

6 ICLEI 2016-76 Sulfasyah

Teachers' Instructional Beliefs and Their Practices in Teaching Writing to First Grade Students in Indonesia

Sulfasyah

Faculty of Education, University of Muhammadiyah Makassar
259 Sultan Alauddin Street, Makassar, Indonesia
sulfasyah@unismuh.ac.id, sulfasyah@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The study reported in this paper aimed to examine first-grade teachers' instructional beliefs about how writing should be taught to first grade students in Indonesia, what factors seemed to influence their beliefs and whether or not their beliefs were consistent with their actual practices in the classroom. Thirty first-grade teachers from South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia, were involved in this study. These teachers teach at a variety of elementary schools, which represent a range of contexts and socio-economic conditions. To collect data, a questionnaire, which consisted of closed, semi-closed and open-ended questions, was used. The findings revealed that all of the teachers' instructional beliefs in this study appeared to be consistent with a more traditional approach, and were apparent in their practices. However, about 20% of them seemed to hold certain values that were somewhat relevant to a more progressive approach although these were not evident in their practices. The findings also revealed that these teachers' beliefs seemed to be mostly influenced by the teachers' experiences when studying at teacher training college.

Keywords: Teachers' Beliefs, Teachers' Practices, Writing

Introduction

Indonesia has undergone several changes in its national educational curriculum. The two latest curricula, the *Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan* (KTSP), when translated means *school-based curriculum*, and 2013 Curriculum, which are currently being implemented, put great emphasis on the need for significant changes in teaching and learning approaches. In these curricula, teachers are required to move away from a traditional method of teaching, characterized as teacher-centered, to a more progressive one and use a student-centered approach. Several studies on curriculum change in Indonesia have been conducted to identify factors that might influence the implementation of the new curricula in Indonesia, such as teachers' understanding of the curricula and the classroom contexts (Pusat Kurikulum, 2007; Sulfasyah, Haig, Barratt-Pugh, 2015; Utomo, 2005). However, studies to investigate whether the Indonesian teachers' instructional beliefs play a role in their implementation are lacking in general, including in the area of teaching writing in Grade One. Studies from different contexts and subject areas have found that teachers' beliefs influence teachers in making decision about curriculum and instructional tasks (Kuzborska, 2011; Nespor 1987; Pajares). Therefore the study, which was part of a larger study, reported in this paper examined the following first grade teachers' beliefs in relation to the teaching of writing in Grade One; what factors seemed to influence their beliefs; and whether their beliefs were consistent with their practices. The findings are expected to inform effective curriculum change in Indonesia and other contexts as well as inform curriculum reform at teacher colleges.

There has been a growing interest in teachers' beliefs in various educational research since the 1990s (Al-Amoush, 2014; Deng, 2004; De Jong, 2007). Despite this, there seems to be no single definition of what teachers' beliefs are. In fact, Pajares (1992) acknowledged that "the difficulty in studying teachers' beliefs has been caused by definitional problems, poor conceptualizations, and differing understandings of beliefs and beliefs structures" (p. 307). Recognising that "all teachers hold beliefs, about their work, their students, their subject matter, and their roles and responsibilities..." (p. 314), Pajares proposed that the concept of teachers' beliefs should be separated into specific aspects of those beliefs for example, *teachers' instructional beliefs* about teaching and learning or other aspects relating to classroom practices. In this study, definition of teachers' beliefs is limited to teachers' philosophy or opinions about teaching and learning writing in Grade One.

Several factors are considered to influence the development of teachers' beliefs. One of them is related to what they have learned in their teacher education courses (Goodman, 1988; Smith, 2005). Richardson's review of literature (1996) documented that teachers' beliefs were shaped by teachers' personal experiences, their experiences with schooling and instruction, and experiences with formal knowledge. In Savasci & Berlin's literature review (2012), factors identified as influencing teacher's beliefs included, among others, teacher content knowledge, teacher education programmes, teacher epistemological beliefs and teacher beliefs about student ability.

Similar to the variety of definitions in teachers' beliefs, research findings related to the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practice are also varied. On the one hand some researchers have found that teachers' beliefs influenced teachers' practices and behaviours in the classroom (Davis & Wilson, 1999; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, & Lloyd; 1991). On the other hand, others found that teachers' beliefs do not necessarily affect their classroom practices (Purnomo, Suryadi & Darwis, 2016; Savasci & Berlin, 2012; King, Shumow & Lietz, 2001). Richardson (1996) stated that, "teachers' beliefs are interactive with their practices. Beliefs are thought to drive actions; however, experiences and reflection on action may lead to changes in and/or additions to beliefs" (p. 104). Therefore, according to Richardson's argument, it can be argued that teachers' beliefs in teaching writing in Grade One may influence their practices and their relevant experience in the field, may or may not amend their beliefs accordingly.

