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Teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning and their implications for meaningful learning practices in elementary school in Bandung: a phenomenological study

Fransiskus Ransus [1], Verawaty Sinaga [1*], Agrielsa Alphasati Sinaga [1], Christina Ester Manthalina Hutabarat [1]

[1] Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, Indonesia 40141

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Abstract

This study aims to explore teachers' beliefs and their implications for meaningful learning practices in elementary schools using a qualitative phenomenological approach. The participants consisted of ten elementary school teachers in Bandung, Indonesia, from both public and private schools, who were purposively selected based on the criteria that (a) they are recognized as highly dedicated teachers and (b) they have more than ten years of teaching experience. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis, and subsequently analyzed and categorized into thematic findings. The results reveal several patterns related to teachers' beliefs, including (1) teacher–student relationships as the foundation of learning, (2) knowledge construction through connecting new learning with students' prior experiences to promote meaningful learning, (3) teachers' flexibility in adapting instructional strategies to students' needs, (4) teachers' positive beliefs about the potential of every student, and (5) teachers' beliefs as a driver of instructional innovation. These findings indicate that meaningful learning is shaped not only by the strategies employed but also by the beliefs that underpin teachers' pedagogical practices. This study contributes to strengthening the role of teacher beliefs as a bridge between pedagogical knowledge and classroom practice. Practically, the findings may serve as a foundation for teacher professional development that focuses not only on technical competencies but also on reflective beliefs as a basis for pedagogical practice.

* Corresponding Author.
E-mail address: verawaty.sinaga@unpar.ac.id (Verawaty Sinaga)
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1. Introduction

As teachers design instructional plans using a range of available pedagogical approaches, their choices are shaped by a combination of professional knowledge and personal beliefs (Lui & Bonner, 2016). Teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning constitute a critical factor influencing the quality of classroom practice. Conceptually, teachers' beliefs refer to teachers' cognitive frameworks regarding meta-level issues, such as the nature of knowledge within a discipline, how students attain proficiency, and the role of teachers in facilitating such development. This line of inquiry also examines how these belief systems are formed, evolve, and manifest in classroom practices (Skott, 2014). Beliefs often exert a stronger influence than objective knowledge in guiding individuals' goals, emotions, decisions, and behaviors; consequently, teachers' instructional decisions are consistently grounded in both implicit and explicit beliefs (Bandura, 1997).

Teachers' beliefs are also reflected in their instructional strategies and the theoretical rationales underlying their pedagogical actions (Schutz et al., 2020). For instance, teachers who value differentiated instruction are more likely to adapt methods and approaches to accommodate students' diverse needs, abilities, and backgrounds (Tomlinson, 2014). Such pedagogical adjustments are essential for enabling students to connect learning experiences with real-life contexts. This aligns with Ausubel's (1968) assertion that learning becomes meaningful only when new information is anchored to prior knowledge.

The formation of teachers' beliefs is influenced by multiple sources, including interactions with students, colleagues, parents, and the broader school environment, as well as wider social experiences (Schutz et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2017). Teaching experience, in particular, plays a significant role in enhancing teachers' understanding of students' needs and cognitive development, as well as in the development of effective instructional strategies (Schutz et al., 2020; Sun & Zhang, 2024). In this sense, beliefs serve as a foundation for everyday pedagogical decision-making. Therefore, examining teachers' beliefs is essential for understanding how meaningful learning is enacted in classroom contexts.

Previous studies have explored aspects of teachers' beliefs regarding curriculum transformation (Mustofa et al., 2023) and their influence on pedagogical practices in elementary education (Hidayah et al., 2023). However, in-depth investigations into how teachers' beliefs shape pedagogical practices at the elementary level remain limited. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore teachers' lived experiences, aiming to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their beliefs and how these are enacted in practices that support meaningful learning.

This study is expected to offer both conceptual and practical contributions. Conceptually, it extends the literature on teachers' beliefs by elucidating how such beliefs are formed, developed, and translated into pedagogical practices that foster meaningful learning in elementary education. Practically, the findings may inform teacher professional development by emphasizing not only technical competencies but also reflective processes and belief transformation, thereby promoting more effective, reflective, and meaningful teaching practices.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative design using a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is a method used to understand a phenomenon within a particular context (Musfiqon, 2012). Through this approach, the study seeks to explore, interpret, and construct meanings regarding teachers' beliefs and pedagogical practices in elementary schools in Bandung. This perspective is

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supported by Creswell (2015, p. 51), who emphasizes that phenomenology focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences regarding a particular concept or phenomenon, including aspects of self-concept.

