



# Beliefs about sources of knowledge predict motivation for learning in teacher education



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Beliefs about sources of knowledge and motivation to learn were assessed.
- Beliefs in experiential sources were stronger than in formalized sources.
- Motivation to learn from practice was higher than motivation to learn from theory.
- Beliefs in experiential sources predicted motivation to learn from practice.
- Beliefs in formalized sources predicted motivation to learn from theory.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to provide new understanding concerning the theory-practice gap in teacher education. Participants, who were 96 Norwegian student teachers, were found to believe more in practically-derived than in theory-based sources of knowledge about instruction and student learning and to be more motivated for learning from practice than from theory in teacher education. Moreover, stronger beliefs in theory-based sources of knowledge were related to higher motivation to learn from theoretically-oriented coursework and stronger beliefs in practically-derived sources were related to higher motivation to learn from teaching practice. Theoretical and educational implications of the findings are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

To enter the teaching profession, student teachers need to acquire knowledge about instruction and student learning (Shulman, 1987). Such knowledge may be acquired from different sources, with those sources ranging from formalized bodies of knowledge to personal experience (Buehl & Fives, 2009). Moreover, student teachers are often said to foreground personal experience at the expense of formalized bodies of knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Kessels & Korthagen, 1996). In the current study, we extended prior work on student teachers' beliefs about the sources of teaching knowledge (Buehl & Fives, 2009) and investigated such

beliefs as contributors to their motivation for learning. More specifically, we surveyed student teachers' beliefs about the sources of knowledge about instruction and student learning and used those data to predict their motivation for learning from theory versus learning from practice during teacher education. In this way, we hoped to provide new insight into how student teachers weigh theory-based knowledge against practically-derived knowledge and may be differentially motivated for learning from theory and practice. Additionally, linking beliefs about sources of knowledge to motivation for learning in teacher education may suggest mechanisms underlying motivational (dis)engagement and help explain why so many student teachers are prone to leave teacher education without graduating in Norway as well as in other countries (e.g., Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Fauskanger & Hanssen, 2011; Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Hong, 2010; McDonald, 1999; Rots, Aelterman, Devos, & Vlerick, 2010; Sinclair, 2008; Stokking, Leenders, De Jong, & Van Tartwijk, 2003; Wikan & Bugge, 2014). For example, Stokking et al. (2003) report that 10–15% drop out

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during the first year of teacher education in the Netherlands, and according to Fauskanger and Hanssen (2011), 20% of Norwegian student teachers drop out during the first year of teacher education. Moreover, Long and colleagues reported that attrition in teacher education was of economic and social concern in several other countries, including the US, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK (Long et al., 2012).

During the last decades, the beliefs that student teachers as well as practicing teachers hold about different aspects of teaching have received increasing attention from researchers, with such beliefs ranging from beliefs about culture and context to beliefs about self and identity (for reviews, see Fives & Buehl, 2012; Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006). Beliefs refer to what individuals accept as or want to be true regardless of verification (Murphy & Mason, 2006; Pajares, 1992), with beliefs about teaching deemed important because they may be used to filter and interpret information, frame tasks, and guide action (Buehl & Beck, 2015; Fives & Buehl, 2012; Pajares, 1992).

Using a mixed methods approach, Fives and Buehl (2008) recently combined a qualitative (Study 1) and a quantitative (Study 2) investigation to identify preservice and practicing teachers' beliefs about teaching knowledge, defined as "all knowledge relevant to the practice of teaching" (p. 135). In that research, participants were shown to hold beliefs about knowledge of instruction (i.e., pedagogy), beliefs about knowledge of student learning, beliefs about content knowledge, and beliefs about organizational and management knowledge. Of note is that the two first categories (i.e., beliefs about knowledge of instruction and student learning) were most frequently mentioned by the participants in the qualitative study and that questionnaire items pertaining to those two categories fell on the same large factor in the quantitative (factor-analytic) study. This suggests that beliefs concerning knowledge of instructional methods (how to teach) and student learning (how students learn) may figure prominently in an integrated manner in student and practicing teachers' minds.

