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Abstract

A personal teaching philosophy is an essential and active element of a teacher. Acquiring a philosophy is powerful, in that it directs and guides a teacher's teaching practices in the classroom as well as how they perceive teaching and learning and the students around them. This paper aims to discuss the importance of developing and reflecting on a personal teaching philosophy as a pre-service teacher, with a particular emphasis on the process of its development and its usefulness as a tool for developing pedagogy. The development of a personal teaching philosophy will be explored through a discussion on best practice and reflection, with insights into the procedural differences for undergraduate and Graduate Diploma of Education teaching philosophy development. The paper will also explore the university's role and challenges in assisting pre-service teachers to develop a personal teaching philosophy.

Keywords

personal teaching philosophy, pre-service teachers, professional experience, reflection, pedagogy, Graduate Diploma of Education



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A personal teaching philosophy is an essential and active element of a teacher. Acquiring a philosophy is powerful, in that it directs and guides a teacher's teaching practices in the classroom as well as how they perceive teaching and learning and the students around them. This paper aims to discuss the importance of developing and reflecting on a personal teaching philosophy as a pre-service teacher, with a particular emphasis on the process of its development and its usefulness as a tool for developing pedagogy. The development of a personal teaching philosophy will be explored through a discussion on best practice and reflection, with insights into the procedural differences for undergraduate and Graduate Diploma of Education teaching philosophy development. The paper will also explore the university's role and challenges in assisting pre-service teachers to develop a personal teaching philosophy.

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What is a personal teaching philosophy?

A personal teaching and learning philosophy is regarded as one of the most desirable attributes in pre-service teachers (Sheridan & Moore, 2009). It encompasses what teachers believe and value about teaching, as well as how students learn best. This has great importance, because it is from this personal philosophy that pre-service teachers will base their decisions (Webster, 2005). A personal teaching philosophy is developed throughout a pre-service teacher's studies, career and teaching experiences and is best evident in pedagogical practice. It is dynamic, as the result of new and diverse experiences, especially in pre-service training, as undergraduate students are exposed to different schools, students, teachers and learning environments through professional experience.

A personal teaching philosophy and pre-service teachers

Duffy (1998, cited in Sheridan & Moore, 2009) identifies that there is a need to imbue pre-service teachers with strong personal philosophies and decision-making skills that require "thoughtful adaptation rather than technical compliance" (pp.2–3). This suggests that pre-service teachers need to develop their own perceptions and views on teaching and not simply follow a common course of actions and beliefs. As pre-



service teachers move through their degree and interact with different teachers and students, it is suggested that their perceptions of themselves as teachers, and of students as learners, will change and develop. Through continually reflecting on these experiences, and how they have impacted or altered their personal teaching philosophy, pre-service teachers are taking the necessary steps toward becoming a quality teacher who is motivated and able to create a safe and nurturing classroom environment for their students (Sheridan & Moore, 2009).

The development of a teaching philosophy

The process of developing a teaching philosophy is constant and active, as it can change or be altered by every teaching experience and interaction with students and teachers. For pre-service teachers, practicum experiences greatly influence a philosophy. It may be that, during practicum experience, a philosophy was developed as a pre-service teacher worked with a mentor who exposed them to what outstanding teaching looks like. Conversely, being aware of the characteristics of ‘bad teaching’, as a result of observing teachers during these experiences, can have an equally important impact on a philosophy. Experiences in schools as a teacher and student significantly influence attitudes and beliefs about teacher qualities and effective teaching that will, in turn, have a greater impact on teaching practices (Sheridan & Moore, 2009).

Dewey (cited in Webster, 2005) argued that all people act and behave according to their beliefs and that a person’s thinking should not be separated too greatly from their experiences. Therefore, the influence of observation and practical teaching experiences is inextricably linked to the development of a teaching philosophy. A pre-service teacher’s personal teaching philosophy, which they have actively defined, shapes how they will orchestrate their classroom in the future. In education there is a clearly defined relationship between personal beliefs, pedagogy and classroom practice (Manning & Manning, 1994) where “experiences influence beliefs and beliefs influence practice” (Maynes, Allison & Julien-Schultz, 2012, p.69). It is essentially how a teacher’s identity is developed and the last part of this process is actually putting values and beliefs into practice in the classroom (Churchill *et al.*, 2011).

