Exploring China School Professional Tutor’ Beliefs About Learning

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Abstract. Teacher culture, which upwards inherits the mainstream cultural wills of society on one hand and downwards connects student culture, classroom culture, school culture and so forth on the other hand, is the most dynamic and subjective cultural factor. The education of our nation is under a paradigm transition, but subjective confusion, cognition bias, method deficiency and other problems that exist objectively in teacher culture are very unconformable with the transition, therefore the traditional teacher culture acts as a strong resistance against the reform. Teacher culture is developing from free pattern to self-conscious pattern and this means that teachers will create their dignity and well-being through self-actualization and that they, on a basis of critical introspection and conversational understanding, will break the old habits, promote the teaching culture reform with creative educational practice and reconstruct the cultural ecological field of education.

School reform efforts in different parts of the world have focused on students’ learning. In particular, most school improvement programs now aim to ensure that students acquire the high-level knowledge and skills that help them to thrive in today’s highly competitive global economy (e.g., Lee & Williams, 2006). In this regard, school reform programs draw from various contemporary theories and research on learning (e.g., Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Lambert & McCombs, 1998). The basic idea is that all school improvement efforts should be directed at ensuring students achieves high levels of learning or attainment of well-defined curricular objectives and standards. For example, textbooks (Chien & Young, 2007), computers and educational technology (Gravosou, 2002; Haertel & Means, 2003; Technology in Schools Task Force, 2003), and educational assessment systems (Black & Wiliam, 2004; Cheung & Ng, 2007; Clark, 2001; Stiggins, 2005) are being reconsidered as regards how they can effectively provide scaffolds and resources for advancing student learning. Likewise, the allocation and management of a school’s financial resources are assessed in terms of whether these are effectively mobilized and utilized towards improving student learning (Bolam, 2006; Chung & Hung, 2006; Retna, 2007).

The present study aims to initiate inquiry into the possible roles of China school Professional tutor in promoting student learning, by looking into school Professional tutor’ conceptions or beliefs regarding the learning process. Conceptions and beliefs about learning has been an important focus of research among various education stakeholders. For example, research has focused on students’ conceptions of learning (Purdie & Hattie, 2002) as these conceptions are related to the students’ learning behaviors and strategies (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004; Pillay, Purdie, Boulton-Lewis, 2000). Similarly, research has also focused on conceptions and beliefs about learning of teachers (Boulton-Lewis, Smith, McCrindle, Burnett, & Campbell, 2001; Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2002; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001) and pre-service teachers (Bernardo, 2008; Cliff, 1998) as these cognitions are said to guide
teachers practices in the classroom (Calderhead, 1996) and may even be related to student achievement (Gao & Watkins, 2004). This study aims to extend this line of inquiry by exploring the beliefs about learning of school Professional tutor in the China.

School Professional tutor are not the direct participants in the learning processes in schools, unlike students and teachers. Nevertheless, how school Professional tutor conceive of their roles in promoting student learning is likely to be shaped by their own conceptions regarding the learning process. If school Professional tutor are to be effective agents in facilitating students learning, they should have a deep and principled understanding of the processes of learning, and the factors that may promote or hinder these processes. In this study, we inquired into the beliefs about learning of practicing school Professional tutor in six different regions of the China by asking them to assess different statements regarding the learning process and indicate their agreement with such statements. Their responses were analyzed using principal components analysis in order to reveal the structure of their beliefs about learning, and possible options for school Professional tutor in relation to the various dimensions of the learning beliefs are discussed.

Method

Participants

One-hundred sixteen school Professional tutor from six different regions of the country participated in the study by answering a questionnaire on conceptions of learning. Ten of the participants were male, 103 female, and three did not indicate their gender. Most of the participants are relatively young; 43.1% of the participants were in their 20s, and 30.2% were in their 30’s. Most of the participants are also relatively new in their present positions as counselors; 50.9% of the participants have been in their present positions for five years for less and 26.7% have been in their positions for 6 to 15 years. About half or 54.9% of the participants have only a bachelor’s degree, and the rest have master’s degrees.