The participants consisted of ten elementary school teachers, both from public and private schools, selected purposively based on the following criteria: (a) having more than ten years of teaching experience and (b) being recognized for their high level of professional dedication. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and supporting documents. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, lasting approximately 40–50 minutes; all sessions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Participant observation was carried out to directly examine teachers' pedagogical practices in classroom settings, while supporting documents, such as lesson plans, were used to corroborate the data.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving processes of coding, categorization, and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed data triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing, supported by an audit trail. Reflexivity was also maintained to minimize researcher bias. Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent, confidentiality of participants' data, and formal permission from the participating schools.

3. Results

Based on in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of supporting documents, several themes were identified representing teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning and their implications for meaningful learning practices.

Theme 1. teacher–student relationships as the foundation of meaningful learning

Overall, teachers emphasized the importance of building positive relationships with students, in which teachers may take on roles as parents, friends, or older siblings. The findings indicate that warm and supportive emotional relationships create positive learning experiences, as students feel valued and cared for, contributing to a more comfortable learning environment. These relationships also foster students' motivation and self-confidence. As expressed by Participant 1,

> *"...Even though I am firm, I still maintain a close relationship with my students, because my firmness is grounded in care."*

This suggests that teacher–student relationships are not merely about emotional closeness but also about balancing firmness and care. Beyond serving as a foundation for meaningful learning, relational closeness also functions as an instructional diagnosis. Teachers utilize daily interactions to better understand students' learning conditions and needs. As noted by Participant 2,

> *"...Sometimes I know a student doesn't understand not from their scores, but from how they stay silent or hesitate when asked."*

This is supported by classroom observations showing that teachers frequently approach passive students. Reflective notes further indicate that interpersonal approaches are used to identify learning difficulties contextually. Additionally, teaching practices are shaped by teachers' personal experiences. P3 stated, "I teach the way I wished to be taught, so, I tend to listen more to

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my students." This highlights how past experiences inform teachers' beliefs and pedagogical practices.

Theme 2. knowledge construction based on prior experience

Participants consistently emphasized that meaningful learning emerges when new knowledge is intentionally connected to students' prior experiences and understandings. Based on teachers' lived experiences, learning is perceived as most effective when students are given opportunities to recall, share, and reflect on what they already know before being introduced to new concepts. Teachers described this approach as a way of "entering students' worlds," making learning more accessible and relevant.

During the interviews, several teachers explained that they intentionally begin lessons with open-ended questions, personal stories, or real-life situations that are closely related to students' daily lives to activate prior knowledge. One participant explained that they start lessons by inviting students to share everyday experiences related to the topic, such as observations at home, in the surrounding environment, or from prior learning. For example, participant 3 describes the following practice:

> *...At the beginning of a science and social studies lesson on environmental change, I initiated the lesson by posing open-ended questions related to students' daily experiences, such as: "Have you ever noticed changes in the environment around your home, such as fewer trees, more buildings, or changes in the weather? What changes have you observed?" Students were then given time to think and encouraged to share their observations freely based on their own experiences.*
>
> *When students responded, I followed up with further open-ended questions such as "Why do you think these changes occur?" and "How do these changes affect humans, animals, or plants around you?" Through these questions, students were guided to reflect on the relationship between human activities and environmental conditions.*
>
> *After gathering students' ideas, I introduced concepts related to human–environment interaction by integrating scientific and social perspectives.*

This pedagogical practice explicitly connects students' responses to the lesson content and explains that environmental change is influenced by natural processes and human activities. In this way, students' prior experiences become the foundation for constructing new knowledge, allowing learning to occur actively and meaningfully rather than through passive information delivery.

Theme 3. adapting strategies to diverse student needs

Teaching practices must be flexible and responsive to classroom dynamics, which often arise from differences in students' abilities, learning pace, and special needs. The findings indicate that teachers make various adjustments to accommodate diverse learning needs. These adjustments include providing additional time for students who have not yet understood the material. Participants 2, 3, 8, and 10 state,

> *"...If there are students who do not understand, I usually spend more time guiding them."*

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In addition, written and visual media are used to support students with specific needs. As expressed by Participants 6 and 9,

"...I use more text and images so that all students can follow the lesson."

Classroom observations reinforced this finding by showing that visual aids were used during instruction. Teachers also utilize peer support as a learning strategy. Participant 7 explains,

"I ask students who already understand to help their peers."

This collaborative interaction was evident in group activities observed in the classroom. Furthermore, various instructional approaches, such as project-based, discovery, and problem-based learning, are used to enhance student engagement. Participant 1 notes,

"...I use projects or real-world problems to make students more active."