With reference to the teaching of writing in Grade One or early years of primary school, there are many approaches taken by teachers in various contexts. These approaches may be arranged on a different spectrum ranging from a traditional to more progressive approaches (Boscolo, 2008; Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons and Turbil; 2003). The traditional approach, believed to be influenced by the behaviourist view of learning, is characterized as skill-based, which places emphasis largely on handwriting and the mastery of writing convention such as spelling, punctuation and grammar through explicit teaching (Browne, 1993; Cox, 2005). Children in a classroom, which adopts this approach, are mostly involved in activities such as practising letter formation, tracing and copying. In the Indonesian context, these practices were commonly found in lower primary schools during the implementation of the curricula prior to 2013. A study by Sulfasyah, Haig & Barratt-Pugh (2015) about how teachers implemented the writing component of a curriculum prior to the 2013 Curriculum confirmed this.

The more progressive approaches to the teaching and learning of early literacy are influenced by the movement from a behaviourist to a cognitive view of learning at the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s (Boscolo, 2008; Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons and Turbil; 2003). These approaches were particularly informed by a number of studies of early literacy, which found that children, when starting formal school, are already aware of the purpose and forms of writing (Clay, 1975; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). The

research findings implicated how writing in the early years of schooling should be taught. That is, writing instruction should build on what children already know (Browne, 2009). As well as recognizing that children are able to make meaning before starting school, these approaches to learning suggest that literacy learning will occur through active and meaningful engagement with the written language (Crawford, 1995). Further, children should be immersed in a print-rich environment, and wherever possible, should use real books and write original texts (Browne, 2009). In addition, writing for a purpose and real audiences is essential to these approaches, which stress the importance of students understanding why they are writing and for whom they are writing (Browne, 2009; Schluze, 2006; Teale & Sulzby, 1989; Tompkins, 2008; Vukelich & Christie, 2009).

Recently, there has been a movement to accommodate both approaches, which balance implicit and explicit instruction. This balanced approach is believed to provide children with effective early literacy instruction (Louden, 2005; Tompkins, 2008; Tompkins, Campbell & Green, 2012; Vukelich & Christie, 2009). As Vukelich & Christie (2009) state children need meaningful, social engagement with books, access to various forms of print, and opportunities to write. However, most of them also need to be exposed to some explicit developmentally appropriate instruction on vocabulary, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge and print awareness.

In this study, teachers' beliefs in teaching writing will be assessed as to whether they reflect the traditional, more progressive approaches or a combination of both approaches. The study will not, however, assess whether one of the approaches is superior to the others.

Research Method

The study reported in this paper, aimed to answer the research questions below:

1. What were the teachers' beliefs in the teaching of writing in Grade One?
2. What were the factors that influenced their beliefs in the teaching of writing in Grade One?
3. Were the teachers' beliefs in the teaching of writing consistent with their practices in teaching writing in Grade One?

The study involved 30 Grade One teachers from various schools, which represented a variety of contexts and socio-economic conditions, in South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. These teachers were selected by using a convenience sampling method. Teachers were asked to provide information about themselves. All of them, 29 females and 1 male, held a Bachelor Degree in Education. The number of years they had taught at Grade One ranged from 3 to 20 years. Most of the teachers had between 20 to 46 students in their class and out of the 30 teachers five had one assistant teacher in the class. About 19 teachers had more than 75% of their students who had been to kindergarten before starting Grade One, 10 teachers had less than 50% of students who had had prior kindergarten experience before starting Grade One and one teacher had students who had all been to kindergarten. In terms of professional development, six teachers had attended training, organized by the local Department of Education, about how to teach writing in Grade One. The rest, 24 teachers, reported that they had not attended any training about teaching literacy in primary school since leaving school. Nineteen teachers reported having had the opportunity to discuss how to teach writing in Grade One with fellow Grade One teachers from the same or other primary schools in a Teacher Working Group, known as *Kelompok Kerja Guru (KKG)* in Indonesia.

The data were collected using a questionnaire, which consisted of closed, semi-closed and open-ended questions. As well as asking demographic information about the teachers, the questionnaire asked teachers to describe:

- their opinion about the teaching of writing in Grade One;
- how they taught writing in Grade One;
- the focus of the materials or textbooks they used to teach writing;
- methods of teaching writing for Grade One they learnt at teacher college;
- training they had received;
- how they improved their knowledge about teaching methods particularly in teaching writing in Grade One since leaving school.

