

2015

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Recommended Citation

Dadvand, B. (2015). Teaching for Democracy: Towards an Ecological Understanding of Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(2).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2015v40n2.6>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol40/iss2/6>

Teaching for Democracy: Towards an Ecological Understanding of Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs

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Abstract: Due to the significance of beliefs in giving direction to the activities of educators, the present study examined the beliefs of 12 Iranian pre-service teachers about democratic education. Overall, the findings of focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews pointed to a technicist and often an apolitical view of teaching held by most of the participants. While these findings can be explained with reference to a constellation of factors in Iran's education policy, this study concludes by pointing to the need for an ecological understanding of teachers' belief systems. Such an approach identifies teachers' agency embedded within a matrix of structural possibilities and constraints as an important contributor to their internalized beliefs.

Introduction

Questions about democracy have always been intertwined with questions about education (Biesta, 2007). According to Dewey (1916), schools are the microcosms of the desired society and as such reflect its democratic ideals. Schools, in fact, build upon the working of other socialization institutions to shape young peoples' democratic dispositions (Beane & Apple, 2007; Buzzellia & Johnston, 2001; Goodlad, 1997). Due to this close connection of schooling and democracy, the past two decades has seen a resurgence of interest in democratic education within different nation states. In young and emerging democracies, the focus of these debates has been on the contribution of schools to the development of a thriving democratic culture while in established democracies these debates have been mostly centered around the role of schools in the revitalization of civics and citizenship, often in response to growing concerns over declining levels of civic participation and wider concerns about social cohesion and social inclusion (Biesta & Lawy, 2006).

Among other factors, teachers can have considerable impact on the quality of democratic education in schools (Dworkin, Saha, & Hill, 2003; Englund, 2006; Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012). The role of teachers is particularly important in this regard since it is "teachers who represent and constitute the school organization and embody educational values, whose understanding of pupils determines so many possibilities for pupils to engage or disengage, and whose practice shapes the context for learning" (Howes, Davies, & Fox, 2009, p. 22). Teachers, in fact, can make an important contribution to democratic education through the creation of a collaborative learning environment (Banks, 2004; Watkins, Carnell, & Lodge, 2007), adoption of a dialogic approach to pedagogy (Alexander, 2005; Carnell & Lodge, 2002), developing students' critical thinking abilities (Halstead & Pike, 2006; Kocoska, 2009), creating possibilities for deliberative communication (Camicia, 2009);

Geboers et al., 2013), and power sharing in classroom decision-making (Psunder, 2005; Thornberg, 2010).

Making teaching more democratic, however, is not an easy task and puts extra professional demands on teachers. To contribute to a culture of democracy and act as transformative intellectuals (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Apple, 2003; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005), teachers should first be aware of the value-laden and political dimension of their profession. As Freire (1993) argues, before embarking on their mission in education, “it is essential that every education worker, every educator, assume, as rapidly as possible, the political nature of his or her practice. That he or she define himself or herself politically” (pp. 44-45). In addition to this vision, teachers should be able to maximize the chances of students to actively participate in a democratic way of life in classrooms (Dworkin, Saha, & Hill, 2003; Englund, 2006). Such an ability on the part of teachers, in turn, requires the existence of a professional-pedagogical knowledge base (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005), a knowledge base that enables them to respond to the demands of schools as “one of the major arenas in which resources, power, and ideology specific to policy, finance, curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation in education are worked through” (Apple, 2006, p. 30).

Teacher Beliefs and Democratic Values

There is now extensive research evidence that points to the critical role 'beliefs' play in affecting educators' thinking, decisions and actions (e.g., Smith & Croom, 2000; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000; Zembylas, 2005). Deeply held and often unexamined, beliefs are important to the professional development of teachers as they “influence how future and practicing teachers approach the task of learning to teach and the knowledge they construct from the experience” (Fives & Buehl, 2008, p. 135). Beliefs also act as filters that mediate educators' interpretations (Lombaerts, De Backer & Engels, 2009) and as such affect how they understand and respond to various issues within the context of their schools and classrooms (Errington, 2004; Ertmer, 2005; Harwood, Hansen, & Lotter 2006; Warfield, Wood & Lehman, 2005). The importance of beliefs in teaching is such that educators' beliefs are considered to be an inseparable constituent of their knowledge base that define their professional identity (Akbari & Dadvand, 2011, 2014; Woods & Cakir, 2011).

