

## ROLE OF ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS FOR CHOOSING A KINDERGARTEN OR PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER PROFESSION

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**Abstract.** This study substantiates the importance of teachers' attitudes and beliefs in their professional activity. Their specificity as psychological constructs is examined, as well as the peculiarities of the relationship between them. Leading theoretical interpretations of the role of attitudes and beliefs in the teaching profession are presented. Based on the most widespread theories, a theoretical framework for their study in relation to students preparing to become kindergarten and/or primary teachers is built. An empirical study conducted among 58 students at the beginning of their training as kindergarten and/or primary teachers is presented. The methodological tool of the research is a freely developed essay „My Educational Philosophy“. An analysis of the content of the texts was made, analyzing the derived advertisements and beliefs according to 4 separate content categories. Conclusions are formulated regarding the structure of the respondents' attitudes and beliefs as a prerequisite for their future professional education.

*Keywords:* teachers' beliefs; teachers' attitudes; pedagogy students

Attitudes and beliefs are psychological constructs that are complexly determined by the cognitive and social experience of the individual, and are often dominated by emotions. In the psychological literature, attitudes and beliefs are viewed as independent constructs that influence aspects of human behavior, as well as in a certain causality.

Richardson defines beliefs as „concepts that an individual feels are true“ regardless of their objective validity. Pajares claims that „beliefs are the best indicators of the decisions individuals make throughout their lives.“ (Pajares, 1992). According to a number of relatively accepted definitions, beliefs have two main characteristics:

- they are subjective truths – they represent individual representations that the individual tends to believe to be objective and realistic;
- they are relatively stable – they are formed early in ontogenesis and tend to be self-sustaining, resisting change even in the face of apparent contradictions with time, training or experience (Pajares, 1992).

In the structure of personality, beliefs play an important role, as they guide perceptions and interpretations, predict behavior and decisions (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010), and are related to self-development and professional identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

Attitudes, in turn, are stable evaluative orientations towards an object, person, idea or event. They represent a complex system of cognitive, affective and behavioral elements that influence the behavior of the individual, but do not fully control it (Reid, 2018). They are considered as a functional component of the Self and a component of the individual's value system. Attitudes can be positive or negative (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Dzhonev, 1996). According to the popular ABC model, attitudes include three components: Affective (emotions), Behavioral (behavioral tendency) and Cognitive (beliefs). It is the cognitive component of attitudes that is interpreted as beliefs, i.e. beliefs are considered an immutable and significant part of attitudes (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

Katz linked the main functions of attitudes in the structure of personality to adaptation, ego protection, expression of values and cognition (Katz, 1960). Thus, they are of fundamental importance in guiding perceptions and interpretations, predicting behavior and decisions (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010), and have a determining relationship to self-development and professional identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

It can be summarized that attitudes and beliefs are in a certain causal relationship, which has a multilayered nonlinear structure. In general, it can be presented as follows:

- Beliefs are the consequences of a given behavior and shape the attitude, which – together with norms, serves to predict intention and behavior. They are deeper and more stable cognitive structures that give meaning to the world and serve as filters for perception, interpretation and action;

- Attitudes are more flexible, but also more direct indicators of readiness for action. They can be viewed as „clusters of beliefs” with an evaluative function, which express personal attitudes towards objects/phenomena, and predispose to certain behavior.

Many authors summarize the importance of attitudes and beliefs for personality development by emphasizing that beliefs structure identity and cognitive stability, while attitudes regulate emotional and social adaptation.

Undoubtedly, attitudes and beliefs are an essential part of a person's professional choices and subsequent professional activity. In the aspect of the teaching profession, the role of attitudes and beliefs has been examined by a number of researchers.

A classic view is that „teachers' beliefs influence their perceptions, judgments, and behavior in the classroom” and therefore understanding and studying their structure is “key to improving educational practice” (Pajares, 1992).

Other studies prove that there is a direct relationship between self-efficacy as a part of attitudes and teachers' work results: higher self-efficacy attitudes are associated with greater persistence, richer strategies, and better management (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001).

Epistemic beliefs lead to depth of teaching as more sophisticated epistemic beliefs correlate with more in-depth strategies and implementation of constructivist approaches (Nist & Holschuh, 2005).