Multi-level reflection

A major component of the developmental process of a personal teaching philosophy occurs before, during and after these aforementioned experiences. There is the need for continuous reflection on teaching practices and observations of other teachers in order for pre-service teachers to be able to formulate and articulate a solid teaching philosophy. Ongoing reflection is a skill that is deliberately used in teaching and learning experiences (Whitton *et al.*, 2010). The field of education distinguishes between three levels of reflection: the mirror, the microscope and the binoculars (Whitton *et al.*, 2010). The first level, the mirror, refers to having a clear understanding of ‘self’, which is considered by Howard Gardner to be intrapersonal intelligence (Whitton *et al.*, 2010). It involves the possession of metacognitive abilities, where an individual is aware and in control of their own thinking, activities



and actions (Barry & King, 1998). The mirror encompasses an understanding of who you are, what your beliefs and values are as well as recognising the experiences that have shaped these understandings. The second level, the microscope, relates to the experiences that you have had and that have caused you to learn something about yourself, students, teaching and learning (Whitton *et al.*, 2010). The third level, the binoculars, looks at what impacts a particular situation. For example, what policies affect teaching and learning in this school and how comfortable is the teacher in adhering to these policies? Each of these levels needs to be reflected upon in order to gain understanding and formulate a judgement that, in turn, will influence a personal teaching philosophy.

Analytical and purposeful reflection on personal conceptions, decisions and teaching experiences, as well as reflection on school policies and ethos, is a critical component of pre-service teaching, as it empowers teachers to refine practice. It strengthens a teacher's philosophy and thereby provides a concrete and thoughtful foundation to base their pedagogy and classroom practice on. Reflection solidifies the development of a teacher's beliefs, values and attitudes toward teaching and what is effective pedagogy (Sheridan & Moore, 2009). Personal perspectives of education, teaching and students enable teachers to critically give meaning to experiences and evaluate existing practices in order to better their own (Webster, 2005). Rather than inactively learning the purposes, goals or aims of education, pre-service teachers should be encouraged to give meaning to, and create, their own perceptions of education. Pre-service teachers need to discern for themselves what constitutes quality teaching and pedagogy and the reflective process allows this to occur (Webster, 2005). Recent research into pre-service teachers' beliefs highlights the importance of reflection in filtering predispositions about students, the classroom and teaching (Mansfield & Volet, 2010). Creating and articulating a philosophy, therefore, comes from reflecting on pre-service teaching experiences (Ballard & McBride, 2010).

Reflection in practice

Pre-service teachers are also encouraged to articulate their personal teaching philosophies with regular journal entries and discussions (Webster, 2005). These types of exercises allow pre-service teachers to respond to the various theories, perspectives and current research findings that they encounter, in terms of what is best practice and which perspective aligns closely with their personal beliefs and values about teaching (Webster, 2005). In doing so, pre-service teachers are also sculpting their personal and professional identity. The types of questions that pre-service teachers may ask of themselves in the reflection process in order to develop their personal philosophy could include:

1. What are my beliefs and values about learning?
2. What are my beliefs and values about teaching?
3. What is my role as an educator?
4. How do students learn best?
5. What resources best support the learning of my students?
6. What did I learn about the students, the curriculum and my own teaching strategies?



7. What impact did the teaching have on me?
8. What values and opinions have been made or have been altered through this teaching experience?
9. How will I think or act in the future as a result of this experience?
10. How can I use this new knowledge in my future planning of teaching and learning?

The questions presented above provide a solid starting point for reflection on teaching and learning experiences. The process involves activating the three levels of reflection (the mirror, the microscope and the binoculars), therefore, when teachers are asking these questions of themselves, their personal teaching philosophy is active and evolving.

