

## Beliefs

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*“The real difficulty in changing the course of any enterprise lies not in developing new ideas but in escaping from the old ones.” ~ John Maynard Keynes*

### I Know...or I Believe...?

Many of the statements made in the school environment or published in the literature are not statements of fact but rather of belief. When people use those belief statements to justify behavior, their “reasoning” may be adversely affected. What is a belief? How does it differ from a fact?

The chemical formula for water is H<sub>2</sub>O. That is a fact—by definition and convention. Few people in the United States would question me if I stated that Chicago is west of New York. They would, however, balk if I stated that Chicago was east of New York. They accept the first statement as a fact because most people in the United States conceptualize direction in that way. Although it’s unlikely, one could also reach Chicago by traveling east from New York.

Facts are statements that *from a particular perspective* are part of “consensus” reality. There is little doubt connected to facts as long as one stays within a particular context. On a continuum of doubt, there is less doubt about facts than about beliefs.

Once you get past defined terms about concrete things—once the context shifts or there is the slightest bit of complexity—statements made about a situation begin to enter the realm of belief, not fact. Take the word *accountability*. Many people, both in and out of education, agree that both students and teachers should be held *accountable* for learning. Beyond that simple agreement, any further discussion about what accountability entails resembles the action on the floor of the Stock Exchange! Each person is certain that his or her perception of *accountability* is “correct”—a fact. Yet there is little consensus.

The more complex a situation gets—the more possible perspectives it may have and the more different people who are involved—the less likely one can state a fact about the situation on which everyone will agree. Thus, we enter the realm of beliefs.

Statements that are “facts” by definition or for which there is an overwhelming body of support and no contradictory evidence are rarely questioned. People have choices when it comes to beliefs. Failure to periodically reexamine beliefs for their validity in the light of new information leads to habitual behavior—or as Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer calls it—mindlessness. The key, then, is to identify which statements frequently used in education are facts and which are beliefs.

### What Are Beliefs?

*“Belief is a moral act for which the believer is to be held responsible.”*  
~ H. A. Hodges

People use the word belief in a variety of ways. In his insightful article on the problems of researching the role of teacher beliefs, Frank Pajares <sup>(1)</sup> says:

*“...Defining beliefs is at best a game of player’s choice. They travel in disguise and often under alias—attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action*

*strategies, rules of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding, and social strategy, to name but a few that can be found in the literature.”<sup>(2)</sup>*

Rather than debating what may or may not make something a belief rather than factual knowledge, I'll simply define the way in which I intend to use the term. Drawing on the work of Robert Dilts<sup>(3)</sup>, I'll define *beliefs* as judgments and evaluations that we make about ourselves, about others, and about the world around us. Beliefs are *generalizations* about things such as causality or the *meaning* of specific actions.

One clue to distinguishing between factual knowledge and belief is how a person responds to a challenge. If someone points out that you spelled a word incorrectly, you don't generally "defend" the misspelling. You merely change a bit of memory to "fix" the problem. When someone questions people's beliefs, they often respond as if it were a personal threat, emotionally defending their position.

Here are a few examples of belief statements made in the educational environment.

- ▶ A quiet classroom is conducive to learning.
- ▶ Studying longer will improve a student's score on the test.
- ▶ Grades encourage students to work harder.

Are any of these statements facts? Not if we define facts as something that is true in all contexts. There are exceptions to each of the statements.

Many beliefs about school come from teachers' experiences as students. They have formed impressions about themselves and their abilities, about the nature of knowledge, and about how "learning" takes place. Consider the young child "playing teacher." She lines her dolls up in neat rows and stands at the front of her class "lecturing" and admonishing her students to "pay attention." At this early age, she already has a strong sense of what school is "s'posed to be." Is it any wonder that when she grows up and becomes a teacher, it would not occur to her to teach in any other way?

### **Fixed Facts, Alternative Beliefs**

You can't arbitrarily decide what time you'll hold your class or choose to teach that  $12 - 5 = 17$  (at least not if you want to keep your job). By contrast, a belief represents one alternative among many rather than the one true fact or rule agreed upon by all. Because of this, people are free to choose among the alternatives.