Due to the important role beliefs play in teaching, there has been growing attention to teachers' belief systems in the teacher education literature within the past decade. In the realm of democratic education too, many studies have examined the perceptions and beliefs of teachers, both pre-service and in-service, as they relate to civics, citizenship and democracy (e.g., Damber & Göhl-Muigai, 2011; Gallavan, 2008; Koutselini, 2008; Leenders, Veugelers, & Kat, 2008; Martin, 2008, 2010; Osler, 2011; Peterson & Knowles, 2009; Topkaya & Yavuz, 2011; Zhang, 2010). Interest in studying teachers' beliefs with regards to democracy rests upon the assumption that what teachers believe about democratic education is a significant indicator of how they understand the concept and how they approach it in their daily practices. That is, the way “practitioners perceive, define and believe concerning ‘democracy’ and ‘democratic school’ have an impact on how democracy is and will be put into action in real settings” (Saraç-Süzera & Alagözülüb, 2010, p. 2398).

While examining teachers' beliefs can provide a useful account of their democratic subjectivities, it would be insufficient to discuss teachers' beliefs without considering the broader context of education that gives rise to the formation of such beliefs. It has now been established that teachers' beliefs are shaped by various factors and elements in the lifelong process of 'learning to teach'. This process begins long before teachers are formally enrolled

in programs of teacher education; its starting point is what Lortie (1975) refers to as *apprenticeship of observation*. According to Lortie, teachers start internalizing their perceptions and attitudes about teaching during their years of schooling from observing their own teachers. Later, these perceptions and attitudes become important predictors of teachers' learning in the guise of beliefs (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Among the other educational factors that influence teachers' knowledge and dispositions, including their democratic beliefs, are their pre-service teacher education programs (Dunkin, Precians, & Nettle, 1994; Mills, 2009; Nettle, 1998), their induction with teacher-mentors (Achinstein & Athanases, 2005; Nilsson & van Driel, 2010), and their continuing professional development (Antonioni & Kyriakides, 2013; Buczynski & Hansen, 2010; de Vries, Jansen, & van de Grift, 2013; Hardy, 2010). Overall, these influences build upon teachers' apprenticeship of observation and provide a platform from which teachers construct their personal theories. Schwille and Dembele (2007) refer to this platform of learning as 'the continuum of teacher learning'. Within this continuum, each stage builds upon and interacts with the other stages to shape teachers' personal subjectivities and professional identity.

Due to the significance of beliefs in giving direction to the activities of educators (Enterline, Cochran-Smith, Ludlow, & Mitescu, 2008), this study aims to investigate how pre-service Iranian teachers understand their teaching role in relation to democratic values and ideals. While there is a longstanding tradition of academic research on teachers' democratic beliefs in the context of Western democracies, such research is in short supply in settings like Iran with a different set of socio-cultural and political traditions. Given that teachers' beliefs are influenced, to a large extent, by their culturally shared experiences and values (Correa et al., 2008), the findings of this study can help shed light on how the belief systems of pre-service teachers about democratic education reflects their institutional and policy context. The findings of this study can also feed into the wider debates about democratic education within diverse nation-states; these findings can highlight how teachers develop their belief systems in face of various institutional possibilities and constraints in their local contexts. Overall, this research seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What do pre-service Iranian teachers believe about democratic values in teaching?
2. How do these beliefs reflect the educational policy context in Iran?

