

Exploring Teachers' Beliefs on Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum within an IB MYP International School Environment

Mary. C. Kelly

Irish College of Humanities and Applied Sciences, Ireland

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ABSTRACT

The following paper explores International Baccalaureate Middle Year Programme teachers' views on what constitutes good teaching, meaningful learning, and quality curricula within an international school environment in the Netherlands. Twenty-five teachers, from a variety of countries, were asked to share their personal beliefs through semi-structured interviews. The inquiry also considered the ways in which teachers' beliefs had been affected by moving to an international school environment. Following thematic analysis, the results indicate that teachers hold a range of perspectives on what signifies good teaching, meaningful learning, and quality curricula. Many of these beliefs align closely with the underlying philosophy of the MYP, such as beliefs in life-worthy curricula, student-centered learning, constructivist approaches to teaching and learning, inquiry, the transfer of understanding, and the challenging of perspectives. The changes in beliefs that occurred following the move to an international context included an increased emphasis in teachers' attention to universal concepts, intercultural themes, lifelong learning, the application of understanding, inquiry, critical thinking, interdisciplinary learning, and team-teaching. Aspects of teaching and learning that did not arise spontaneously during the interviews were beliefs concerning community service, global contexts, and approaches to assessments, all of which are integral components of the IB MYP. The findings of the study provided guidance for the design and development of professional development opportunities.

1. Introduction

Teachers' philosophical and pedagogical beliefs are known to influence teaching practices and the quality of learning in classrooms (Součková, 2020). An exploration of teachers' beliefs is, therefore, advisable in any educational institution, in order to maintain and improve the quality of the learning experience for all students. To that end, the goal of this study was to explore international teachers' philosophical and pedagogical beliefs in order to discover whether their beliefs reflected the underlying philosophy of the international school context that they were teaching in. The beliefs solicited included their perspectives on the nature of good teaching, meaningful learning, and quality curriculum, as well as their views on the impact of international school teaching on their beliefs.

* Corresponding author E-mail address: marykellyresearch@gmail.com

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The context of the inquiry is an international school in the Netherlands, within the International Baccalaureate Middle Years' Programme (MYP), which caters to the education of international students from the ages of 12 to 16. The MYP promotes a constructively-oriented approach to teaching and learning, and incorporates disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary understanding. In addition, all curricula are underpinned by the global contexts, which emphasize identities, relationships, cultural expression, innovation, globalization, fairness, and sustainability. Teachers and learners are expected to adopt the attributes of the learner profile which guides character development, they participate in community and service, and they learn how to apply a range of approaches-to-learning and approaches-to-teaching skills, including concept and process based inquiry, research skills, critical thinking, communication skills, and social and emotional skills.

Teachers who teach within the MYP typically come from different backgrounds, cultures, and countries, and may or may not have developed the knowledge and skills required to teach in an MYP environment during their initial teacher training. For this reason, their beliefs and practices may differ from some of the beliefs and practices that are most desirable in this context, especially when it comes to constructivist-based teaching approaches. For the teachers to feel comfortable and successful, and for their students to develop inquiry-based approaches-to-learning and global mindsets, it is important that teachers have the opportunity to explore their personal beliefs and to highlight and address any areas of disconnection or discomfort that may be present. Otherwise, as Xu (2012) warns, teachers may feel limited as professionals.

An exploration of beliefs proved enlightening for the participants, and it demonstrated that many of the teachers already had well-developed beliefs and practices that were in line with the philosophy of the MYP. However, there were also several areas of disconnect and discomfort that surfaced, including a perceived lack of understanding and competence in relation to the global contexts, community and service, and approaches to assessment. These findings heralded the introduction of differentiated professional development opportunities, that were constructed to suit the needs of the individual teachers. Overall, the study demonstrates that an exploration of beliefs on teaching, learning, and curricula is a valuable practice for international school teachers, and, indeed, for any teacher moving between different educational systems.

