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**Teachers' education.
The perspective of theory and practice**

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EDUCATIONAL CONCEPT AND INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION

Summary

This paper discusses the concept of beliefs of in-service and pre-service teachers at faculties of education in different conceptual and terminological determinations, as well as the results of respective relevant research about their connection with the orientation towards the application of specific teaching methods in specific learning situations. It has been stressed that significant changes in teaching could occur if future teachers dealt with personal theories that become visible through a process of self-reflection. In the area of initial teacher education it is necessary to abandon traditional models of training and practising technical skills and rather direct the teaching process to active learning, and to understanding the curricular contents of theoretical nature with respect to students' experience that relies on the underlying theoretical knowledge, which allows reconsideration of their own beliefs and practices.

Key words: educational concept, pedagogical beliefs, initial teacher education, reflective practitioner.

Introduction

When deciding on how they will proceed in the classroom, teachers rely on previous experience and their own way of looking at problems. Their approach is based on personal understanding of the circumstances, i.e. understanding rooted in their beliefs. The question is what truly makes teachers' beliefs, as there is no unique terminological way of defining them. A number of terms can be found in relevant studies, such as: pedagogical beliefs (Northcote, 2009; Singh, 2010), epistemological beliefs (Brownlee et al., 2001; Brownlee, 2004), teacher beliefs (Pajares, 1992; Kagan, 1992), personal epistemology (Walker et al., 2012), implicit pedagogy (Arežina, Pešić, 1982; Pešikan, 2010; Suzić, 1997), pedagogical concept (Vujisić-Živković 2005; Tadić 2015).

Under the epistemological beliefs Brownlee includes beliefs about what knowledge is, how it can be gained, and the limits and criteria for determining knowledge (Brownlee, 2004). Calderhead lists five teachers' epistemological beliefs – beliefs about the student and learning, beliefs about teaching, beliefs about the teaching subject, beliefs about the professional development of teachers and beliefs about their role in teaching children (Calderhead, 1996, in: Joksimović et al., 2010). The term personal epistemology also refers to beliefs of individuals about the nature of knowing and knowledge, though according to literature if there are elements in common with the notion of epistemological beliefs, the focus of personal epistemology is related to the individual nature of belief (Walker et al., 2012).

Pajares (Pajares) points out that teachers' beliefs represent a complex concept, which is often explained by other terms such as judgements, axioms, opinions, or concepts and they are spoken about as theories that underlie our behavior, on the basis of which we estimate what we are learning (Pajares, 1992).

Implicit pedagogy includes the philosophy of education – a system of values and goals of education; personal psychology – beliefs about the nature of the child, development and learning, needs and abilities of children of different ages and personal pedagogy – beliefs about educational processes (Arežina, Pešić), prejudice, stereotypes and preconception of teachers about learning and teaching (Suzić, 1997), personal and unconscious theories about education and teaching that influence actions and behaviour (Pešikan, 2010).

Under the term ‘educational concept’ Vujisić Živković includes „the way students understand the basic pedagogical categories and processes, upbringing, education and teaching and the role of the main actors of this process, students and teachers” (Vujisić-Živković, 2005, p. 105). In addition to this definition of the concept, she notices that for American researchers this term includes not only scientifically based and conscious pedagogical concept, but also an implicit pedagogy, and practical theories, i.e. knowledge in action (Vujisić-Živković, 2005). Thus defined educational concept is not permanently determined, but represents an option that provides space for the expansion and upgrade (Andjelković, 2012).

Definitions of educational concept can also be found in studies conducted with subject teachers and primary school teachers in Serbia, which focus on the characteristics of educational concept of teachers (Tadić, Mrvoš, 2014; Tadić, 2015). The educational concept includes beliefs of teachers about the basic educational issues – the child’s nature, the relationship between an individual and the community, the basic goals of education, the nature of knowledge and the way people learn, the roles of teachers and students in an educational process, methods and contents of educational work, the importance and role of educational institutions and the like (Tadić, 2015).

What follows from the aforementioned is that the term ‘educational concept’ denotes rather general beliefs about the basic pedagogical issues (the educational concept of teachers is usually defined by beliefs about the nature of the child). The impact of educational concept of teachers is crucial for the acceptance or the development of teachers’ beliefs about more specific pedagogical issues (about learning, teaching, curriculum, evaluation, and their own roles), and for the application of specific teaching methods in specific learning situations (Tadić, 2015; Tauber, 2007). That is, the teacher’s educational acts and practical work are directly affected by the educational concept, and thus, such beliefs can be used for interpreting and understanding the behaviour of teachers in the classroom (Kalra, Baveja, 2013).