The data from the questionnaire, piloted, before the commencement of the study, were numerically coded in order to be analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) programme. The responses from the closed-ended questions were given a numerical coding, which was placed at the right-hand side of the questionnaire. For the open-ended questions, the teachers' responses were coded into categories based on the recurrent themes emerging from the participants' responses. Next, each category was numerically coded. These numbers were then inputted into an Excel worksheet before being transferred onto the SPSS computer programme. This procedure was employed to tabulate and analyze the data using descriptive statistical methods that used frequency and percentage distribution. The responses from the semi-closed questions were analyzed using techniques that combined the analysis of closed and open-ended questions described above.

Findings and Discussion

The Teachers' Beliefs in the Teaching of Writing in Grade One

With reference to the first research question in this study, it was found that the teachers' beliefs in the teaching of writing in Grade One appeared to predominantly reflect a more traditional approach, which was influenced by a behaviourist view of learning. This is evident in the teachers' responses to when they were asked to describe what the teaching of writing should look like in Grade One. Twenty-four (80%) teachers in this study reported that the teaching of writing in Grade One should focus on hand coordination, letter formation, tracing words and copying teacher's words. One teacher, for example, wrote: *"We should teach students one skill at a time, step by step, from knowing how to hold a pen to forming letters or alphabet, tracing lines or letters. Then we can teach them how to write a word."* Others made comments such as: *"Teaching writing in Grade One emphasizes on letter formation and activities given to them such as copying."* Further, when asked to justify their reasons, these teachers stated that in *Grade One, students still do not know how to write. They do not even know how to hold a pencil.* Six teachers (20%), who had taught at Grade One for up to three years, had a different opinion. One reported that the teaching of writing should focus on giving a simple whole sentence to students, and then breaking the words down into syllables and then putting them back again into a whole sentence. When asked to provide a reason, she stated students should be exposed to whole sentences not single letters.

When asked if students should be given opportunities to create composition through independent writing activities, 15 (50%) teachers agreed while the other 15 (50%) disagreed.

The first 50%, however, had different opinions about the time to give students independent writing activities. Nine out of these 15 teachers, who agreed, stated that students could have independent writing toward the end of Grade One when they already know how to form letters or how to write simple words and sentences. The rest, six teachers, stated that teachers could ask students to write independently as early as possible to allow them to practise their writing and explore their thinking.

The other 15 (50%) teachers, who disagreed, reported that teachers should avoid giving independent writing to students until the next grade as Grade One students still do not

know how to write letters, words or sentences independently. One teacher wrote: *“At the early stage, we should encourage students to master forming letters, words and then simple sentence.”*

The finding in this study where teachers' beliefs were mostly concurrent with a more traditional approach had also been found in other study from a different education context (e.g. Kuzborska, 2011).

Factors Influencing Teachers' Beliefs in the Teaching of Writing in Grade One

This study identified one factor that seemed to influence the teachers' beliefs in teaching writing in Grade One. This factor related to teachers' experiences when studying at teacher training college. Twenty-four teachers (80%) whose beliefs in teaching writing in Grade One reflected a more traditional approach described that when taking primary teacher education courses at a teacher college, they learnt that writing in the first two years should focus on skill-based activities, which include hand coordination, writing in the air, in the sand, letter formation, tracing and copying letters, words, and sentences. In higher classes, the teaching covered composition and writing a poem. For example, one teacher who had taught in elementary school for eleven years, seven years in Grade One and previously four years in another grade, reported: *“When I was a student-teacher, I learnt that teaching writing in early years in elementary school focus on writing in the air, in the sand, forming letters and tracing letters, words and numbers.”* Another teacher, who had taught in elementary school and Grade One for three years stated; *“The teaching of writing begins with teaching individual alphabets and then arrange them into syllable to form words”*. Six (20%) teachers, who seemed to have different instructional beliefs, reported that they learnt how to teach writing in Grade One using a whole language approach when taking courses at teacher college. This finding supported early studies, which found that what teachers have learned in their teacher education courses influenced the shaping of their beliefs (Goodman, 1988; Purnomo, Suryadi & Darwis, 2016; Smith, 2005).

It is interesting to note that while professional development (PD) did not seem to shape teachers' beliefs in this study, there was evidence found which suggests that experience with the PD sessions may strengthen teachers' beliefs when the PD given reflects the beliefs of the teachers. For example, in this study 19 teachers whose beliefs were consistent with a more traditional approach and who had had opportunities to discuss how to teach writing in Grade One with their Grade One fellow teachers in a Teacher Working Group (TWG) stated that in the TWG, they shared that the teaching of writing in Grade One should focus on handwriting, letter formation and mastery of letters or the alphabet. Further, they claimed that their experience in the TWG help them improve their teaching. Similarly, teachers who reported to have attended training in the teaching of early writing which placed the emphasis on letter formation and writing conventions also reported that the training help improve their practices. This finding is in line with Richardson's argument (1996) that experiences in the field could change or improve the beliefs. In this case, the teachers' PD experiences appeared to confirm their beliefs.