These findings also highlight flexibility in curriculum implementation. Learning is not solely about completing the material but about ensuring students' understanding. Participant 4 emphasizes,

"...What matters is that students understand, not just that the material is finished."

Theme 4. teachers' beliefs in students' potential

Teachers demonstrated a strong belief in the potential of every student and consistently rejected negative labeling such as "failure," "stupid," or "incapable." They viewed each child as capable of developing according to their individual abilities, as reflected in Participant 2's statement,

"...There are no unintelligent children; they simply need different ways of learning."

This belief was enacted through the consistent use of positive affirmations during the learning process. Participant 4 notes,

"I always tell them, 'You can do it,' so they become more confident."

Classroom observations further reveal that teachers actively provided verbal encouragement, including to students experiencing learning difficulties.

In addition, teachers recognized that students follow different learning paths and progress at varying paces. Participant 5 explains, *"All children can reach the goal; they just need different amounts of time. Our role as teachers is to support them throughout the process."* Participant 2 also adds that they occasionally included motivational notes in students' assessed work to signal the teacher's continuous presence and support.

These perspectives indicate that teachers position themselves not only as knowledge transmitters but also as consistent sources of support for all students, without discrimination. Such beliefs form a critical foundation for meaningful learning, as teachers not only deliver content but

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also foster motivation and students' self-awareness. This finding highlights that teachers' beliefs play a crucial role in creating a learning environment that supports students' holistic development.

Theme 5. teachers' beliefs and learning innovation

Teachers' beliefs in students' potential drive the emergence of learning innovations that are not merely methodological but also adaptive and reflective. This indicates that teaching is not solely focused on applying various engaging methods; rather, teachers continuously evaluate and adjust their approaches based on students' responses throughout the learning process.

Participant 8 emphasizes that teachers must be sensitive and responsive to classroom conditions. When a particular method proves ineffective, teachers need to consider alternative approaches to enhance students' understanding of the subject matter. This perspective is grounded in the belief that every student can develop when provided with appropriate instructional strategies.

Another significant finding is that teachers perceive mistakes as an essential part of the learning process. Participants 2 and 3 express similar views, noting that when students make errors, they are not immediately judged; instead, they are guided to identify and reflect on their mistakes. This approach not only strengthens conceptual understanding but also fosters students' self-awareness, enabling them to recognize their strengths and weaknesses and work toward improvement.

Classroom observations further reveal that teachers create opportunities for students to try, fail, and improve, thereby fostering a safe and supportive learning environment where failure is accepted as part of growth. All participating teachers agreed that learning should promote active student engagement and be contextual, closely connected to students' everyday lives. Learning, therefore, becomes a process of linking knowledge with personal experiences, life values, and practical skills.

Overall, these findings indicate that learning innovation is not simply about adopting new methods but rather a dynamic process rooted in teachers' beliefs about students' potential, the importance of the learning process, and the need to create relevant, reflective, and sustainable learning experiences.

4. Discussion

The research findings indicate that meaningful learning emerges from a complex interaction of teachers' beliefs that shape pedagogical practices characterized as relational, constructive, adaptive, and innovative. Teacher–student relationships function as strategic pedagogical mechanisms. Warm and empathetic relationships, combined with appropriate firmness, create a psychologically safe environment that encourages active student engagement. Viewed through the lens of the ethic of care (Noddings, 1984), these findings reinforce the notion that care is not merely a moral value but a pedagogical practice with a direct impact on students' motivation and self-confidence. This is further supported by Xu et al. (2025), who demonstrate that learning success is rooted not only in strategies and instructional media but also in the quality of teacher–student relationships. This aligns with broader evidence on teacher-student relationship quality and student outcomes (Cardenal et al., 2024; García-Rodríguez et al., 2023; Mammadov, 2024; Sun, 2021; Zee & Koomen, 2024). Moreover, the finding that relationships serve as a means of learning diagnosis extends Vygotsky's (1978) perspective, suggesting that social interaction functions not only to promote cognitive development but also as a tool for understanding students' learning needs contextually. Thus, teacher–student relationships operate both as a psychological foundation and as a diagnostic instrument in learning through interpersonal interaction.

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From the perspective of knowledge construction, learning is understood as a continuous and contextual process. It is not limited to knowledge transmission; it also involves how knowledge is understood, interpreted, and connected to real-life experiences. The emphasis on students' prior experiences affirms the relevance of meaningful learning theory (Ausubel, 1968) and constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1952). However, this study contributes a contextual perspective by showing that the practice of "entering students' worlds" goes beyond activating prior knowledge; it also bridges academic concepts with students' lived realities. Previous studies have demonstrated that constructivist approaches enhance active classroom engagement and produce stronger conceptual understanding than rote learning, thereby supporting the principles of deep learning (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014; Hattie, 2009; Nxasana et al., 2023).