To address the second research question, first some of the factors that contribute to the formation of Iranian teachers' beliefs about democratic education are examined. In this regard, the pre-service teachers' spectrum of learning, including their apprenticeship of observation, their formal teacher education programs, and their context of (future) teaching practices, are discussed as important contributors to their democratic subjectivities. While the link between teachers' beliefs as regards democracy is well established in other places, it has not been investigated in Iran where the context and the influence of the *apprenticeship of observation* is different. Thus, next section of this paper provides an overview of the Iranian education system in the areas of education policy that help shape educators' thinking about democratic education. This includes three interrelated domains of education policy in Iran including: K-12 education, teacher education, and civic/social studies.

Context of Teaching and Learning to Teach

Within Iran's centralized system of education administration, the blueprint for education, from primary to higher education, is set by three ministries: Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT), and Ministry of Health, Treatment and Medical Education. Iran's MoE is responsible for K-12 education in the

country. It coordinates and supervises education provisions in primary schools (from one-year pre-school to grade 5), middle schools (from grade 6 to grade 8) and high schools (from grade 9 to grade 12). The MoE, as the sole authority for K-12 education, is in charge of all that relates to pre-university education in both public and private schools, from educational planning, financing, administration, curriculum, to textbook development, and testing. This ministry sets the national course of study for all subjects, specifies the syllabus, stipulates the content to be covered and the number of hours to be taught, oversees textbook content, and designs and administers tests (Kamyab, 2004). The MoE is also responsible for some teacher training colleges and universities in the country.

Higher education falls within the shared jurisdiction of two ministries in Iran: MSRT, and Ministry of Health, Treatment and Medical Education. These two ministries are in charge of the countries' universities, medical schools, professional development sites, teacher training colleges, and private higher education institutions. Both ministries take an active role in setting uniform higher education policies in the country through planning the curriculum, setting the learning objectives, specifying the study subjects, and mandating the modes of assessment. The MSRT regulates education towards the achievement of Associate, Bachelor's, Master's, PhD and Post-Doctoral degrees in different fields and majors, while the Ministry of Health, Treatment and Medical Education takes charge of the medical universities and colleges in the country.

Teacher education and training in Iran takes place in several higher education institutes and colleges affiliated to the MoE and the MSRT. These two ministries are jointly responsible for the admission, preparation and certification of pre-service teachers. Primary and middle school teacher preparation takes place in training colleges and higher institutes of technical and vocational education under the auspices of the MoE. Preparation of high school teachers, however, is carried out by tertiary level institutions and training colleges of the MSRT. Both ministries endorse highly regimented policies for the preparation of teachers and all universities and colleges are obliged to implement the policy mandates. According to the teacher education policy schemes of both ministries, pre-service teachers should successfully undertake subject matter courses towards specialization in particular subject areas. Pre-service teachers should also complete 'teaching skills', 'practicum', and 'classroom management' courses as a part of their preparation program (Darki, 2006).

With regards to civic education, a subject-centred policy is followed by Iran's MoE. Civic education is a mandatory subject in Iran's K-12 school curriculum and students are formally introduced to 'Social Studies' in the third grade of primary school. Social Studies remains a mandatory school subject until the first grade of high school. Influenced by the country's contemporary political history, Iran's civic education policy aims at social reproduction of the existing religious and political ideology. According to the Organization for Research and Educational Planning (2013), which is Iran's MoE body responsible for planning, development and evaluation of school textbooks, some of the main objectives of Social Studies textbooks include: familiarizing students with the concept of the Islamic Republic and its political constituencies, strengthening attachment to the Islamic Republic as a legitimate political entity, strengthening national unity, creation of positive attitude towards the country's political institutions, encouraging respect for law and values, and cultivating a sense of responsibility towards the state and society.