Consistency Between the teachers' Beliefs in the Teaching of Writing and Their Practices in Teaching Writing in Grade One

This study found that there was consistency between the beliefs of 24 (80%) participating teachers in teaching writing in Grade One and their practices. The teachers, who held instructional beliefs aligned with a more traditional approach, illustrated that the teaching of writing should start from practising hand coordination, letter formation and then tracing and copying lines, letters, words and sentences. This was evident from the teachers' description of their practices in teaching writing. In contrast, 6 (20%) of the teachers who

stated that writing should be taught using a whole language approach, had different activities in their classroom. When asked to describe their writing, they introduced similar activities to those used by the rest of the 24 teachers mentioned earlier. This means that these 6 teachers' practices did not reflect what they believed. These findings were similar to previous research findings which indicated that teachers' beliefs may or may not be consistent with their practices (Davis & Wilson, 1999; Ogan-Bekiroglu & Akkoc, 2009; Savasci & Berlin, 2012) although in this study, it was found that the first was more dominant.

Regarding the teachers' practices in the classroom in this study, there was evidence that the teaching materials or the textbooks the teachers used in teaching writing in Grade One could either support the implementation of their instructional beliefs or prevent them from implementing their beliefs. All teachers in this study, including six teachers whose beliefs were aligned with a more progressive approach, reported that the materials or textbooks they used were skill-based, focusing on activities such as writing in the sand or in the air, forming letters, tracing lines, letters, words and sentences. While this seemed to maintain the practices of the teachers whose instructional beliefs were in line with the textbooks, it clearly did not support those of the teachers who had different instructional beliefs with the underlying philosophy of the textbooks.

Similarly, class size also seemed to influence teachers' practices in this study regardless their beliefs. Most of the teachers' classes involved in this study were considered large. About 50% of them had 31 to 46 students, seven had 26 to 30 students, and eight had 25 or less students, with the smallest having 20 students. Out of 30 participating teachers, five had one teaching assistant in their classroom. When asked if the teachers considered their students' individual ability and background when planning the writing lessons and gave different activities based on their background, all of them said that they gave similar activities or tasks because that way made their class manageable. This confirmed previous study that classroom context influence teachers' practices (Blignaut, 2008)

The findings in this study may have some implications on two aspects. First, teachers' experience at teacher training college seemed to influence their beliefs greatly. Therefore, pre-service teachers should be exposed to a variety of pedagogies, research-based methods and best-practices in teaching writing in primary schools, including in early grades, to allow them experience alternative instructional practices, which may shape their instructional beliefs. This could mean that teacher training college, particularly in Indonesian context, should review the courses they offered including courses in teaching writing in early grades of primary schools. Second, there was evidence in this study that the teaching materials or textbooks that the teachers used and professional development they had attended strengthened the teachers' beliefs and supported or discouraged them to implement their beliefs. Therefore, in relation to implementing new curricula, supports given to teachers and textbooks provided should reflect the change intended to help teachers execute change.

Conclusions

This study found that the teachers' beliefs in this study were mostly aligned with a more traditional approach. Their beliefs were apparently influenced by what they had learned in their teacher education courses. While most of the teachers' beliefs in this study were consistent with their teaching practices, a small percentage of teachers held instructional beliefs that were not evident in their teaching practices. This inconsistency was particularly found in teachers whose beliefs were somewhat relevant to a more progressive approach. The findings, however, cannot be generalized due to the small number of participants and the limited methodology used, which only relied on the survey. Further research is needed to investigate teachers' beliefs and their practices in Indonesian context using qualitative and advanced quantitative methods.