Another notable finding is that flexibility emerges as an essential principle of teaching. In practice, differentiation is not always formally structured but often occurs incidentally and responsively to classroom dynamics. Teachers act as adaptive decision-makers, adjusting strategies based on students' real needs, such as providing additional time, using varied instructional media, and employing peer tutoring. This suggests that flexibility is not merely a methodological choice but a manifestation of teachers' beliefs about diverse abilities and learning pace. Such practices have been shown to improve academic achievement (Asriadi et al., 2023; Pozas et al., 2021) and strengthen students' intrinsic motivation (Ismail & Al Allaq, 2019; Pozas et al., 2021).

The findings also highlight that teachers' beliefs about students' potential have significant implications for the creation of supportive learning environments. The rejection of negative labeling and the consistent use of positive affirmations reflect high yet realistic expectations. From the perspective of the self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) and self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997), such attitudes contribute to increased student confidence and motivation. Teachers are positioned not only as knowledge providers but also as figures who consistently accompany students on their developmental journeys. Consequently, teachers' beliefs form the foundation for building inclusive, reflective, and growth-oriented classroom cultures.

Finally, the study reveals that instructional innovation represents a concrete manifestation of teachers' beliefs. Innovation extends beyond the adoption of new methods and includes reflective and adaptive capacities in responding to learning situations. Practices such as viewing mistakes as part of the learning process and providing opportunities for students to try and fail signal a shift from outcome-oriented to process-oriented learning. Within the framework of teacher agency (Biesta et al., 2015), these findings affirm that pedagogical creativity is rooted in teachers' beliefs about students' potential. Teachers who hold positive beliefs tend to be more innovative in designing learning experiences, which, in turn, foster adaptive practices and enhance students' motivation and autonomy (Nxasana et al., 2023; Tondeur et al., 2017).

Overall, the findings underscore that teachers' beliefs function not only as a conceptual framework but also as a transformative force shaping how teachers build relationships, design instruction, respond to diversity, and foster innovation. Therefore, improving educational quality should focus not only on curriculum and methods but also on strengthening and reflecting on teachers' beliefs as the core of meaningful pedagogical practice.

5. Conclusion and implications

This study underscores that teachers' beliefs constitute a foundational basis for shaping pedagogical practices oriented toward meaningful learning experiences. The findings reveal that

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teacher–student relationships, knowledge construction based on prior experience, differentiated instruction, positive expectations, and innovation are not discrete elements; rather, they are interconnected within a coherent system of pedagogical beliefs. In this framework, teachers' beliefs function as a generative mechanism that bridges affective (relationships and motivation), cognitive (knowledge construction), and instructional (strategies and innovation) dimensions of teaching and learning. Furthermore, in the context of elementary education in Indonesia, this study makes a contextual contribution by demonstrating that meaningful learning practices emerge through relational, adaptive, and reflective approaches rather than being solely grounded in formal instructional models.

The implications of these findings underscore the need for greater collaboration among policymakers, school leaders, and educators to advance teacher professional development. Such development should extend beyond technical competencies to include structured reflection on teachers' beliefs as a foundation for pedagogical practice. Strengthening school cultures that promote collaboration, reflective dialogue, and professional learning communities is therefore essential to fostering contextualized and student-centered learning practices (UNESCO, 2017).

6. Limitation

This study has several limitations. Methodologically, the participants were selected from highly dedicated teachers, which may limit the representativeness of the findings across broader teacher populations. Therefore, future research is recommended to employ longitudinal designs to examine changes in teachers' beliefs over time and to incorporate quantitative approaches for comparative analysis.

Credit authorship contribution statement

First Author: Led the conceptualization of the study, managed data curation, and contributed to the overall development of the research design and manuscript. **Second authors**: Contributed to the research methodology, provided resources, and supported project administration throughout the study. **Third authors**: Conducted formal data analysis and were responsible for securing funding to support the research. **Fourth authors**: Assisted in data curation and were responsible for translating the manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest

We declare that we have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding Author upon reasonable request. Due to the inclusion of human participant data, the datasets are not publicly available in order to protect participants' privacy.

Ethical Declaration

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Parahyangan Catholic University. The research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards. All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the study and were informed about the purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained.

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Declaration of AI statement

The AI tool was used to support translation, develop the conceptual framework, and assist with various technical aspects of manuscript preparation, including language refinement and structural organization.

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