Many studies have pointed to various deficiencies in the Iranian civic education (e.g. Bagheri, 2000; Fatah, 2006; Fathi, 2002; Gavazi, 2008; Gholtash & Yarmohammadian, 2011; Lotfabadi, 2006, 2007; Mahmoudi, 2011). To address these shortcomings, Iran's MoE has more recently undertaken civic education reforms. Various students' and parents' councils and associations have been set up at the school level within the past decade. According to the MoE website, the formation of Student Councils, Iranian Student Parliament, Pupils

Association News Agency (PANA), and Parents-Teachers' Associations represent some of the efforts to increase participation in school decision-making. While the establishment of these councils and associations definitely marks a positive development, their organizational structure and function have been a topic of debate. First, since all student associations are subject to top-down administrative control by the MoE as their funding agency, there are doubts about their real independence and power (Sajadi, 2005). In addition, the role of Parents'-Teachers' Associations in schools has been criticized as too narrow and only limited to financial contributions (Barkhordari, 2002).

The Present Study

This section of the paper provides an overview of the study's research design, including the participants, data collection and data analysis. This is then followed by the findings related to what Iranian pre-service teachers believe about democratic values in teaching. At the end, in order to provide context for the findings, the beliefs of the participants are discussed vis-à-vis the contextual particularities of the Iranian education system in three areas of education policy, namely K-12 education, teacher education, and democratic education.

Participants

The participants in this study were twelve pre-service teachers (Participant A, B, ... and L hereafter) undertaking a graduate teacher education program in the field of English Language Teaching. These participants were all second year students enrolled in pre-service teacher education programs in three universities under the auspices of the MSRT in Iran: Tehran University, Tarbiat Modares University, and Kharazmi University (formerly known as Teacher Training University). The choice of participants from these universities was based on their reputation and good standing as centers of higher education excellence in the country. According to the MSRT's latest ranking in 2013, University of Tehran and Tarbiat Modares stand first and second while Kharazmi University is ranked 13 among 318 universities and institutions of higher education associated to the MSRT. The second factor that was influential in the selection of universities was their geographical distribution limiting this research to universities across Tehran for the ease of access and practical reasons.

After the target universities were identified, four participants were selected from each site from among the pool of the pre-service teachers enrolled in their pre-service teacher education programs. Initial contact was made with the respective departments in each university to gain permission to the participants for the study. Purposive sampling (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1990) was used to set the participant selection criteria, namely prior teaching experience and progress towards achieving teaching credentials. In order to control the impact of learning from experience, only pre-service teachers with little to no prior teaching experience were selected for this study. In addition, since this study is concerned with the contribution of formal teacher education to pre-service teachers' beliefs about democratic education, the choice of participants was narrowed down to second year students who had finished the course-based components of their programs and who were completing their Master's theses at the time. The final group of participants who matched these selection criteria and who formally agreed to take part in this study included twelve pre-service teachers, 7 male and 5 female, ranging from 22 to 29 years of age.

Data Collection

Following a multi-method research design, the present study used focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews to explore the beliefs and attitudes of the participants. The relatively flexible and interactive structure of these methods made them most relevant to the study of teachers' beliefs. First, in order to engage the pre-service teachers in a collective discussion, the participants took part in a focus group mediated by the researcher around teachers' contributions to a democratic classroom culture. The choice of focus group was due to its potential to provide "a socially legitimated occasion for participants to engage in 'retrospective introspection', to attempt collectively to tease out previously taken for granted assumptions" (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001, pp. 5-6). The social dynamics of the focus groups also helped to create a more participatory context in which different beliefs were expressed by and discussed among the participants.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted separately with each of the participants following the focus group discussion. The aim of these interviews, which lasted from 43 to 72 minutes, was to have an open dialogue with each of the pre-service teachers and examine their beliefs in more detail. The semi-structured interviews, including the prompt questions, were based on the set of 'concourses' generated from the discussions in the focus group. As a dominant theme emerging from a body of discussion, a concourse represents the interplay of positions, ideas, and opinions on a given topic (Dryzek & Berejikian, 1993). By using concourse as the guiding themes for the semi-structured interviews, this study tried to provide a thick description of the beliefs and opinions of each of the participants regarding the issues that were raised and discussed in the focus groups.