2. Review of Literature

According to Fives & Gill (2015) there has been a burgeoning of interest in teachers' beliefs in recent years, given that beliefs inform and influence attitudes and behaviours. Borg (2001) describes a belief as "a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held", it is "accepted as true by the individual", and "it serves as a guide to thought and behavior" (p. 186). In this sense, beliefs represent a form of subjective reality through which new experiences can be understood (Davis & Andrzejewski, 2009). As Xu (2012) points out, these beliefs inform understanding by determining what information from our surroundings is accepted and perceived to be true. Ultimately, their strong evaluative and affective nature influences how we interpret knowledge (Pajares, 1992), and they guide the goals that people set out for others and for themselves (Ferguson & Bråten, 2018). With regards to recognizing our beliefs Pajares (1992) claims that they can be manifest through verbal and written declarations or through actions.

There have been a number of theories put forward concerning the origin of the teachers' beliefs. Richardson (1996) claims that teachers' beliefs can emerge out of their personal life experiences, from teaching and learning experiences, and from access to knowledge during studies or training. Solis (2015) adds, they can be actively constructed "through engagement

with others and across different contexts” (p. 249). Richards and Lockhart (1994) claim that teachers’ personalities also play a role in the development of beliefs. Abdi and Asadi (2015), suggest that this may be because different teaching methods suit different teachers’ characters. In addition, cultural environments have been found to affect beliefs by Díaz, Jansson & Neira, (2012), which is interesting from an international school perspective where a number of different cultures come together.

Given the effect that beliefs have on perceptions and actions, it is important to contemplate the influence that beliefs have on teaching and learning. As Xu (2020) indicates, “teachers’ beliefs about what learning is will affect everything that they do in the classroom” (p. 1400), given that these beliefs are the framework or lens through which all of their pedagogical decisions and choices are made (Pajares, 1992). Accordingly, there are a range of ways in which beliefs have been found to influence instructional practice, planning and curricular decisions, and choosing what needs to be taught (Poplawski, 2020).

In addition, teachers’ beliefs influence the relational aspects of teaching, including the interactions between teachers and their learners (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017) and the building of community and different approaches to discipline (Poplawski, 2020). Similarly, they influence students’ motivation to learn, and how they engage with assessments (Solis, 2015). Additional research on the classroom presence of the teacher, suggests that beliefs affect their state of consciousness (Xu, 2012), their sense of awareness (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017), and their personal intentions in learning situations (Ferguson & Bråten 2018).

As indicated by Xu (2020), failure on a teacher’s part to become aware of their beliefs could cause “unanticipated consequences in the classroom” (p. 1399) given the degree to which beliefs influence what is taught, how it is taught, and how students are perceived and treated. For teachers in transient international environments it is even more relevant that teachers explore their beliefs when transitioning to a new teaching environment. As Rosales (2009) suggests, it is important for teachers to make their beliefs more explicit so that new practices, knowledge, and insights can be integrated with previous experiences.

This is particularly important in light of the ongoing shift towards constructivist approaches to teaching, which can be particularly complex for teachers who are moving from traditional exam-based settings to an inquiry-based environment (Prawat, 1992). If not, teachers from traditional backgrounds may over-emphasize methods and approaches that favor factual and procedural understanding, over methods that aim for deep conceptual understanding, which is the hallmark of the IB Middle Years Programme. Moreover, unexamined beliefs could “limit their potential as professionals” as indicated by Xu (2020, p. 1401) seeing as the challenging of beliefs plays a role in the continuing professional development of teachers (Vries *et al.*, 2013).

3. Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research approach to gain insight into teachers’ beliefs on education, teaching, learning, and curriculum in the Middle Years Programme (MYP). The purpose behind using a qualitative approach was to illicit descriptive accounts of the respondents’ beliefs in order to develop insight into how these beliefs were reflected in their personal teaching practices and in the philosophy of the MYP.

Twenty-five teachers (T1-T25) were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. As Kitzinger (1995) maintains, semi-structured interviews are a valuable means of constructing the viewpoints of individuals during an inquiry of this nature. The respondents were all

experienced Middle Years' teachers, who came from different countries, and who taught a range of disciplines, across multiple year levels within the MYP.

