to understand and explain how and why the professional teachers' practices emerge and develop. Research has examined how teacher behaviour influences student behaviour and student achievement scores. Pajares [2] cites several sources in support of the assumption that beliefs are the best indicators of the decisions individuals make throughout their lives and he suggested a strong relationship between teachers' educational beliefs and their planning, instructional decisions, and classroom practices. The findings about the relationship between teacher beliefs and practices of teaching could be used by teachers themselves, teacher educator, school administrator, policymakers, and curriculum designers. There are different views about the concept of beliefs. These depend on the point of view of theorist or researcher. Since the 1970s, research has tried to classify the concept through a multi-dimensional system. For example Wehling and Charter [13] discuss beliefs in terms of complex organizations consisting of discrete sets of inter-related concepts. They include beliefs in the category of representations, or cognitive maps of the external world which serve as mediators for experiencing and responding to reality. This conception of beliefs fits with the notion of beliefs as personal knowledge, personal pedagogies and implicit theories. Pajares [2], refers to beliefs as a "messy construct", one that has not always been accorded much precision. However, research indicates that teacher behaviours are not always consistent with their beliefs.

A growing body of research asserts that teachers' beliefs should be studied through a framework aware of the influence of culture [5], so are constantly situated in a physical setting as the school, the classroom, the community, or curriculum. One common conclusion in the literature about teachers' beliefs is that changing is a complex, perhaps even, mysterious, process [14] and that powerful teacher education programs are needed to impact beliefs [15]. Teachers' beliefs appear to be static [16], resistant to change [17], and are generally not affected by reading and applying the findings of educational research [18]. However, some researchers have noted that reflecting on practice can change beliefs. Critical thinking, as the ability to involve in meaningful, self-regulatory judgment, is generally recognized as an essential skill for the knowledge and most educators would agree that learning to think critically is one the most desirable goal of formal schooling. This means not only thinking about important problem concerning disciplinary areas but thinking about the political, ethical and social challenges in everyday life.

2. Critical Thinking in Children

Critical thinking is a complex and controversial notion and there are widely contrasting views about it [19], [20]. The origin of literature on critical thinking can be traced in two academic disciplines: philosophy and psychology. Stenberg [21] has also referred a third critical thinking area within the field of education. The philosophical approach focuses on the hypothetical critical thinker as someone who is e.g. inquisitive in nature, open-minded, flexible, understands diverse viewpoints [22]. The cognitive psychological approach focus on how people actually think versus how they could or should think under ideal conditions [20] and to define critical thinking by the types of actions of behaviours critical thinkers can do and shows a list of skills and procedures performed by critical thinkers [23]. Bloom and his colleagues [24] are included in the educational approach. Their taxonomy for information processing skills, especially the three highest levels (analysis, synthesis and evaluation) are frequently considered as representation of critical thinking. The educational approach is based on years of classroom experience and observations of student learning but the frameworks in this field have not been tested as firmly within either philosophy or psychology [21]. Many researchers working in the area of critical thinking lament the poor state of critical thinking in most educated adult and children. Early research in the Piagetian tradition tended to view the cognitive processes of young children as insufficient in relation to those of older individuals. Following the Piaget's stages of development, young children are incapable of formal operations which are required for critical thought. In spite of more recent research has found that young children engage in many of the same cognitive processes that adults do, that means that there is a place for critical thinking in the lower elementary curriculum [25]. Kennedy [26] refers although critical thinking ability appears to improve with age, even young children can benefit from critical thinking instruction. Bailin et al. [27] argue that critical thinking instruction at the primary school can include teaching student to e.g.: value reason and truth; be open-minded; respect others during discussion; be willing to see thinks from another's perspective. A large number of critical thinking researchers confirm that critical thinking skills and abilities can be taught. Halpern [28] offers evidence of two instructional programs. Kennedy et al. [25] concluded that instructional interventions improving critical thinking skills generally shows positive results. Although critical thinking skills and abilities are part of the context to be learned according

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