When Buehl and Fives (2009) further explored preservice and practicing teachers' beliefs about where knowledge of teaching come from, that is, about the sources of such knowledge, they found that formal preparation (i.e., college courses and professional development), formalized bodies of knowledge (i.e., books, research articles, and responsible websites), observational experiences (i.e., observing others teach), interactive and collaborative experiences with others, personal experiences, and self-reflection were regarded as sources of teaching knowledge. While Buehl and Fives (2009) did not assess to what extent their participants endorsed the different types of knowledge sources, the present study was conducted to compare their endorsements of theory-based (i.e., sources involving formalized bodies of knowledge) and practically-derived (i.e., sources involving observational, collaborative, and personal experiences) knowledge about teaching, with a specific focus on sources of knowledge about instruction and student learning. Our main assumption is that student teachers' judgments regarding the different types of sources of knowledge about instruction and student learning may have implications for their motivation to learn from corresponding types of sources in teacher education. Crucial to our argument is the possibility that student teachers tending to rely on theory-based knowledge of instruction and student learning may be more motivated to learn from theory presented in college courses and lectures while student teachers tending to rely more on practically-derived knowledge may be more motivated to learn from experiences provided by the teaching practice periods of the program. Importantly, support for this assumption is also offered by theory and research within the growing field of personal epistemology.

Personal epistemology<sup>2</sup> refers to individuals' beliefs about "how knowing occurs, what counts as knowledge and where it resides, and how knowledge is constructed and evaluated" (Hofer, 2004, p. 1). Such "epistemic beliefs" (Kitchener, 2002) may concern knowledge in general or knowledge concerning particular domains or even topics within domains (Bråten, Strømsø, & Samuelstuen, 2008; Muis, Bendixen, & Haerle, 2006). Following Fives and Buehl (2008), we consider beliefs about teaching knowledge (including beliefs about instruction and student learning) domain-specific epistemic beliefs in this study, with the domain of teaching distinguishable as a particular recognized and institutionalized field or subject (Alexander, 1997).

Beliefs about sources of knowledge are included in the much cited multidimensional epistemic belief conceptualizations of Schommer (1990) and Hofer and Pintrich (1997). Specifically, Hofer and Pintrich (1997) proposed that such beliefs fall on a continuum ranging from the conception that knowledge originates outside the self and resides in external authority, from which it may be transmitted, to the conception that knowledge is actively constructed by the person in interaction with others (a parallel dimension was termed "omniscient authority" by Schommer). More recently, however, beliefs concerning authority and personal experience as sources of knowledge have been considered to constitute separate dimensions rather than representing endpoints on the same dimension (Ferguson, Bråten, & Strømsø, 2012; Greene, Azevedo, & Torney-Purta, 2008), with those two dimensions capturing the extent to which individuals rely on external authority and personal experience, respectively, as sources of knowledge (Bråten, Ferguson, Strømsø, & Anmarkrud, 2014). Accordingly, we attempted to measure student teachers' reliance on theory-based and practically-derived knowledge on separate dimensions in the present study. Please note that theoretical and practical sources of knowledge bear resemblance to external authority and personal experience regarded as distinct sources of knowledge within personal epistemology (see also, Buehl & Fives, 2009).

The literature on personal epistemology provided both theoretical and empirical grounding for our attempt to link student teachers' beliefs about the sources of knowledge about instruction and student learning to their motivation for learning in teacher education. For example, Hofer and Pintrich (1997) suggested that epistemic beliefs may function as implicit theories about knowledge and knowing that are activated by domains and tasks and influence individuals' motivational approach to those domains and tasks. Likewise, theoretical models proposed by Buehl (2003) and Muis (2007) posited that epistemic beliefs are activated during learners' perceptions and definitions of particular tasks and then affect motivational components such as self-beliefs, values, and achievement goals, which were conceived of as standards for learning by Muis (2007). In this view, then, student teachers' beliefs about sources of teaching knowledge, specifically knowledge of instruction and student learning, may frame their interpretation of learning tasks and guide them to value or disregard information presented throughout their teacher education (Fives & Buehl, 2008).

According to Watt and Richardson (2015), relevant frameworks for studying student teachers' motivation include self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), achievement goal theory (Dweck, 1986; Elliot, 1999), and expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Among these, expectancy-value theory

<sup>2</sup> The term "personal" in "personal epistemology" is mainly used to distinguish students' and other laypersons' beliefs about knowledge and knowing from schooled philosophers' (i.e., epistemologists') thinking about such issues (Bråten, 2011).

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