

# The relationship between the prior school lives of adult educators and their beliefs about teaching adults

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Research in the K-12 field about teaching beliefs reveals that past school experiences have a tremendous influence on educators' present beliefs about teaching. However, little research exists regarding the nature of teaching beliefs of adult educators, particularly how their prior school experiences relate to their present beliefs about teaching adults. It was the purpose of this qualitative study involving 16 practising adult educators to understand the relationship of their early school lives and their present beliefs about teaching adults. Findings reveal that: (a) past positive teacher models mirror present descriptions of ideal teachers and present descriptions of self as a teacher; (b) past positive teaching experiences are about making the act of imparting knowledge more engaging and interesting; (c) past positive learning experiences relate to present conceptions of learning; (d) past conceptions of self as a student reflect present expectations of adult students; and (e) past cultural experiences are reflected in present descriptions of adult students. The implications of this study are significant because teaching beliefs of adult educators seem rooted in school experiences as a child or young adult and they begin to undermine the assumption that the teaching of adults is different from the teaching of children.

## Introduction

At the beginning of each school year, a new group of students enters the graduate programme in adult education where I teach. Part of my approach in getting to know them is having them spend time talking not only about who they are, but also writing about and discussing what they believe is important about the teaching and learning of adults. Regardless of teaching experience, all them arrive with a host of established beliefs about teaching. These beliefs are reflected in a range of statements, for example: the importance of treating all students with respect; the importance of teaching from the text; the significance of providing experiential activities in class; and the dislike of unmotivated and non-self-directed students. As these new students share stories of their practice, it also becomes apparent that, like many adult educators, they entered the practice of teaching adults by 'falling into' the position, instead of through career planning or as result of some childhood aspirations. In addition, most have had no formal educational training in the practice of teaching. For many, attending a graduate programme in adult

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education is their first formal experience about the study of teaching and learning of adults. Despite their lack of study, all the students seem to express well-established beliefs about the teaching of adults. This raises questions of where these graduate students acquired their beliefs about teaching. And what about their past school life contributed to their belief development?

Before discussing the origin of teaching beliefs, it is important to note that beliefs, along with contextual factors, play a significant role in determining how individuals organize knowledge and information and are essential to helping them adapt, understand and make sense of themselves and their world (Schommer 1990, Richardson 1994). Defined by anthropologists and social psychologists as strong personal propositions, beliefs—whether consciously or unconsciously held—are used for assessing, guiding and supporting an individual's decision-making and actions (Richardson 1996). When looking at the literature in the field of adult education, there have been a handful of studies published in the last decade that highlight the significance of beliefs about teaching adults and how they influence and shape practice (Dirkx and Spurgin 1992, Pratt 1992, 1998, Creeson and Dean 2000, Taylor *et al.* 2001, Taylor 2002). What this research has shown is that adult teaching 'beliefs and values are not minor, they are fundamental. They provide the submerged "bulk of the iceberg" upon which any particular [teaching] technique rests' (Pratt 1998: 16). Despite the significance of this work, there has been no exploration into the origin of teaching beliefs of adult educators and their relationship to present conceptions about teaching adults (Taylor 1999).

Some understanding of the origin of teaching beliefs and their relationship to practice can be found within the research in the K-12 field (early childhood through secondary education). Studies in this field have found teaching beliefs to be well established before individuals enter a teacher education programme, as the result of learning experiences as children and students (Lortie 1975, Anning 1988, Knowles 1992, Pajares 1992, Fang 1996, Richardson 1996, Sugrue 1996, Marvin *et al.* 1998). Early teaching beliefs are found in the natural development from childhood as a learner to parent as a teacher and in the socialization factor of spending thousands of hours in the classroom exposed to a variety of different teachers (Nemser 1983). Britzman (1986: 443) suggest that all teachers bring to their teaching experience 'implicit institutional biographies—the cumulative experience of school lives—which, in turn, inform their knowledge of the student's world, of school structure and of the curriculum. All this contributes to well-worn and commonsensical images of the teacher's work and serves as the frame of reference for prospective teacher self-images. In addition, the origin of teaching beliefs and their relationship to practice has been found to be quite significant in the training of future teachers. Research has shown that ignoring beliefs about teaching in the process of promoting change in practice frequently leads to disappointing results (Richardson 1994, 1996). Unlike future doctors and lawyers—who come to their professional training relatively unaware of, and unskilled in their inevitable responsibilities—future educators already have a well-developed sense of a teacher's responsibilities and roles in the classroom.