Examining future teachers’ beliefs and educational concepts

Research suggests that even before starting their studies future teachers have formed beliefs about pedagogical issues – children's nature, upbringing, education, teaching (Vujisić-Živković, 2005; Gürümük, Göregenli, 2009; Pajares, 1992; Thomson, Palermo, 2014). These beliefs are a reflection of the experiences they had as school students, developed over many years of observation of teachers with whom they met (Pajares, 1992).

Basic teacher beliefs on pedagogical issues (about the nature of children, about the purpose of education, about how students learn, what motivates their behaviour...) and specific pedagogical issues (teaching and learning) are socially constructed and cannot be viewed independently of the wider social and cultural context in which teachers live and work. A research conducted in Turkey found that the humanistic orientation in the upbringing of children is more typical of women compared to the respondents of the

opposite sex, and that the traditional orientation is more characteristic of men's beliefs about raising children (Gürimek, Göregenli, 2009). The authors stated that due to their beliefs and the role influenced by culture and environment, future male teachers have difficulty adjusting as opposed to female teachers, especially in the first years of initial education. Similar results were obtained in a comparative study by TALIS (OECD, 2009). In most countries, teachers rather express beliefs of transmissive type, which is characterized by the perception of teaching as a process of direct transfer of knowledge, and a less common type of constructivist beliefs, which reflects the vision of students as active participants in the process of acquiring knowledge.

Future teachers' belief systems reflect their personal theories about the nature of knowledge and, consequently, influence decisions related to the process of teaching and learning and the curriculum (Kalra, Baveja, 2013; Pajares, 1992; Tanrıverdi, Apak, 2014), the status of students in the educational process (Decker, Rimm-Kaufman, 2008), the beliefs about the appropriate ways of preventing and solving discipline problems (Tadić, Radovanović, 2012), and are associated with the choice of teaching styles which they implement during their pre-service practice (Chai et al., 2009; OECD, 2009). The research results of Tadić and Radovanović, with the first-year students of Teacher Education Faculty in Belgrade show that students in the experimental group, who were presented the contents about education concepts and models of classroom discipline by means of the Problem-Based Approach, exhibited more optimism in respect of children's nature, a positive commitment to the educational processes, greater consistency in explaining the disciplinary procedures and better performance in explaining their attitudes, compared to the control group of students, who were exposed to these contents orally, with the teacher assuming the dominant lecturing role (Tadić, Radovanović, 2012).

Research of Decker and Rimm-Kaufman indicates that students of teacher education faculties are inclined to a clearly proactive approach to discipline, they emphasize the need for the application of procedures aimed at metacognitive student development, which reflect taking into account the social experiences of students, and they emphasize the importance of active participation of students in the teaching process. It was found that the students who prefer to work in a high school, rather than in the primary, are more inclined to practising and relying on learning by heart and often choose to deal with the areas where students are having problems, (rather than offer students a choice of activities). As regards pre-service teachers' beliefs about school students (in terms of students' motivation) findings show that younger students of teacher education faculties „tend to express negative beliefs about school students more often” (Decker, Rimm-Kaufman, 2008, p. 59).

Studies have shown that students' beliefs about teaching and learning not only affect their future practical work, but also the process of learning and acquiring knowledge – the choice of strategies and learning techniques, selection and interpretation of contents, connecting with previously learned contents, as well as motivational issues (Northcote, 2009; Pajares, 1992). Sue Walker and associates state that personal epistemological beliefs of prospective teachers directly affect their learning strategies, they act as a filter that determines the way students learn things during their initial education and the learning outcomes achieved during the study (Walker et al., 2012). Research of Bondy and associates (Bondy et al., 2007; according to Walker et al., 2012) who dealt with connections between the learning approaches of students, future teachers, and their personal epistemology suggests that students with sophisticated beliefs are more inclined

to include different perspectives in the learning process, and are more successful at connecting different ideas. The results are similar to the data obtained by Braten and Stromso (Braten, Stromso, 2006), which suggest that the beliefs of first year students of teacher education faculties in Norway regarding the speed of acquiring knowledge affected their ability to think critically.

Research and analysis of the beliefs of students and teachers – practitioners can provide relevant information when creating educational programmes and are of great importance for the improvement of their professional education and teaching practice (Brownlee et al., 2001; Gürimek, Göregenli, 2009; Kalra, Baveja, Northcote, 2009; Minor et al., 2002; Pajares, 1992).