Developing a personal teaching philosophy for students in Graduate Diploma and Bachelor of Education programs: Lessons learnt in the field

It is acknowledged today that the aim of teacher education programs is to educate and guide future teachers in such a way as to produce highly qualified individuals who possess the knowledge, skills and dispositions they need to become effective teachers (Cargill *et al.*, 2009). Education faculties have continually emphasised their commitment to the development and growth of pre-service teachers, not only with respect to content and pedagogical knowledge but also in the areas of personal development (Cargill *et al.*, 2009). Countries like Finland are renowned for their exceptional educational prowess and boast an education system that produces excellence in its teacher workforce.

Case study exemplar – Finland

The Finnish system does not rely on standardised student testing to motivate performance but rather on the proficiency and professional accountability of teachers who are knowledgeable and committed to their profession (Sahlberg, 2011). In Finland, teaching is a much-admired profession and departments of teacher education at Finnish universities are committed to recruiting only a select few high school graduates who have not only scored well in examinations but who also show a deep commitment to teaching (Sahlberg, 2011). Teacher education is based on a combination of research, practice and reflection where prospective teachers are required to complete a five–seven-year masters degree and a thesis on a topic relevant to educational practice (Sahlberg, 2011). The duration of the course and the elements that constitute the degree provide pre-service teachers with ample time, opportunities and resources to flesh out the meaning of a teaching philosophy and develop a well-rounded concept. Finland's broad teacher-education curriculum ensures that pre-service teachers are well equipped with the tools, knowledge and research to become exceptional teachers with strong and passionate philosophies about teaching. Universities in Finland instil in pre-service teachers a strong devotion to teaching and enable teachers to develop a teaching philosophy that is based on research and reflection on practice. For these reasons, it is a practice exemplar for teacher education institutions around the world.



Linking the undergraduate and GDE experience

The desire for universities to develop a personal teaching philosophy for Graduate Diploma of Education (GDE) students gives an insight into the scope of the usefulness of a philosophy as a tool for developing pedagogy. From personal discussions with members of the GDE student body at one such university, many referred to the constrained time that the course allowed them to develop a teaching philosophy. They indicated that the course was very concentrated, therefore, students found it difficult to decide what aspect of their program to allocate more time to: reflection on experiences and the development of a philosophy or writing numerous assignments. GDE pre-service teachers also highlighted that they found it difficult to keep going back to a philosophy when planning for professional experience and assignments. This calls into question the practicality of developing a philosophy in this program and whether students are given the support and direction needed to be able to understand the role and importance of a personal teaching philosophy in practice. The learning transfer between the university context and in-class practice continues to be a challenge in pre-service teacher education (Kidman *et al.*, 2008). It is the university's role to make the influence of reflection and philosophy on teaching practice very clear to students studying all teacher education courses. GDE students also commented that the content of the course was very vague and unclear, and the only occasion where deep and purposeful learning occurred was on practical experience. It is very clear, therefore, that time and reflection is a major factor that influences how strongly a philosophy can be developed in pre-service teaching courses and how it can be clearly identified in teaching practice.

From my experiences in a Bachelor of Primary Education degree, the undergraduate degree has given me ample time and opportunities to develop and strengthen my teaching philosophy. The theory and practical components of the degree have fleshed out the concept and purpose of a philosophy and I feel that I have strong foundations to base my personal teaching decisions on. For example, a number of special needs education subjects sparked my interest in teaching special needs children. In my second year practical experience, I came across a student with special needs who was not fully integrated into the classroom environment by either his teacher or his peers. After reflecting on the situation, observations, my teaching experience in that classroom and what exclusion meant for that student both emotionally and intellectually, I organised my lessons so that the student was able to participate in the task and feel like a valued member of the classroom community. Part of my teaching philosophy was shaped as a result of this experience. At the core of my philosophy is a commitment to each student and their learning. Entering my fourth and final year, I am confident that I *own* my teaching philosophy, as opposed to a GDE student who has had to develop a philosophy with little support using examples and proformas found through online blogs and job-seeker websites (GDE, personal communication). With these sources as a foundation, pre-service GDE teachers have been pressured to develop a philosophy that was satisfactory for a job interview in just ten months (GDE, personal communication).

