Teachers' understanding and implementation of a whole language approach to literacy in Taiwan: A study of early years' teachers' beliefs and practices

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Abstract

In recent years, state and national governments have introduced major programmes to reform literacy teaching, e.g. textbook programmes in the United States; the Literacy Block in Victoria, Australia (DEET, 1997, 1998); the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in England (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1998). These programmes are largely based on the growing body of evidence about what may constitute effective literacy teaching. Following the trend, Taiwan's government is also recognizing that in order to meet the challenges of globalization and the desire to improve students' PIRST in the literacy section year–on-year, Taiwanese should be well-equipped with new knowledge and literacy (Ministry of Education, Taiwan; 1999, 2000, 2003, 2005). One of the ways to make education and training more accessible is by providing better infrastructure, such as building new libraries and providing more books, as well as upgrading the teaching and learning practices through teacher training. There is also an urgent need to improve the declining standards in Chinese literacy (Ministry of Education, Taiwan; 1999, 2000, 2003, 2005). In 2000, the Taiwan Education Commission proposed a Reading Project in an attempt to deal with these challenges, which included the whole language approach (MOE, 2000). This approach was the key guideline for the implementation of the aims of early childhood education for the twenty-first millennium. Therefore, many nurseries and kindergartens claim that they have applied the whole language approach as part of their teaching policy, and have treated it as an important element of their curriculum design.

In order to explore the understanding of Taiwanese early year's teachers regarding whole language approach and its implementation, a total of 200 questionnaires were

delivered to teachers at nurseries and kindergartens. 169 were completed and analyzed. In addition, three Taiwanese nursery teachers participated in an in-depth qualitative study to investigate the implementation of the whole language approach and to explore their understanding of it. During the course of the investigation, their beliefs about literacy teaching and the extent to which those beliefs are reflected in their classroom practices were examined. Their framing of the whole language approach was tracked for more than four months by means of interviews and classroom observations. The wealth of data and information collected revealed that although the whole language approach may be positively mandated on a large scale, individual differences between teachers may make the implementation of any such approach or reform more variable in its impact than researchers and policy makers would expect.

The findings indicate that, while teachers sought to include the whole language approach into their literacy teaching, their thinking often shifted and their concept of the whole language approach and literacy learning and teaching fluctuated.

The findings also highlight the complexity of these views. The key influences on teachers' perceptions of literacy and literacy teaching form a continuum, ranging from a purely discrete skill-based curriculum, which reflects traditional Confucian beliefs, to social interaction, which supports the integration of the whole language approach. This range of beliefs is informed by a variety of different influences, including the experience of teachers; their personal background; their understanding of the needs of parents, as well as those of school requirements; government suggested guidelines, and, finally, cultural demands. Each of these influences represents a unique challenge to the beliefs of teachers. When drawn together, the combination of influences that emerge illustrates the complex ways in which teacher beliefs inform their pedagogical practice.

What the data reveals is that the pedagogical practices of teachers were pushed and pulled by these intervening forces, along a continuum between a whole language approach and a more traditional skill-based teaching. Therefore, it is not that they were slow to adopt the utopian whole language approach in practice, nor were they reluctant to change, but that their practice was in reality always constrained by these forces.

The findings also indicate that there are immense difficulties in understanding the concept of the whole language approach and a gap between the practitioners' espoused theories and practice. The study revealed the complex nature of learning and teaching and the core issue for implementing reform, namely, the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Based upon the findings of the study, implications for practice are also considered, namely, the need for government funding and subsidies to help nursery schools to mediate market forces; the restructuring of the bureaucratic and hierarchical management in nurseries; the empowerment of teachers through nurturing their pedagogical competence; support of professional career training; and the ongoing development and reformation of the philosophical underpinnings of teacher training.

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