Initial teacher education and educational concept

Initial teacher education can be a critical period for students to elucidate and reconsider the already formed beliefs and values, and to adapt them in accordance with their professional roles. Changing teachers' or students' beliefs can be very slow. Numerous studies point to the need for awareness of the already established pedagogical attitudes and beliefs about teaching and learning, so they do not become an obstacle in the process of students' education, due to the fact that there is a tendency to assimilate new knowledge into already existing (Brownlee et al., 2001; Vujisić-Živković 2005; Gürimek, Göregenli, 2009; Decker, Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Joram, Gabriele, 1997; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). Beliefs play an important role in the acquisition of knowledge and „may be responsible for the perpetuation of antiquated and ineffectual teaching practices” (Pajares, 1992, p. 328). Therefore, students should be encouraged to share perspectives and question their own beliefs, especially if they are in contradiction with the experience acquired during professional education and practice.

During initial education, and later too, we are still faced with the traditional models of teacher education where the contents are studied without bringing them into relation to or basing them on personal teachers' experiences and beliefs about general pedagogical dilemmas and / or the specific area of pedagogical work. The traditional model of training, practising or mastering technical skills, and passive acquisition of knowledge, which serve as recipes to be applied in practical situations, usually do not occur in the conditions of real practice (Lepičnik-Vodopivec, 2011; Korthagen 2001; Radulovic, 2011). This model of education includes the separation of theory and practice, as well as of knowledge and opinions from real activity. A student who formed during their studies the belief that the theoretical content is a burden to the educational process or that theory is inapplicable in everyday situations „will be placed in a position to rely solely on their own experience or to accept ready-made solutions from other people's experience – in imitation of their own teachers from the past or following their colleagues' advice, or to use the techniques and solutions that provide short-efficient outcomes at least” (Radulović, 2011, p. 128). Such orientation has been under critical scrutiny in recent decades with an emphasized necessity of studying the theoretical knowledge on specific aspects of the teaching profession and of practical activities (e.g. classroom management: development of procedural mechanisms, building interpersonal relations and the use of didactic strategies that provide quality work and learning). Successful teaching is not *magic*, as it is often understood in so designed training programs (and what teachers often expect) which are based on partial knowledge and communication skills without studying the theoretical

basis on which specific teaching techniques are based, or reconsidering not only their bases, but, in the first place, teacher beliefs about the issues to be studied.

In all its aspects, the teaching process must respect the unified act of a person's upbringing and education. Understood in this way, it requires teacher education to rise above the training for mere organizational activities and the study of partial professional skills by pre-service and in-service teachers (mostly the study of communication skills and other techniques for classroom management). It is necessary to critically examine the objectives set by the programme and studied by teachers during their professional development, „whether these objectives and selected resources are ethically, politically and educationally justified” (Apple, 2012, p. 346) and whether thus set goals can be achieved. The so-called critical orientation in professional education of teachers combines progressive social vision with the radical critique of education (Feiman-Nemser, 1989). On the one hand, there is the optimistic faith in the power of education in terms of creating a new social order, and on the other, the view that schools are a tool to maintain social injustice. The teacher plays an important role in social reform, and teacher education is part of a broader strategy to create a more just and democratic society. He is an educator and political activist who creates in a class a community that learns and promotes democratic values. A conceptual turnaround is visible in the understanding of the ways in which teachers learn things during the process of professional education. The teacher is not observed as *a consumer of other people's knowledge*, but as *a reflective practitioner* who has a critical attitude not only to the theory and practice, but also to the personal educational concept and the system of values that are the basis of decision-making and of teacher performance.

Reflective practice is a very important approach in teacher education, because students are asked to think about their attitudes, beliefs and assumptions and to use reflection as a means of self-evaluation and change (Andjelković, 2012; Ilić, Bojović, 2015; Radulović 2011; Stančić et al., 2013). The study of theoretical assumptions about education during initial teacher education should be planned and implemented so as to thereby enable and support the stated reconsideration. Activities with theoretical teaching content should be aimed at encouraging students to reconsider and construct knowledge, and not to provide ready-made solutions, i.e. recipes which are assumed to be practical for future application. Theoretical knowledge acquired in a process that takes into account the teacher's understanding of the theory and his experience which reflects the meaning of such theoretical knowledge, is not an *absolute truth* directly applicable in practice. It allows the teacher critical thinking and functioning at school. Minor (2002) contends that two important things which can influence the change of beliefs are the experience acquired by students in practical classroom work and the ability to think and analyze their experiences. For future teachers to be willing to do so, it is necessary to develop specific competencies during the initial education and to improve and upgrade them during further professional education, to foster reflection, self-evaluation, responsibility, critical and divergent thinking.