Data Analysis

Constant comparative analysis (Merriam, 2009) was used by the researcher to analyze the qualitative data from the focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews. The analysis involved grouping the transcribed data together on similar conceptual dimensions and comparing one segment with another to identify the underlying patterns, themes and discursive narratives. Throughout the analyses, the researcher was particularly sensitive to the use of *imageries* and *metaphors* by the participants in discussing their beliefs. Imageries and metaphors function as tools by which people communicate their deeply held assumptions, beliefs and expectations. It is partly through our metaphors and mental images that we construct a certain interpretation of ourselves and reality. For this reason, imageries and metaphors have been frequently used in educational research. In teacher education research, too, analysis of imageries and metaphors offers "a window on teachers' pedagogical knowledge, beliefs, and ideologies" (Greene & Magliaro, 2005, p. 211).

Two measures were taken to check the reliability of the coding and analyses, and thus ensure the validity of the interpretations. First, 20% of the transcribed data from both the focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews were re-examined by a colleague familiar with the study's research design. This was done by juxtaposing a random cross-section of data against the extracted patterns and themes to check for the accuracy of the researcher's judgements and interpretations. The results of this round of analysis showed a high degree of consistency between the researcher's and the external examiner's analyses. In cases of conflicting interpretations, both parties re-examined the relevant segments of the data and tried to achieve consensus through deliberation and discussion. In addition, in order to seek 'member checking' of the findings, the emergent patterns and themes from each participant's data were emailed to them as a summary at the conclusion of the study. Once

the accuracy of these interpretations was ensured through feedback from the participants, the researcher proceeded to report these as the study findings.

Results

This section presents the themes around which the participants' discursive narratives were organized. To give a detailed account of the points under discussion, reference is made to the imageries and metaphors that the participants drew upon in discussing their beliefs; direct quotations are also used from the participants wherever relevant. All the quotations used in this section are translated from Persian, the language in which the focus group discussion and the semi-structured interviews were conducted. To ensure the accuracy of the translations done by the researcher, the external examiner was also asked to check all the translated quotes against their Persian transcripts.

Teaching and Technicism

A major concourse that emerged from the focus group discussion and was further explored during the interviews was the idea that teaching is a form of political activity intertwined with norms and values. The researcher posited a political definition of teaching in the focus group meeting against which the pre-service teachers discussed their views and explained how they understood the nature of a teacher's role. In this regard, all the participants, except for participant D, saw very little to no contribution for teachers beyond the successful teaching of the subject matter. In fact, most of the participants considered teaching as a technical activity in which teachers' main responsibility is to *teach the subject matter and facilitate students' learning*. A good case in point here is participant E who drew an analogy between a teacher and a medical practitioner to explain how he viewed teachers' role:

Teachers are like medical practitioners. First they need knowledge of their field like doctors do. ... Teachers need to know how to diagnose and prescribe. The difference is that instead of a disease, teachers diagnose learning problems. ... Students are like patients to them [teachers].

Other participants also expressed a somewhat similar view by echoing a technical understanding of teaching in which teachers' main responsibility was the teaching of their subject courses. Using the metaphor of *opera conductor* for teachers, participant C, for example, compared teaching to conducting an opera by describing the classroom as an opera hall; the teacher was described as the conductor of the opera and the students were compared to opera musicians. Participant C argued that what matters most to teachers is how well they use their knowledge and expertise to achieve learning outcomes:

I see teachers as opera conductors. They should know best what music they want to produce, and how to produce it.

The only notable exception to such an apolitical and technicist view of teaching was participant D. While all the other participants subscribed to a view of teaching as a technical activity devoid of political significance and implications, participant D understood teaching as "inherently tied to values". Comparing teachers' role in classrooms to that of *parents* at home, this participant believed that teachers should care for the overall wellbeing of their students as parents do for their children. Participant D went on to argue that teachers should not only set good examples for their students through their conduct, but also try to broaden

their perspectives about diverse issues that surround them in society. Participant D also argued, what sets teaching apart from other professions is “teachers’ duty to the moral development of students through consciousness-raising”.