To investigate their beliefs, the respondents were invited to respond to the following questions: In your view, what is the purpose of education? What does good teaching look like to you? How would you describe meaningful learning? How would you describe quality curricula? Describe any impact that international school teaching has had on your beliefs?

4. Data Analysis

Following the interviews transcripts were generated, and during the data analysis stage, these transcripts were highlighted to identify initial units of data, on a "feels right" and "looks right" basis. Erlandson *et al.* (1993) describe this process of unitising as "disaggregating the data into the smallest pieces of information that can stand alone as independent thoughts" (p. 114). These initial highlighted units consisted of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, and they gave rise to codes: words and concepts that were close enough to the units (which they were describing) that their meaning could still be deciphered easily.

These codes were assembled into visual wall grids, so that patterns and contradictions in the data could be made clearly visible, in order for the categories to arise. The emergent categories represented groups of codes that were similar in meaning, and these were represented, in turn, by overarching words and phrases. As Thomas (2019) asserts, there is no special method to generating categories. It's guided, simply, by an ability to see relationships in the codes.

The next step in the condensation of the data was the generation of themes, which conveyed overarching insights and ideas in response to the research questions. Overall, this process of generating themes from the data is termed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The meta-themes for each guiding question were supported by sub themes, which, in this study, are closely related to the generative categories. Including both the meta themes and the related sub themes helps provide a broader account of the data and a deeper level of insight than would be visible through the meta themes alone.

From an accountability perspective, it was important that these meta themes and sub themes reflected what they claimed to reflect (Thomas, 2019). Therefore, in order to comply with the criterion of *validity*, a third party (a colleague) was invited to evaluate whether the themes were a genuine reflection of the original data. To further ensure validity, the qualitative research criteria of *transparency* was met by clearly identifying the stages of the data analysis process, the criterion of *credibility* was met by providing a clear research methodology, and the criterion of *transferability* was achieved by identifying the international nature of the context and the respondents. In addition, the supporting criteria of *dependability* (reliability) and *confirmability* were ensured by keeping a detailed reflexive journal that guided the direction of the data analysis, as it unfolded.

5. Results and Discussion

The following sections are headed by the topics that represent the individual research questions: purpose of education, good teaching, meaningful learning, quality curriculum, and the impact of an international environment on beliefs.

The sections include the themes and sub-themes that arose through the data, with the main themes appearing in bold, and the subthemes appearing alongside them in plain text. The subthemes, as mentioned earlier, are closely related to the categories that resulted from the initial data units, and these sub themes serve to add breath and depth to the meta themes.

In addition, each section contains quotes originating from individual teachers, which are discussed in relation to the *principles-for-practice*, laid down by the MYP (2014), and the quotes are further aligned, where relevant, with the literature on teachers' beliefs, as profiled within the literature review.

5.1. Purpose of Education

Teachers responded to the first question: What is the purpose of education? with a range of different perspectives, although there were a number of clear patterns across the responses that focused on the importance of school being personally meaningful for students, and on the need for school to provide students with holistic learning experiences that enabled them to flourish, whilst challenging their perspectives, and emphasizing global themes, and values.

Life-worthy learning: an understanding of the world, preparation for life, self-actualization, to inspire a love of learning/lifelong learning, understanding humanity and civilization

Conceptual and Procedural: skills development, conceptual development, knowledge development, critical thinking, big ideas, approaches to learning strategies, tools for learning,

Character Development: the development of personal values and dispositions (responsibility, flexibility, resilience, respect, independence, creativity, self-awareness), and citizenship and social responsibility, passing on of human values,

As a collective, the teachers appreciated the multifaceted nature of education, and they demonstrated an understanding of the need to view education in existential terms, with an emphasis on education serving the long-term needs of students and society. For example, T13 said education is “for the love of learning and for enjoyment, with obvious links to real life”, T20 believes that “education is for students to discover their own possibilities”, and T14 believes that it is for them “to develop an awareness of themselves and the world.”