References

- Al-Amoush, S., Markic, Usak, M., Erdogan, M. & Eilks, I. 2014. Beliefs about chemistry teaching and learning - A comparison of teachers' and student teachers' beliefs from Jordan, Turkey and Germany. *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education*, 12: 767-792.
- Blignaut, S. (2008). Teachers' sense making and enactment of curriculum policy. *Journal of Education*, 43, 102-126.
- Boscolo, P. 2008. Writing in primary school. In C. Bazerman (Ed.), *Handbook of research on writing: History, society, school, individual, text*. New York: NY: Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.
- Browne, A. 2009. *Developing language and literacy 3-8* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.
- Clay, M. 1975. *What did I write*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cox, C. 2005. *Teaching language arts, a student-and response-centered classroom* (5th ed.). Needham Height, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Crawford, P. 1995. Early literacy: Emerging perspectives. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 10(1), 71-86.
- Davis, M. M., & Wilson, E. K. 1999. A Title 1 teacher's beliefs, decision-making, and instruction at the third and seventh grade levels. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 38(4), 290-299.
- De Jong, O. 2007. Trends in western science curricula and science education research: A bird's eye view. *Journal of Baltic Science Education*, 6(1), 15-22.
- Deng, Z. 2004. Beyond teacher training: Singaporean teacher preparation in the era of new educational initiatives. *Teaching Education*, 15(2), 159-173.
- Ferreiro, E., & Teberosky, A. 1982. *Literacy before schooling*. Exeter, NH: Heinemann.
- Goodman, J. 1988. Constructing a practical philosophy of teaching: A study of preservice teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 4(2), 121-137.3.
- Harris, P., McKenzie, B., Fitzsimmons, P. & Turbil, J. 2003. *Writing in the Primary School Years*. Tuggerah, NSW, Australia: Social Science Press.
- Kuzborska, I. 2011. Links between teachers' beliefs and practices and research on reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, Volume 23, No. 1. pp. 102-128
- King, K., Shumow, L., & Lietz, S. 2001. Science education in an urban elementary school: Case studies of teacher beliefs and classroom practices. *Science Education*, 85(2), 89-110.
- Louden, W., Rohl, M., Barratt-Pugh, C., Brown, C., Cairney, T., Elderfield, J., Rowe, K. 2005. *In teachers' hands: Effective literacy teaching practices in the early years of schooling*. Canberra: Department of Science and Training (DEST).
- Nespor, J. 1987. The role of beliefs in the practice of teaching. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 19(4), 317-328.
- Ogan-Bekiroglu, F., & Akkoc, H. 2009. Preservice teachers' instructional beliefs and examination of consistency between beliefs and practice. *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education*, 7, 1173-1199.
- Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of educational research*, 62(3), 307-332.
- Purnomo, Y.W., SuryadI, D. & Darwis. S. 2016. Examining pre-service elementary school teacher beliefs and instructional practices in mathematics class. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, June 2016, 8(4), 629-642.
- Pusat Kurikulum. 2007. *Laporan hasil pemantauan pelaksanaan Standar Isi dan Standar Kompetensi kelulusan [A report on monitoring findings on the implementation of*

- Content Standard and Graduate Competency Standard*]. Jakarta: Badan Penelitian dan Pengembangan, Depdiknas [Research and Development Board, Department of National Education].
- Richardson, V. 1996. The role of attitudes and beliefs in learning to teach. In J. Sikula (Ed.), *The handbook of research in teacher education* (2nd ed., pp. 102-119). New York: Macmillan.
- Richardson, V., Anders, P., Tidwell, D., & Lloyd, C. 1991. The relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices in reading comprehension instruction. *American Educational Research*, 28(3), 559-586.
- Savasci, F., & Berlin, D.F. 2012. Science Teacher Beliefs and Classroom Practice Related to Constructivism in Different School Settings. *J Sci Teacher Education*, 23:65-86.
- Schluze, A.C. 2006. *Helping children become readers through writing: A Guide to writing workshop in kindergarten*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Smith, L. 2005. The impact of early life history on teachers' beliefs: In-school and out-of-school experiences as learner and knowers of science. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 11(1), 5-36.
- Sulfasyah, Haig, Y., & Barratt-Pugh, C. 2015. Indonesian teachers' implementation of new curriculum initiatives in relation to teaching writing in lower primary school. *International Journal of Education*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 52-73.
- Teale, W.H., & Sulzby, E. 1989. Emergent literacy: New perspectives. In D. S. Strickland & L. M. Morrow (Eds.), *Emerging literacy: Young children learn to read and write* (pp. pp.1-5). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Tompkins, G.E. 2008. *Teaching writing: balancing process and product*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education.
- Tompkins, G.E., Campbell, R., & Green, D. 2012. *Literacy for the 21st century: A balanced approach*. French Forest, NSW: Pearson Australia.
- Utomo, Erry. 2005. *Challenges of curriculum reform in the context of decentralization: The response of teachers to a Competence-Based curriculum (CBC) and its implementation in schools*. (Doctoral dissertation), University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh.
- Vukelich, C., & Christie, J. 2009. *Building a foundation for preschool literacy : Effective instruction for children's reading and writing development*. Newark, Del.: International Reading Association.