Curriculum Hands-off and Accountability

Another concourse that was generated in the focus group meeting and was discussed with each pre-service teacher in the semi-structured interviews was that of curriculum. Given the central role curriculum plays in defining *valid* educational knowledge (Bernstein, 2003), the way teaching practitioners position themselves vis-à-vis the formal curriculum can determine, to a large extent, what is taught in the classroom and how it is taught (Wen, Elicker, & McMullen, 2011). Overall, two inter-connected themes emerged from the participants’ discussions about the curriculum: non-intervention and accountability. As for the first theme, most of the participants argued that curriculum decisions stand outside teachers’ and students’ jurisdiction. The reasoning behind this was that curriculum decisions are made by policy-makers, or as participant F put it, by “those at the top”. Participant K also reiterated this belief in response to a question about inviting students to contribute to the curriculum content:

I don't think it is helpful to engage teachers and students in the curriculum. Teachers are responsible for teaching and students for learning. ... Curriculum comes from the Ministry [of Education], from those who know curriculum matters and are responsible for it.

A similar view was expressed by participant B using the metaphor of 'schools as factories'. This participant pointed out that effective education takes place only when there is a division of roles in schools the same way factories divide work based on expertise:

Like in a factory where each person is responsible for a particular task, schools should also divide roles and responsibilities.

The participants mentioned two other reasons for adhering to the formal curriculum. Some of the participants argued that negotiating the curriculum with students can become an impediment to learning. For example, participants A and F reasoned that curriculum embodies the ideal arrangement of teaching/learning materials; it maps out what to learn and “the best way to learn” as participant F put it. Thus, students’ involvement in the curriculum content may, in fact, be counter-productive since more often than not they lack the necessary knowledge and expertise for such an involvement. As participant A argued:

This [getting students’ involved in the curriculum] may come at a cost. Most students don't know what is best for them [to learn] and if important decisions are left to students, their learning may be interrupted.

In addition, some of the participants mentioned exams as another reason for complying with the curriculum. Participants E, H and K, for example, believed that teachers’ primary focus should be on students’ achievement. Concerns of these participants with achievement were such that they defined learning in terms of students’ exam performance. Participant H, for instance, raised a question about whether it would be feasible for teachers to negotiate the curriculum with their students and still achieve learning outcomes. Likewise, participant K equated “learning success” with “good exam results”. Although this participant expressed an interest in a negotiated curriculum, she believed that this may affect what students learn and thus put teachers at odds with schools and parents:

Let's imagine students decide not to cover one part of the curriculum. ... Who is going to be held accountable at the end if that is not what

students need to learn? Teachers of course; they are the ones who should answer.

Similarly, participant J believed that teachers should always be wary of how their performance is weighed against exam results. However, this participant also believed that teachers can find ways to circumvent the accountability pressure by improvising the curriculum in ways that can enable students to have a say in it and at the same time satisfy others through exam results. Participant D also expressed a somewhat similar view pointing to the positive contributions of students and teachers to the curriculum. However, like participant J, participant D saw the role of external examinations as an obstacle to a more participatory curriculum practices.

Banking Knowledge and Active Compliance

A third concourse that emerged from the data relates to pedagogy. Overall, the unearthed beliefs of the participants indicated that most of them advocated a 'banking model of education' (Freire, 1972) in which teachers' knowledge was a crucial element in defining the nature of the teacher-student relationship. This is reflected in the argument advanced by participant I in response to a call for teachers' deliberation with students in classrooms:

Teachers know much better [than students] what to teach and how to teach it. ... Students don't have the knowledge [that teachers have] and don't know the teaching content and method.

Other participants also reiterated a somewhat similar belief by placing students in the position of 'knowledge consumers'. Referring to teachers as "conveyors of knowledge", participant F pointed to the asymmetrical structure of classroom relationships based on who knows the content and teaching methods. Similarly, participant L believed that a good teacher knows what works best and what does not. According to this participant, since students do not have such knowledge and insight, their contribution to pedagogical decisions should be minimized:

A good teacher knows what to teach and how to teach it. ... A good experienced teacher knows the best practice ... Students lack the knowledge that teachers have and for this reason they can't be relied on in pedagogical decisions.