These beliefs mirror the underpinning philosophy of the MYP, which places considerable emphasis on the holistic nature of education and the need for students “to become active, compassionate lifelong learners”, (MYP, 2014, p. 9) as they “search for universal cultural understanding” (MYP, 2014, p. 18), as they develop “an awareness of themselves and the world” (MYP, 2014, p. 4).

5.2. Good Teaching

The second question concerning teachers beliefs in relation to good teaching yielded responses that fell naturally into the following themes and sub-themes, which included the importance of student engagement, constructivist based approaches, the need for a comprehensive set of teaching skills and approaches, as well as the capacity to create positive learning environments.

Student-centered: student engagement, student-centered learning, teachers know their students, each student has an opportunity to shine, teacher meets individual students' needs,

Constructivist approaches: inquiry-based approaches, the transfer of understanding to novel contexts, student questions, guiding questions, conceptual understanding, discussion,

Variety of Skills: knowledgeable, a variety of teaching approaches, preparation, planning, structure, consistency, enthusiasm, fair evaluation, inspirational, motivational

Positive environment: fair and safe environment, encouragement, a positive atmosphere, respectful interactions, enthusiasm, interesting learning experiences, stimulating,

To illustrate these themes, T6 describes good teaching as “involving students, requiring thinking, reinforcement, expansion of ideas, drawing relationships between ideas, and being interesting”, and T1 stated that good teaching involved “creating a safe, friendly environment, encouraging students to take part actively in the learning process, and including variety in teaching styles and activities”. Meanwhile, T21 said that good teaching involves “engaged students, clear aims and objectives, good clear communication, good structure to lessons, consistency in approach, enjoyment, and variety, tailored towards different learning styles”. Overall, there was a significant degree of overlap across the cohort of teachers when it came to detailing what characterizes good teaching.

The obvious focus on constructivist-based approaches is reflective of the IB approach to teaching and learning which “celebrates the many ways people work together to construct meaning and make sense of the world” (MYP, 2014, p. 10). In addition, the pivotal role of the teacher in cultivating positive learning environments was center stage and the role of “the teacher as a facilitator, as opposed to the director of learning” (MYP, 2014, p. 75). Teachers commented specifically on the need for respectful and safe learning environments, which is reflective of the MYP’s philosophy of creating “secure learning environments in which the individual student is valued and respected” (MYP, 2014, p. 74).

5.3. Meaningful Learning

When asked to describe meaningful learning there was an obvious overlap with teachers’ interpretations of good teaching. The main themes that emerged were those concerning the transfer of understanding, the need for learning to be purposeful, the development of a wide range of skills, and the importance of challenging preconceived ideas and perceptions.

Transfer of Understanding: conceptual understanding, the transfer and application of knowledge and understanding to novel contexts

Purposeful: useful for real life, meaningful, original, big ideas, internalized,

Approaches to Learning: analysis, critical thinking, discussion, communication, research, organization, planning, presentation

Challenging: challenge beliefs, ideas, and perspectives, challenge misconceptions,

By far the majority of the teachers identify the transfer and application of knowledge and understanding to novel contexts as the most meaningful aspect of learning, which is the hallmark of an inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning. Their perspectives are closely aligned with the MYP premise that contextual teaching and learning leads to meaning. As Johnson (2002) maintains when students have the opportunity to connect learning with their own life experiences, they create meaning, and this meaning then gives them a reason to continue learning, as it “makes their studies come alive” (MYP, 2014, p. 17). The following quote from T19 illustrates this point: “good teaching results in – conceptual understanding, and the ability of students to utilize ideas in unfamiliar situations”.

In addition, the need for learning to be provocative was clear with T7 adding that meaningful learning “should challenge the students’ ideas, perceptions, and beliefs”. In addition, the practical aspects of learning for life were in evidence with T22 identifying meaningful learning as the “acquisition of life skills like analysis, organization, presentation, communication, and research skills”. These skills, mentioned by a number of teachers, reflect the Approaches to Learning skills that enable students not just to develop skills, but to “evaluate the effectiveness of their learning” (MYP, 2014, p. 26)

5.4. Quality Curriculum

Teachers indicated a range of beliefs concerning what constitutes quality curriculum, the main theme of which was the need for a transparent and dynamic curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, horizontally and vertically aligned, and regularly reviewed for relevance that parallels changes in the real world. In addition, constructivist approaches were mentioned regularly, and there was clear emphasis on the need for a multiplicity of learning opportunities and occasions to create inter-disciplinary and transdisciplinary connections.