There is also more specific research that unequivocally confirms the power of attitudes in the teaching profession. For example, positive attitudes towards inclusion lead to actual practices that are particularly effective if reinforced with available support and training. The opposite trend is also valid – without the presence of attitudes, there is more limited inclusive behavior (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

A number of empirical studies demonstrate a robust, albeit incomplete, relationship between attitudes and beliefs, with beliefs filtering attitudes and guiding routine pedagogical actions, and change often requiring targeted interventions and time (Pajares, 1992; Fives & Buehl, 2012).

Based on the analyses made, it can be summarized that beliefs and attitudes both have an independent influence and form a specific complex that determines the teacher's behavior and directs his professional activity. It can be assumed that beliefs are stable and permanent constructions, based mainly on the teacher's professional readiness, which influence attitudes. Attitudes – on their part, are active and emotionally determined constructions that directly influence the teacher's professional behavior in specific situations in the educational environment. That is why the study of attitudes and beliefs – both separately and in a complex, is an especially important aspect of the knowledge and development of teachers.

As complex personally and professionally determined constructs, teachers' beliefs and attitudes are not easy to study. On the one hand, the difficulties arise from the multidirectionality in which they manifest themselves, and on the other hand, from the very limited set of instruments that rely primarily on the self-assessment and reflection of the respondents (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Dimensions of teachers' beliefs and attitudes

Construct	Basic definition	Domains	Measurement examples
<b>Teacher beliefs</b>	„Filters through which new phenomena are interpreted; perceptions, judgments and behavior are shaped” (Pajares, 1992). Beliefs are deeper and more persistent („what I believe is true”).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– About children and students learning</li> <li>– About learning and teaching</li> <li>– About pedagogical approaches</li> <li>– About the content of education/ subjects</li> <li>– About oneself (self-efficacy)</li> <li>– Epistemic beliefs (about knowledge)</li> <li>– Context / educational policies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <b>TSES</b> (Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale, Tschannen-Moran &amp; Woolfolk Hoy, 2001)</li> <li>– Epistemic Belief Questionnaires (Hofer &amp; Pintrich, 1997)</li> <li>– Concept Maps, Reflective Journals</li> <li>– Using Reflection and Interviews to “Map” Beliefs</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher attitudes</b>	“A psychological tendency expressed by evaluating an object with some degree of approval/ disapproval” (Eagly & Chaiken, 2007) Attitudes are more direct evaluative orientations („like/ dislike”).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– To education and its specific aspects and philosophies (e.g. inclusion, assessment, constructivism, etc.)</li> <li>– To specific educational approaches, methods, forms, means (e.g. constructivism, interactivity, digitalization, etc.)</li> <li>– To children and students as individuals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Scales for measuring attitudes towards inclusion (Avramidis &amp; Norwich, 2002)</li> <li>– Locally adapted surveys on attitudes towards technology, assessment, etc.</li> <li>– Discussions and case studies</li> <li>– Reflection on personal examples (“How do I feel about...”)</li> </ul>
<b>Relationship between beliefs and attitudes</b>	Attitudes are often “clusters of beliefs” (Pajares, 1992). Beliefs filter attitudes and guide routine pedagogical actions (Pajares, 1992; Fives & Buehl, 2012).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Beliefs → basis (filter, frame)</li> <li>– Attitudes → behavioral impulse</li> <li>– Values → give normative force</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Theory of Planned Behavior (Fishbein &amp; Ajzen, 2010) – behavioral beliefs → attitudes → intentions → behavior</li> <li>– First clarify beliefs, then address attitudes</li> <li>– Interventions focus on experiences that can trigger both</li> </ul>

Despite the limitations mentioned, there is considerable experience in studying teachers' attitudes and beliefs. As can be seen, the reflexive approach is the most common in this type of research, and this is not accidental, since attitudes and beliefs are highly personal. Of course, there are also some objective instruments, such as the TSES (Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale), which indirectly validate teachers' attitudes and beliefs. It is also worth mentioning the theory of planned behavior, which is used as a theoretical basis for numerous empirical studies of teachers' attitudes and beliefs (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) (Table 1).