For example, not everyone agrees that classrooms must be quiet for learning to take place. Some believe collaboration benefits learning. It's a bit difficult to collaborate without some level of conversation. Many disagreements in education occur because people don't distinguish between facts and beliefs. Much of the "conventional wisdom" of education is, in effect, a collection of outdated beliefs that retain the power to drive the behavior of the institution.

I'm not suggesting teachers change *any* beliefs. What I am suggesting is that, because a teacher's beliefs strongly influence students' development, it is imperative for teachers to examine what those beliefs are. Are they based on solid foundations? What, if any, alternatives would be in the best interest of both the teacher and the students?

## Beliefs and Perceptions

*"Whatever one believes to be true either is true  
or becomes true in one's mind."*

~ John C. Lilly

Beliefs not only affect how people behave but what they perceive (or pay attention to) in their environment. Contrary to the old saying "*seeing is believing*," it is more likely that "*believing is seeing*." When people *believe* something is true, they *perceive* information supporting that belief. Beliefs alter expectations. People perceive what they expect to perceive.

If, for example, Stan *believes* Jamie is a "troublemaker," he will unconsciously interpret some of Jamie's behaviors as disruptive. Cheryl, who *believes* Jamie is "full of energy," may not even notice the behavior. The same thing is true of a teacher who has no prior belief, one way or the other, about Jamie. Think of the damage teachers do when they "help out" another teacher by telling him to "Watch out for that one. He's a real troublemaker." Sharing facts? Hardly.

If teachers *believe* a program they have been told to use is based on a solid foundation, and if the program is based on beliefs similar to their own, they will notice ways in which the program works. If they *believe* it is a waste of time, they will notice evidence supporting that belief. It's imperative to recognize that teachers are interpreting *the same events* in different ways. They unconsciously assign different meanings to the event in order to support their prior beliefs.

### What Should Teachers Believe?

*"One's personal predispositions are not only relevant but, in fact,  
stand at the core of becoming a teacher."* ~ Dan Lortie

In reviewing the literature on beliefs, I came across one study in which a researcher concluded that the beliefs of pre-service teachers did, indeed, influence their teaching behaviors. This researcher then went on to suggest that, in teacher education classes, prospective teachers should be *taught* the *correct* beliefs. Where might we find such pearls of wisdom?

First, she assumes there are correct beliefs. Second, she assumes that by teaching (telling) people what they *should* believe, they will do so. If that were true, why are there still so many arguments about fundamental issues in education? If, after a long history of public education, educators can't even agree on the definition of education, what hope is there that they will agree on the "correct beliefs" all teachers should hold about it?

If there is no correct set of beliefs, what might teachers gain by identifying their current beliefs? There are many benefits, including identifying sources of conflict and frustration, pinpointing beliefs based on outdated or erroneous information, and increasing behavioral flexibility. Because teachers cannot help but teach what they believe, self-reflection will help them understand how their beliefs influence the *taught*, *learned*, and *implicit* curriculum. (See related articles) Perhaps the most compelling reason for teachers to explore the beliefs that shape the topography of their inner landscape is contained in these words by Parker Palmer:

*"When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through  
a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—  
and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well."*(5)

[Note: Portions of this article were excerpted from *Teaching in Mind: How Teacher Thinking Shapes Education* by Judith Lloyd Yero. Published in January, 2002 by MindFlight Publishing, P.O. Box 1738, Hamilton, MT 59840 (ISBN 0-9711983-3-0). For permission to reprint or use any part of this article, please contact [info@mind-flight.com](mailto:info@mind-flight.com).]

### References

1 Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers' Beliefs and Educational Research: Cleaning Up a Messy Construct. *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 62, No. 3, 307-332.

2 Ibid. p 309

3 Dilts, R. B. (1999). *Sleight of Mouth: The Magic of Conversational Belief Change*. Capitola, CA: Meta Publications.

4 Marchese, T. J. (1998). The New conversation about Learning: Insights From neuroscience and Anthropology, Cognitive Science and Work-Place Studies. New Horizons for Learning. <http://www.newhorizons.org>

5 Palmer, P. J. (1998) *The Courage To Teach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2.