Dynamic: relevant, transparent, responds to the real world, assessment for growth

Constructivist: inquiry, reflection, connections, conceptual understanding, and links

Alignment: horizontal, vertical, regular reviews, developmentally appropriate,

Multiplicity: diverse tasks, independent learning, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary,

Teachers emphasised curricula that honor connections and links between the disciplines. The MYP defines interdisciplinary learning as “the process by which students come to understand bodies of knowledge and modes of thinking from two or more disciplines and integrate them to create a new understanding” (MYP, 2014, p. 46). Quotes that illustrate these themes include T3’s belief that “everything needs to be connected”, and T16’s belief in the need to “have a review for curriculum that is yearly – a review that is systematic, with interdisciplinary links that are established, developed and maintained”. Given the complexity of designing responsive and dynamic curricula, teachers believed in the need for regular reviews of the process, to limit the possibilities for repetition or omissions in concepts and processes across the grade levels. It was clear from a number of comments that teachers’ beliefs about the holistic purpose of education, meshed with what they believed quality curricula to be. For example, T25 asserted that quality curricula need to “make students aware of the world around them, create problem solvers, and allow students to find and develop their strengths”.

5.5. Impact of International School Environment

Overall, teachers were positive about the impact that the move to teaching in an international school environment had on their beliefs. The following are some of the themes that arose for them in relation to the changes that they felt were most significant between their previous contexts and this international school environment.

Collegiality: sharing of ideas, learning from colleagues, team teaching

Inquiry-based: student-centered approaches, independent learning, deep understanding, big ideas, and opportunities for students to apply understanding

Freedom: design curricula without external constraints, stimulating and engaging, keeps them engaged and moving forward.

Different cultures: deeper understanding of students’ beliefs and backgrounds,

Teachers’ responses that reflect these themes: T2 appreciated the fact that the school was “more student centered learning”, and that there was “a more involved awareness of what students bring from their own culture.” T21 said that it had “broadened her teaching practice, and challenged previous ideas and conceptions”, and T8 explained that she has a “better understanding of what good teaching looks like” and she “can see where kids are coming from and going to.” In addition, T20 appreciates that there are always “lots of changes in people and ideas” indicating the dynamism that exists in an international school environment.

The MYP requires teachers to “provide resources and support for each student to become involved in inquiry, using the tools and strategies that best fit the student’s development and ways of learning” (MYP, 2014, p. 75). From their responses, it was clear that this was an aspect of teaching that needed to develop for a number of teachers on transition to the IB MYP. They realized the need to create learning environments that were flexible and responsive, and which promoted inquiry, irrespective of the educational experiences that they have encountered previously. In addition to the pedagogical aspect of the move, teachers appreciated the opportunity to learn from different cultures, as it enabled a deeper level of understanding of their students.

Overall, teachers’ comments reflected beliefs that mirror the underlying principles of the MYP, and aspects of the aforementioned research on teachers’ beliefs. Teachers identified a number of philosophies, approaches, and strategies that represent inquiry-based approaches to teaching, and given that Pajares (1992) claims that verbal declarations affect decision-making processes and practices, one can hope that these beliefs will be enacted in practice. It is not surprising that there was a considerable degree of overlap in the responses to the questions relating to good teaching and meaningful learning as “teachers’ beliefs about what learning is will affect everything that they do in the classroom (Xu, 2020, p. 1400).