### **Methodology**

The aim of the empirical study is to identify the fundamental attitudes and beliefs of students who have chosen the profession of kindergarten and/or primary school teacher. At the time of the study, they are at the beginning of their studies – 1st year of the specialties “Primary School Pedagogy” and “Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy”. The study involved 58 bachelor students who are training as specialists with higher education for the first time.

The main research method is content analysis. The research tool includes an essay on the topic „My Educational Philosophy“. The essay is developed as an audience assignment within the classes of the discipline „Didactics“. The chosen research approach guarantees the authenticity of the judgments produced by the students within the essay, since the researcher's motives remain hidden from them.

### **Results**

Based on the theoretical generalizations, a structured quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the essays was conducted. Empirically, 4 categories for analysis were derived, which contain different numbers of meaningful statements – specifically isolated tendencies, distributed according to two separate criteria – beliefs and attitudes. In the course of the analysis, the connections were found, expressing the prototypical structure of the relationship “attitudes – beliefs” in the personality of future kindergarten/primary school teachers.

The result of the content analysis is presented in Table 2. It should be noted that in general, the category “beliefs” is less numerous than the category “attitudes” – 15 and 19 categories, respectively.

The first category derived is “Vision of modern education/school”. It contains the most categories of beliefs – 6, and attitudes – 9.

The second – „Teacher skills and competences”, contains 4 categories classified as beliefs and 5 – as attitudes.

The third category „Teacher image” contains an equal number of categories of beliefs and attitudes – 3 each.

The fourth category “Motivation for choosing the profession” is the poorest and contains 2 categories of beliefs and attitudes.

**Table 2.** Content analysis of the essay „My Educational Philosophy“

Content analyze categories	Specific statements/trends			
	F (%)	Beliefs	Attitudes	F (%)
Vision for modern education/ school	58 (100%)	Education is a vocation/mission, not just a profession	Education instills values (respect, empathy, kindness)	46 (79%)
	58 (100%)	Education builds not only knowledge, but also personality/ character		
	58 (100%)	Each child is unique, with their own potential	Individual approach	44 (76%)
	54 (93%)	Learning is an experience	Learning through experience, creativity, discovery	51 (88%)
	50 (86%)	Education should be applicable and related to life	Interactive methods (discussions, conversations, dialogues, game methods)	58 (100%)
			Constructivist approach	56 (97%)
			Project-based learning	10 (66%)
			Digital technology	35 (60%)
			Group learning	32 (55%)
	41 (71%)	The school is a community, not a factory for grades	Cooperation with children, students, colleagues, parents	42 (72%)
Teacher skills and competence	58 (100%)	Empathy, patience, empathy	Balance between rigor and kindness	30 (52%)
	55 (95%)	Communication skills	Building trust	46 (79%)
	46 (79%)	Flexibility	Adapt to the child	50 (86%)
			Openness to innovation	43 (74%)
	36 (62%)	Lifelong Learning	Self-development	39 (67%)

<b>Teacher image</b>	54 (93%)	The teacher is a friend and support for children	Managing groups	29 (50%)
	52 (90%)	The teacher is a role model, example	Upbringing by personal example	49 (84%)
	49 (84%)	The teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor	The teacher learns together with the children	48 (83%)
<b>Motivation for choosing a profession</b>	58 (100%)	Love for children	Satisfaction from the development of the child/student	38 (66%)
	53 (91%)	Sense of meaning	Satisfaction from the successes of the child/student	51 (88%)

The content analysis of the derived categories of attitudes and beliefs was carried out according to three main criteria derived from the most common theoretical interpretations:

1. Content of attitudes and beliefs as independent personal-professional constructs – the indicators are the type, frequency and manifestation of attitudes and beliefs within the formulated content category.

2. Content of beliefs as filters of attitudes and guiding routine pedagogical actions – indicators are the number and specificity of attitudes based on certain beliefs.

3. Content of attitudes as „clusters of beliefs“ – indicators are the number and specificity of beliefs in the „cluster“ of a certain attitude.

From the data presented in Table 2, it can be seen that the strongest beliefs of teachers are located in three of the 4 categories, as follows:

– In the category „Vision for modern education/school“ – 3 beliefs, present in 100% of the essays:

- Education is a vocation/mission, not just a profession;
- Education builds not only knowledge, but also personality/character;
- Each child is unique, with their own potential;

– In the category “Teacher skills and competence” – 1 belief, present in 100% of the essays: Empathy, patience, empathy;

– In the category “Motivation for choosing the profession” – 1 belief, present in 100% of the essays: Love for children.

