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Assessing Reading: Early Years Teachers' Views Angeliki Kostopoulou
(angeliki.kostopoulou@btinternet.com/ak3745@tutor.open.ac.uk) and David
Wray(d.j.wray@warwick.ac.uk) Open University/University of Warwick Institute of Education

Angeliki Kostopoulou¹, David Wray²

¹Open University, West Midlands, United Kingdom, ²University of Warwick, West Midlands, United Kingdom

Background

Understanding beliefs, according to Roekach (1968), requires making inferences about individuals' underlying states, inferences fraught with difficulty because individuals are often unable or unwilling to accurately present their beliefs. Because of this, researchers have developed a variety of ways for thinking about how teachers' knowledge and beliefs shape their classroom practices. Teachers' beliefs - encompassing suppositions, commitments and ideologies - have been situated in a variety of settings and contexts.

At the same time there is literature that indicates that teachers' beliefs are frequently so strongly held that (i) they can cause resistance to changes in curriculum and methods (Allington and Lie, 1990; Smith and Shepherd, 1988), (ii) they can lead to resistance to advice and support from resource staff (Fields, 1995) and (iii) they can influence the degree to which teachers are willing or not willing to make adaptations in their teaching approach for students with problems in learning (Westwood, 1995)

In the same line of argument 'the tasks teachers set are, thus, a function of feelings and beliefs interacting with disciplinary knowledge and assumptions about teaching and learning. Such knowledge beliefs and orientations will both support and limit what teachers do and the flexibility with which they respond to pupils. Even if their views of learning change, however, the scope of teaching topics in new ways will be set by the subject knowledge they hold'. Aubrey (1997) (p.41)

Research Questions

The research project from which this presentation is derived consisted of the views and understandings held by various types of early years teachers/workers about the teaching of reading and the relationships between these beliefs and the teaching practices of these teachers/workers. Using a small part of the data collected for the research project in this presentation we will discuss the beliefs held by the practitioners about assessment and the extent to which they are reflected upon the practices they followed with the children.

Methods

The aim of this presentation is to report on a study which set out to:

1— examine closely the approaches to teaching reading claimed to be used, and actually used, by teachers/carers in a variety of early years settings.

2— examine the level of inconsistency between the claims about and the use of teaching approaches to developing reading.

Questionnaires, interviews and observations were the techniques chosen for data collection. The sample group chosen for the investigation were early years practitioners (that is, people who worked on a daily basis with children aged 3 to 4) in the Coventry/Birmingham areas. Potential members of this group were randomly selected from appropriate educational establishments, using a stratified sampling design. This design included establishments of three kinds:

- Reception classes in primary schools;
- Nursery classes attached to primary schools;
- Day nurseries, either community or privately owned.

An initial sample of 160 practitioners (63 worked in nursery classes attached to primary schools, 51 in Private Day Nurseries/ Day Care Centres and 46 in Reception Classes) was targeted to receive a questionnaire asking about their educational backgrounds and training, as well as making a preliminary enquiry into their beliefs about and attitudes towards the teaching of reading. In the event, 86 completed questionnaires were returned and the results were analysed with the use of SPSS. Seventeen questionnaires came from Nursery classes, 45 questionnaires from Reception classes and 24 questionnaires from Private Day Nurseries/Day Care Centres. As a follow-up, 9 of these respondents were randomly selected (3 from each sample group) to be interviewed about their approaches to, beliefs about, and training in the teaching of reading. The sampling was randomly stratified which permitted the inclusion of parameters of special interest (Weinsberg, Krosnick and Bowen, 1996).

The approach followed was a semi-structured interview, the duration of which was 35-40 minutes. The small number of interviews facilitated the analysis of the interview data through the use of an interview guide Patton (1990). The classroom practice of this group was subsequently observed during a full working day, with special attention being given to ways in which these practitioners approached early reading with their charges.

Frame

According to the QCDA 'assessment is an integral part of effective teaching and learning. It allows progress to be recognised and celebrated and it informs the next steps and priorities of both teachers and learners. It is inextricably linked to the curriculum, which provides the content and context of assessment'. Moreover within the Primary National Strategy it is stated that 'assessing pupils progress (APP) is the new structured approach to teacher assessment which equips teachers to make judgements on pupils' progress. The APP approach has similar principles and practices to the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. 'Both assessments focus on practitioners/teachers reviewing a range of evidence of children's knowledge, skills and understanding in a variety of contexts in relation to nationally agreed criteria'.

In the same line of argument the final report of the EPPE Project (DfES 2004) underlines the importance of assessment in the Foundation Stage when it suggests that 'it is important not to ignore or minimise the existence of language or pre-reading differences because of their potential relationship with later attainment and progress in school. It is crucial that school entry assessments are used formatively to assist teachers in planning a programme to meet individual needs. At the same time the Independent Review of Teaching of Early Reading (Rose 2006) places emphasis towards synthetic phonics by five years of age while it states that the use of assessment for learning is improving but overall it is still the least successful element of teaching' (p.22) Because of such uncertainty as to the way teachers assess young children's capabilities, there has been debate regarding what they need to know about young learners, that will give teachers confidence that children are assessed in ways that will empower their learning in the future. The necessity of the debate is strengthened by the fact that it is the 'judgements that teachers make will enable them to identify the appropriate next steps in children's learning.'
(<http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/153446> accessed 20/1/2010)

Research findings

The study revealed that teachers in private day nurseries viewed assessment as an on going process and were against any kind of formal assessment. On the contrary the majority of school based nursery and Reception class teachers were faced with increasing demands to assess skills and knowledge in certain ways presented in the form of goals. These differences in the role of the early years teachers appeared to be associated with significant differences in these teachers' beliefs and practices in assessing early reading

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Angeliki Kostopoulou has completed a PhD with the University of Warwick and is currently an associate lecturer with the Open University and a Visiting Lecturer with Birmingham City University.

David Wray has taught in primary schools for 10 years and is currently a professor of Literacy Education and a Deputy Director at the Institute of Education at the University of Warwick. He has published over 30 books on aspects of literacy teaching and his best known on his work on developing teaching strategies to help pupils access the curriculum through literacy.