Despite the fact that teachers come from different teaching backgrounds and cultures, this did not appear to adversely affect their capacity to cultivate beliefs that differed from their own early educational experiences. This may be because, as Richardson (1996) has found, teachers’ beliefs and their resulting practices can be impacted by regular access to professional training, which a number of teachers commented on as being a favorable aspect of this international school context. Solis (2015) maintains that beliefs can also be altered through active engagement with other teachers. A number of the teachers commented on the positive impact that the move to team-teaching, and inter-disciplinary teaching had on their approaches to teachings. For example, one teacher T20 said: “The teachers in my team have made an impression on me. Sometimes they have confirmed things I feel to be important. Sometimes they make me see things I have not seen before” and T7 declared “there is a strong emphasis on team teaching, which encourages one to see the meaning in one’s own subject.”

Reflecting on Richards and Lockhart’s (1994) claim that teachers’ personalities play a role in the development of beliefs, I found this hard to determine through the study, although there were a few teachers who commented on the fact that a concept and process based curriculum and an open inquiry-based approach to teaching suited their temperament. T5 for example, said that they enjoyed the “freedom to plan without external constraints.” In addition, a number of teachers indicated their preference for an intercultural context where there was an opportunity to learn from different cultures. For example, T25 appreciated “working with different cultures and backgrounds”. T12 mentioned that an intercultural context “makes the mind more open to other ideas”, whilst T20 enjoyed “lots of changes in people and ideas”. The impact of a cultural change, is not surprising, as Díaz, Jansson & Neira, (2012) have found that experiencing different cultural environments have an impact on the development and evolution of teachers’ beliefs.

Interestingly, there were aspects of teaching and learning that teachers did not comment on which research on beliefs finds relevant. For example, teachers did not refer to the internal state of the teacher as being an important aspect of teaching, yet research by Xu (2012), and Gilakjani & Sabouri, (2017) have found this to be important. Teachers commented on the relational aspects of teaching, such as the need to be respectful, positive, supportive, and inspirational, but this does not fully capture the aspects of presence that impact consciousness and awareness, which are the specific aspects-of-being that are indicated as relevant by Xu,

and Gilakjani & Sabouri. Additionally, teachers did not emphasize the relationship between teaching, learning, and assessment through their responses. There were references made by a few teachers, but, overall, this aspect of teaching did not shine through, possibly because assessment within the MYP is an integral feature of teaching and learning where the focus is on on-going and formative assessment as opposed to external exams. Other aspects of teaching and learning that were not raised included the integration of community and service, and the global contexts, which are integral components of the MYP program. These areas were flagged as important areas of focus for follow-up professional learning opportunities.

6. Conclusion

To conclude teachers' articulated a range of pedagogical beliefs that covered many of the core elements of MYP philosophy, although the beliefs varied in their level of sophistication and descriptive detail. Overall, teachers indicated a belief in holistic education that places a strong emphasis on conceptual and procedural understanding, inquiry, the real world application of learning, constructivist approaches, a relational approach to teaching, and character development. Teachers believed in flexible student-centered approaches that were responsive to student interests and student needs, and they indicated the importance of positive learning environments. They appreciated the freedom to create curricula that was informed by concepts and big ideas, and they indicated an openness for collaboration, and an interest in learning from other teachers and from other cultures. In general, teachers embraced the complexity of an IB international school environment, and they spoke favorably of curricula that fostered interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary understanding. Aspects of teaching and learning that did not arise spontaneously were beliefs concerning the internal state-of-being of the teacher, community service, and global contexts, and there were minimal references to approaches-to-assessment. Beliefs in relation to these aspects of the MYP program merited further exploration, as they are integral components of the program.

7. Implications

Although MYP philosophy and approaches were clearly in evidence through teachers' beliefs, there were differences in the degrees of awareness and levels of sophistication of these beliefs, and there were several aspects of the MYP program that were not referred to spontaneously. Not being aware of one's beliefs in specific areas can cause "unanticipated consequences in the classroom" as indicated by Xu (2012, p. 1401). Therefore, for teachers transitioning into the IB MYP from other school environments, the exploration of beliefs is important as it can raise awareness of blind-spots and it can help to integrate new practices and new knowledge with previous experiences. Otherwise, as Xu (2012) claims, unexamined beliefs may limit the teachers as professionals in the new teaching environment.

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