Instrument

A questionnaire was designed to include 42 statements regarding the learning process and factors that affect this process. The statements were derived from different contemporary theories and principles regarding learning. The items were arranged in one random sequence in the questionnaire. The participants were asked to indicate whether they agree or disagree with each statement in the questionnaire, using a scale from 0 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree). The questionnaire also included questions referring to the school counselors’ educational and professional background and some other demographic information.

Results

To explore the structure of the school Professional tutor’ beliefs about learning, their responses were analyzed using an exploratory factor analysis. First, the internal consistency of the entire 42-item scale was computed and the item-total correlations were computed. The item-total correlations ranged from .27 to .66, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .94$. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .815 indicating that the data are factorable. The raw data on the 42 items were then analyzed using principal components analysis, and the scree plot suggested three factors. The component matrix was rotated using the promax rotation
orthogonal factors are rotated to oblique positions). The pattern matrix with three factors accounted for 42.30% of the variance. The factor loadings were determined by considering items with loading of at least .40 in one factor and not more than .35 in either of the other factors.

An examination of the items in Factor 1 (Eigenvalue = 12.62; % of variance = 30.06) indicates that most of the items refer to conceptions of learning that are consistent with cognitive constructivist views of learning. These items emphasize the importance of attaining higher level cognitive knowledge and skills, and the importance of active processes that relate old and new knowledge in the process of constructing more complex knowledge representations. Some sample items include: “Learning complex material involves being able to effectively plan how to understand a complex skill or concept” and “Learning complex material involves changing or reorganizing how one represents information in the mind.”

On the other hand, the items in Factor 2 (Eigenvalue = 3.26; % of variance = 7.77) refer to conceptions of learning consistent with behaviorist conceptions of learning, that also suggest that learning processes are constrained by innate capabilities but are shaped by more traditional instructional processes. The items in this factor also suggest a passive role of the learner, and the importance of external instructional processes in advancing learning. Some sample items include: “Learning complex material involves the consistent practice and reinforcement of complex skills so that this is executed fast and without error” and “Learning complex material involves the imitation of desired behaviors from models in the environment.”

Finally, the items in Factor 3 (Eigenvalue = 1.88; % of variance = 4.48) refer to factors that influence individual differences in learning, such as developmental, motivational, social, and individual cognitive styles. Most of the items in this factor refer to one or more personal or social factors that may influence the outcomes of the learning process. Example items include: “The learning process is influenced by whether the task and concepts to be learned are relevant to the learner’s personal interest” and “The learning process is influenced by the learner’s expectations for success and failure in learning.”

The different items that loaded into the three factors were combined form three scales that represented each of the three factors. The social-cognitive constructivist beliefs scale consisted of 17 items (M=5.72, SD = .72, Cronbach’s α = .92). The behaviorist beliefs scale consisted of 9 items (M = 5.14, SD = .98, Cronbach’s α = .83). Finally, individual difference beliefs scale consisted of another 9 items (M = 5.64, SD = .78, Cronbach’s α = .82). The participants’ responses to the items in the three factors were highly related. Social-cognitive constructivists beliefs were correlated with behaviorist beliefs (r = .48, p < .0001), and with individual difference beliefs (r = .67, p < .0001). Behaviorist beliefs were also correlated with individual difference beliefs (r = .50, p< .0001). The descriptive statistics for the three factors suggest that there is no clear preference for one set of beliefs or another, nor is there a clear distinction made among the beliefs. Other descriptive statistical analysis revealed that the responses for the three factors were not associated with any of the educational, professional, or demographic variables such as sex, age, years in the profession, educational concentration/major, or educational attainment.

Discussion

This exploratory study reveals that China school counselors’ beliefs about learning are organized in terms of fairly coherent systems of principles and factors that are consistent with
both traditional (behaviorist) and contemporary (constructivist) approaches to understanding learning. One could speculate that the beliefs are organized in ways that reflect formal instruction regarding theories of learning, however, research on the guidance and counseling or counselor education curriculum in the China (Wong-Fernandez, 2000, 2001) indicates that such concepts are not given emphasis at all. Thus, it is unlikely that the China counselors’ beliefs about learning merely replicate the structure of formal courses on learning.

Reference