The attitudes are not as categorically expressed, which is normal given their larger number and evaluative nature. The only categorically expressed attitude is that of using interactive methods – various such methods are described in 58 essays or 100% of all surveyed students (Table 2).

Other significant attitudes are those for:

- Applying a constructivist approach in education – indirectly observed in statements in 56 essays or 97% of the surveyed students;
- Achieving satisfaction from the child/student's successes – mentioned in 51 essays or by 88% of the respondents;
- Learning through experience, creativity, discovery – described in 51 essays or by 88% of the surveyed.

Based on the theoretical concept that „beliefs are filters for attitudes”, from the data presented in Table 2, it can be seen that several significant trends stand out.

The belief that *education should be applicable and related to life* „filters“ numerous attitudes towards the application of various modern approaches, methods and forms of learning, which have the following structure in the ideas of future kindergarten/primary teachers:

- Teaching through interactive methods such as discussions, conversations, dialogues, game methods – indicated by 100% of respondents;
- Application of a constructivist approach – indicated by 97% of those surveyed;
- Application of project-based learning – directly or indirectly described by 66% of the participants in the study;
- Integration of digital technologies in the educational process – an attitude described by 60% of the students surveyed
- Application of group learning – indicated in 55% of the essays.

On the other hand, two beliefs described by all respondents, namely that *education is a vocation/mission, not just a profession and builds not only knowledge, but also personality/character*, although they may indirectly refer to other attitudes, actually filter one basic attitude – that through education values such as respect, empathy, kindness are cultivated (Table 2).

Besides the belief that *education should be applicable and related to life*, just one more thing – that *flexibility* is a basic quality of a modern teacher – filters more than one attitude, but there are only two of them (Table 2).

It can be summarized that professional beliefs are not yet sufficiently cognitively interiorized in future teachers to be able to filter a variety of attitudes, which in turn provoke full and effective professional behavior. This means that the observed trends are due to the primary ideas of the first-year students about the teaching profession, and not to stable cognitive constructs.

Starting from the theoretical premise that „attitudes are clusters of beliefs”, based on the results obtained from the content analysis, several groups can be formed, explaining the state of the “attitudes – beliefs” relationship of future kindergarten and/or primary school teachers. This theoretical concept also assumes that within a professional field – in this case the teaching profession, one attitude will be based on more than one belief. Within the framework of the presented study, it can be expected that the cluster of one attitude will include

beliefs from more than one category, or from categories different from the one to which the attitude refers.

The results obtained provide grounds for distinguishing the following clusters of beliefs in relation to certain specifically derived attitudes:

Attitude towards *cooperation with children, students, colleagues, parents* – 9 beliefs: *education is a vocation/mission, not just a profession; each child is unique, with their own potential; the school is a community, not a factory for grades; empathy, patience, empathy; communication skills; flexibility; the teacher is a friend and support for children; the teacher is a role model, example; the teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor; sense of meaning.*

Attitude towards *building trust* (with students/children, parents) – 9 beliefs: *education is a vocation/mission, not just a profession; the school is a community, not a factory for grades; empathy, patience, empathy; communication skills; the teacher is a friend and support for children; the teacher is a role model, example; the teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor; love for children; sense of meaning.*

Attitude that *education instills values (respect, empathy, kindness)* – 8 beliefs: *education is a vocation/mission, not just a profession; education builds not only knowledge, but also personality/character; each child is unique, with their own potential; school is a community, not a factory for grades; the teacher must have skills for empathy, patience, empathy; the teacher is a friend and support for children; love for children; a sense of meaning.*

Attitude to *apply an individual approach* – 8 beliefs: *each child is unique, with their own potential; flexibility; empathy, patience, empathy; education builds not only knowledge, but also personality/character; empathy, patience, empathy; communication skills; the teacher is a role model, an example; the teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor; love for children.*