The idea that teachers, as masters of educational content and teaching methods, should determine what transpires in classrooms was also re-affirmed by the participants during the semi-structured interviews. In this regard, most of the participants agreed that students' judgments and authority should not over-ride those of teachers. Being a student was equated with being the recipients of teachers' knowledge, and by extension of their authority. As participant E put it, a good student, "trusts and follows" teachers' classroom lead. Participant B used a similar argument by referring to teachers as orchestrators:

It's a mistake to put teachers on par with students. ... Teachers should orchestrate learning and classroom activities. This is how teachers can create a productive learning environment.

Participants D and J took a slightly different turn from the other participants in their contributions to the discussion. While acknowledging the importance of classroom role differentiation, these participants believed that teachers should deliberate with their students and engage them in their pedagogical decisions. Participant D, for example, compared a teacher's role to that of a "lighthouse" which shows the direction, but does not dictate the exact pathway. The same participant went on to explain his position by arguing that teachers should use their wisdom to engage students in "what they learn and how they learn it". In a

similar vein, participant J believed that teachers should try to foster “a culture of cooperation” by consulting with their students in matters that relate to their learning.

Accountability through Tests

The fourth and final concourse in the data related to assessment. The participants’ discussions about assessment pointed to their concerns with learning outcomes on the one hand and good evaluative practices on the other. With regards to the first theme, some of the participants referred to assessment as ‘a diagnostic tool’ at teachers’ disposal. Accordingly, the main purpose of assessment, either formative in-class tests or summative end-of the term exams, was argued to be giving *feedback* to teachers and students about teaching and learning. Participant E called this the *diagnostic* value of exams:

Teachers should take classroom assessment seriously. ... Exam results are useful for diagnosing problems and can inform teachers and students about their performance.

Participants B, L and I also expressed somewhat similar views about assessment. Participant B, for instance, referred to assessment as “the final thread in teaching”. According to this participant, the work of teachers is incomplete if students do not do well in exams. Participant B went on to argue that teachers should channel their efforts towards the test. Similarly, for participants L and I good exam results can prove to schools and parents that learning objectives have been met. Even participant D, who envisaged a political role for teachers and advocated a more democratic approach to curriculum and pedagogy, mentioned feedback on learning and school accountability as to “why assessment matters”:

Exams capture what students have learned. ... They [teachers] should make sure that students do well in their exams. ... That’s what the school takes you to account for at the end of the day.

A related theme that emerged from the discussions around assessment pertained to how the participants defined good assessment practices. The question was raised in the focus group as to whether teachers should deliberate with students about what is tested and how it is tested. By and large, most of the participants argued that teachers should be the final arbiters in assessment because of their expert knowledge. The participants’ arguments in this regard showed continuity with their earlier beliefs about pedagogy. Participant H, for instance, opposed deliberating with students about assessment using the following reasoning:

Teachers know how to test [students' learning]. Why should they deliberate with students when students don't know much!?

Other participants also expressed similar views by referring to the required expertise in assessment. Participant E stated that assessment of learning needs familiarity with theories and methods of learning and testing. Teachers, as participant E continued to argue, know these theories and methods and thus can choose the best method(s) of assessment. Participant E also argued that students' lack of knowledge about assessment makes them poor candidates for deliberation in this area:

Students don't know the aims of different assessment means and methods. ... They are usually more interested in their grades than how they are graded. ... How can they be trusted when they don't know much about it [assessment]?