A study investigating pre-service teachers' development of attitudes and beliefs found that subjects differed in their readiness to develop such beliefs and



practices (Hindin & Mueller, 2009). It is clear from discussions with GDE students and personal experiences that willingness and readiness to develop, and continue to redefine, a personal teaching philosophy depends largely on the extent to which a pre-service teacher understands themselves and their ability to critically reflect on their experiences. It is true that action coupled with reflection results in learning (Whitton *et al.*, 2010). Some undergraduate pre-service teachers may take just ten months to discover what they truly believe about teaching and learning while many are still concerned with the concept and its purpose once out of the university context and in the classroom. It is important to note here that a personal teaching philosophy is dynamic and ever changing, continuing to be influenced well into a teacher's career, however, professional experiences undertaken in university education courses are a valuable starting point to help build the foundations of a philosophy.

Drawing on my own experiences as a university student studying primary education and informal discussions with GDE students surrounding their study requirements, it is evident that there are considerable differences in attitudes regarding the role of the university in supporting the growth of a personal teaching philosophy. As an undergraduate the process of developing a philosophy was slow and reflective and I did not feel pressured to come up with a sound philosophy immediately. Students in the GDE program thought differently, stating that upon applying for the course, they were required to provide a half-page philosophy on teaching. At this stage they had had no experience in education, which resulted in one student using blogs and websites and adopting a philosophy that they viewed as merely 'adequate' (GDE, personal communication). Moreover, they did not believe that the university's GDE course of one year fostered the development of a reflective philosophy. Whilst they were asked what makes a competent and adept teacher and why do they want to teach, there was not really any support in fine tuning or understanding the concept of a philosophy within the university context. The Department of Education and Communities interview at the end of the year and possible job interviews where they would be asked to articulate a teaching philosophy and how they developed this was, therefore, a daunting prospect for most GDE students. They needed to ensure that they included and learned, within a compacted period of time, the relevant teaching jargon, such as the Quality Teaching Framework and Professional Teaching Standards, in order to make sure their 'philosophy' appealed to interviewers. This positions a teaching philosophy for GDE students as an artificial construct, based not in reflection but employability. It is important to note here that the GDE program is in the process of shifting to a two-year qualification as a result of reform at the federal level. This will significantly improve the potential for developing and nurturing a philosophy, as future GDE students will be able to engage in greater reflection time. As a consequence, the relationship between a teaching philosophy and teaching practice should be unambiguously evident.

As an undergraduate student, it has taken me these four years of academia to fully understand these models and what they mean for my teaching. The question 'How are teachers able to develop teaching philosophies on their own without academic support?' can be asked, and the answer is because philosophies are mostly formed through personal and practical experiences and the ability of individual pre-service teachers to reflect on practical experiences. Integrated teacher education courses (those that combine sufficient academic learning with field experience) seem



to have the greatest impact in developing beliefs about teaching (Hindin & Mueller, 2009).

Conclusion

The development of a personal teaching philosophy has important implications for teaching practice. It is the foundation on which teachers should base their decisions about students, the classroom, teaching and the school. It is important to develop a philosophy that is true to personal beliefs, values and experiences, and universities and teacher education programs should provide, through theory and practice, the direction and support for pre-service teachers to do this. The role of practical experience is a crucial component for the development of a personal teaching philosophy for pre-service teachers, especially those in the GDE program.

Throughout GDE and undergraduate study, it is essential that reflection should occur after every teaching and learning experience in order to develop and continue to refine a personal teaching philosophy. A strong philosophy that has its roots in thoughtful reflection on teaching and learning experiences will create teachers who are strongly committed to the service of education.

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