Attitude to *achieve a balance between rigor and kindness* (in upbringing) – 8 beliefs: *education is a vocation/mission, not just a profession; education builds not only knowledge, but also personality/character; school is a community, not a factory for grades; empathy, patience, sympathy; the teacher is a friend and support for children; the teacher is a role model, example; the teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor; love for children.*

Attitude that *the teacher learns together with the children* – 7 beliefs: *learning is an experience; empathy, patience, sympathy; lifelong learning; the teacher is a friend and support for children; the teacher is a role model, example; the teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor; love for children.*

Attitude to *upbringing by personal example* – 6 beliefs: *education is a vocation/mission, not just a profession; education builds not only knowledge, but also personality/character; the school is a community, not a factory for grades; the teacher is a role model, an example; the teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor; love for children.*

Attitude to achieve *satisfaction from the development of the child/student* – 6 beliefs: *education is a vocation/mission, not just a profession; education builds not only knowledge, but also personality/character; each child is unique, with their own potential; the teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor; love for children; a sense of meaning.*

Attitude to achieve *satisfaction from the successes of the child/student* – 5 beliefs: *education is a vocation/mission, not just a profession; the school is a community, not a factory for grades; the teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor; love for children; a sense of meaning.*

Attitude to *self-development* – 5 beliefs: *flexibility; lifelong learning; the teacher is a role model, an example; the teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor; sense of meaning.*

Attitude for *managing groups* – 5 beliefs: *the teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor; empathy, patience, empathy; communication skills; the teacher is a friend and support for children; the teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor.*

Attitude for *provoking learning through experience, creativity, discovery* – 5 beliefs: *learning is an experience; the school is a community, not a factory for grades; communication skills; flexibility; the teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor.*

Attitude for *implementing a constructivist approach* in education – 4 beliefs: *learning is an experience; education must be applicable and related to life; communication skills; the teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor.*

Attitude for *implementing group learning* – 4 beliefs: *education must be applicable and related to life; empathy, patience, empathy; communication skills; the teacher is a leader, inspirer, mentor.*

Attitude to *adapt* (professional activity) *to the child* – 4 beliefs: *education builds not only knowledge, but also personality/character; each child is unique, with their own potential; flexibility; the teacher is a friend and support for children.*

Attitude to *apply interactive methods in teaching children and students* – 3 beliefs: *learning is an experience; communication skills; flexibility.*

Attitude to *apply project-based learning* – 3 beliefs: *learning is an experience; education must be applicable and related to life; communication skills.*

Attitude towards *digital technologies* (in education) – 3 beliefs: *education should be applicable and related to life; flexibility; lifelong learning.*

Attitude of *openness to innovation* – 3 beliefs: *flexibility; lifelong learning; the teacher is a leader, an inspirer, a mentor.*

From the analysis, it can be said that the strongest attitudes of future kindergarten and primary school teachers are related to the skills of building and managing a cohesive and collaborative community, individual approach to each child/student, and achieving a balance between rigor and positivism in education.

## **Conclusion**

The teaching profession is distinguished from most other professions in that it is experienced by those who choose it, even before they are fully prepared for it. Kindergarten and school are an essential part of the sociocultural experience of the child/student, and the work of the teacher is actively experienced by children and students through the prism of expected behavior and received attitude.

The respondents of this study are students who are studying to become teachers immediately or shortly after completing their school education. They have developed attitudes and beliefs about the teaching profession based on their experience as students and probably apply in their essays desired and/or experienced trends in education and the role of the teacher in it. It can be summarized that the essays express a clear trend towards a humanistic and student-centered educational philosophy, in which the teacher is not only a bearer of knowledge, but also an inspirer, partner and role model. The main part of the essays emphasizes the need for competencies related to empathy, adaptability and the ability to build a supportive environment. Education itself is viewed as a process of personal development, not as mechanical learning.

From the judgments generated in the essays, the emotional element is predominant in the attitudes derived, and the beliefs are based primarily on ideas, rather than on firmly established cognitive structures. The conclusions drawn are grounds for confirming that at the beginning of their professional training, future kindergarten and primary teachers are emotionally motivated and understand the current dimensions of the teaching profession, albeit in a primarily naive way. Their expectations are to receive professional training corresponding to the modern educational paradigm.

The study provides valuable information for future interventions through which to shape an effective profile of future kindergarten and/or primary teachers.

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