Although most of the participants mentioned accountability and feedback on learning as two important issues related to assessment, participants D and J expressed concerns about how high-stake assessment can become an impediment to teaching. Participant D reasoned that although exams can be useful as a means of providing feedback, high-stake testing puts

pressures on teacher to teach to the test. The danger in this, participant D argued, is the way tests can limit teachers' professional freedom. Similarly, Participant J mentioned that one downside of assessment through performance technologies is "the reduction of learning to what can be measured through exams". Participant J argued that this could be the source of conflict for teachers who wish to address issues that are not included in the curriculum.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study used a qualitative research design to explore the beliefs of 12 pre-service Iranian teachers about democratic education. As the findings showed, the participants held somewhat similar beliefs regarding teachers' contributions to a culture of democracy in schools and classrooms. Overall, these beliefs, which ranged from tacit and unexamined to explicit and articulated, pointed to the relatively limited democratic thinking of the pre-service teachers. Reflecting a technicist (Halliday, 1998) and often an apolitical view of teaching, the participants' beliefs showed continuity across different domains related to teachers' professional practices, i.e., curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. With regards to the curriculum, the dominant view shared among the participants was one of non-intervention and accountability. The participants' discussions about pedagogy also indicated that most of the pre-service teachers advocated a banking model (Freire, 1972) geared towards knowledge transmission. Finally, the participants' beliefs about assessment reflected a similar set of concerns regarding accountability, learning outcomes and the importance of feedback.

While these findings provide a useful overview of how the participants position themselves vis-à-vis democratic values in teaching, it would be insufficient to discuss teachers' beliefs without considering the particularities of the education context that helps shape such beliefs. As the earlier review suggested, Iran's system of education administration is hierarchical in nature and favours a technical, transmission approach to teacher education which is controlled at every level from governance, through policy to delivery. The MoE defines for teachers, students, and schools the curriculum, hours of instruction, and method(s) of assessment. Subjected to such top-down policy dictates, Iranian teachers, thus, have little control over the content of their instruction. They are also under increasing pressure to align pedagogy to assessment and teach to the test.

In addition, teacher education policy in Iran does not sufficiently address topics related to democratic education in the preparation of pre-service teachers. Instead, it focuses on enhancing the candidates' subject knowledge and improving their pedagogical and classroom-management related skills through a combination of 'subject-focused', 'teaching skills', 'practicum', and 'classroom management' courses. This matrix of *teacher-proof curriculum*, *standardized tests/exams*, and *technical teacher training* pushes pre-service teachers to think of their profession as a routine and externally controlled work-piece, rather than an independent activity with political significance. A subject-focused civic education that promotes compliance rather than critical thinking then becomes the final thread in the fabric of an education that encourages a banking approach to teaching and learning.

While this study explored pre-service teachers' beliefs as a contextual construct, to claim that teachers' subjectivities are a mere residue of the context would be reductionist. Such a proposition, in fact, ignores the role of teachers' agency in face of structural possibilities and constraints (Priestley et al., 2012; Vongalis-Macrow, 2007). Perhaps a good case in point here are two participants who expressed different views compared to the rest of their peers. Participants D and J both defined teaching as a value-laden activity with political significance. Although sometimes with caveats, these participants also showed interest in creating a more democratic classroom environment through deliberation and power-sharing

with students. At the same time, participants D and J showed a high level of awareness regarding the structural constraints, such as a top-down curriculum and accountability mechanisms, that teachers need to circumvent in order to turn their classrooms into a more inclusive and participatory learning platforms.

In light of these findings, this study concludes by pointing to the need for an *ecological* understanding of teachers' beliefs. Such an approach identifies teachers' agency, embedded within a matrix of structural possibilities and constraints, as an important contributor to their internalized beliefs. Such an ecological perspective "highlights that actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment ... [and that] the achievement of agency will always result in the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors" (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 139). Viewing agency in such terms can help us understand how teachers' beliefs are mediated by the policy and socio-political particularities of their teaching contexts. At the same time, approaching teachers' beliefs through an ecological lens allows us to view teachers as reflexive agents who can negotiate and surpass structural constraints to act, as Ayers (2004, p. 4) put it, as "the midwives of hope" rather than "the purveyors of determinism and despair".

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Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to professor Stavros Moutsios from Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, for his constructive feedback and contributions to this study.