Schön indicates the importance of reconsidering specific situations and detecting problems in a particular context, and that „the teacher as a reflective practitioner does not just render knowledge that he adopted as a technique, but contemplates his work, judges his practices, perceives and defines specific problems from his practice in a particular context, links them with the formerly acquired knowledge (theoretically and experientially developed)

and still acts, trying to adapt his work to new situations, specific students and his new knowledge, and continues to examine his practices” (Schön, 1987; in: Radulović, 2011, p. 63-64).

The role of reflection in professional teacher education is also discussed by Korthagen (Korthagen, 2001). Explaining his „realistic approach” he states that the teacher's behavior depends on the personal experience and that it is of great importance to start from the beliefs of teachers in professional education. He points out that the basis of programmes based on this approach should be concrete practical problems that students and teachers have met in real situations, in order to become aware of their wishes, feelings, thoughts and actions, which in turn leads to their changes. Students are taught to follow the model of reflection which consists of five stages - action, reflection on action, raising awareness about the essential aspects of the action, creating alternative methods of action and evaluation. Through the work in small groups, role playing and discussions, students learn to reflect their feelings; this shows the importance of interaction between both teachers (educators) and students – future teachers, and among students themselves. Exchange of views and perspectives about thinking and learning by using group interviews and bringing them in connection with real examples from practice is also the characteristic of the strategy of encouraging future teachers to explicate, reconsider and modify their own ideas about children's thinking and learning, which was developed by Strauss (Strauss, 1993). With the same aim Feiman-Nemser implemented a course with students organized around the most common prejudices that are formed through the experience of schooling. During the programme, the applied techniques were those of reflective diary, case studies, analysis of video recordings, discussion, role-play and analysis of professional literature (Feiman-Nemser et al., 1987; in: Vujisić-Živković, 2005).

Studies indicate that the professional practice can be an opportunity for students – future teachers to get to know and reconsider their teaching beliefs and test models of teaching that they have been taught. So they have the opportunity to meet with different perspectives of other participants in the educational process. Also, the teachers and their associates in schools and colleges not only get the opportunity to encourage students to think about beliefs, but to question their own teaching practice, i.e. its implicit basis, so that both sides observe their own and others' pedagogical beliefs. Introduction of different views on pedagogical issues can contribute not only to raising awareness of, but also monitoring the development and changes of one's own beliefs (Ilić, Bojović, 2015; Stančić et al., 2011).

The influence of the theory of social constructivism in teacher education, there was a shift of the focus onto a change in teachers' perceptions and thinking processes. Such a change requires learning opportunities based on the substantive reconsideration of educational theories and practices based on personal beliefs and experiences (Tatto, 1998). Syllabuses should be directed towards the development of skills that encourage pre-service teachers to reflect on their beliefs (Brownlee et al., 2001; Northcote, 2009). Recent studies have shown that the beliefs of students of teacher education faculties (Brownlee et al., 2001; Kay et al., 2010; Tadić, Radovanović, 2012) can be changed as a result of teaching /learning (at university or during professional development of teachers), if the teaching process is based on the involvement of all participants in the dialogue and on understanding personal beliefs. The change does not only depend on the contents that students learn, but also on the way in which these contents are being learned. Such a conception of teacher education programmes would involve significant changes in the organization of teaching at faculties and practice in schools.

Conclusion

Pedagogical beliefs of future teachers are of great importance, because they are the basis which pre-service teachers start from when interpreting the pedagogical and educational process about which they learn during their studies and which they observe, analyze and create during their practice. They reflect students' personal theories on the nature of the child and cognition and, consequently, influence the decisions related to the process of teaching and learning, the curriculum, and assessment of pupils' learning, and they influence various aspects of classroom activity.

Even before starting their studies, future teachers have formed beliefs about education, teaching and learning, which were built on the basis of their own experience. Numerous authors point to the need for reconsideration of already established pedagogical beliefs and the possibility of their continual transformation and change. The understanding, reconsideration and changing of beliefs is a complex and lengthy process and should begin during initial teacher education. To initiate changes, course and professional practice syllabuses at teacher training faculties, and the ways in which university teachers work should enable and support the activities in which students would question the meanings they attach to different perspectives and experiences through their mutual exchange and confrontation (with other students, teachers, authors of texts which they use as references). Thus conceived, initial teacher education is focused on the development of teachers as reflective practitioners, in order to enable future teachers to understand and interpret personal attitudes and values that underlie their actions.

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