The research in the K-12 field would seem to imply strongly that understanding the origin of students' teaching beliefs and how they relate to practice are quite significant. Furthermore, graduate students' lack of a formal education in the practice of teaching adults, in conjunction with teaching beliefs rooted in their prior experiences of being taught as a child and/or adolescent, and having to teach

in a setting where their students are often adults, peers like themselves, raises a number of provocative questions. Can it be assumed that beliefs about teaching adults are rooted in prior school experiences similar to those of K-12 educators'? If so, does this mean that these graduate students' beliefs about teaching adults are based on their past experiences of being taught as a child or young adolescent? If not, where and how did they develop different beliefs about teaching adults?

One of the first steps to developing a better understanding of teaching beliefs of adult educators is to begin exploring beliefs in conjunction with the educators' prior school lives as children and adolescents. More specifically, it means asking several questions about how their early personal history as students relates to their present conception of teaching adults. For example, what is the relationship with adult educators' past significant teachers and how they presently teach adults? Also, how did their early learning experiences in school relate to their present conceptions about how adults learn? And, what is the relationship between their own experience as young students and their present expectations of their adult students?

By examining the prior school lives of adult educators, along with their present beliefs about teaching adults, a window can be opened into how their early school experiences of teaching and learning contributed to the development of their present beliefs about teaching adults. It can also help identify significant prior educational experiences for exploration and critical reflection by students and teachers in the preparation of future adult educators. With this understanding, adult educators, like K-12 educators, can gain greater control over their practice through a deeper awareness of how their present beliefs evolved and why change is difficult when exposed to new practices and approaches about teaching adults. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between the prior school lives of adult educators and their present beliefs about teaching adults.

### **Conceptual framework**

For the purposes of this study, teaching beliefs are conceptualized within Pratt's (1998: 21) research on teaching perspectives. Pratt has given the most significant attention to teaching beliefs in the adult education field. He sees beliefs as the defining attribute of teaching perspectives, whereby they 'represent the most stable and least flexible aspect of a person's perspective on teaching'. Even though they are not static, but characteristically complex and evolving, he finds a strong link between a teacher's action in the classroom and his or her core beliefs (e.g. those most central to that person's values) about teaching. He has identified three types of beliefs fundamental to a perspective on teaching: epistemic beliefs (views of knowledge, learning, evaluation), normative beliefs (views of roles, responsibilities and relationships in teaching) and procedural beliefs (tactical and strategic intentions in teaching). Epistemic beliefs about teaching are concerned with the 'why?' behind what they choose and how they teach. Bringing these beliefs to the fore means having teachers explore questions such as, what do they want their students to learn and how do they believe students learn the content of the course? Normative beliefs, on the other hand, focus on the social norms of a teacher's roles, responsibilities and relationships with students and others. Understanding these beliefs means asking questions of teachers about what they see as their primary role as a teacher and what responsibilities are associated with that role. Lastly,

procedural beliefs are focused on tactical skill and strategic beliefs, managing the how and when of actions in the classroom and the justification of those actions. Exploring these belief means asking teachers, for example, how they introduce a new concept in class and what their justification is for this particular approach? These three belief structures form a comprehensive and interconnected framework for understanding the beliefs of adult educators.

Along with Pratt's framework for understanding belief structures, Mezirow (2000) and Cranton's (1994) work on transformative learning provides insight into the early development of belief structures. Mezirow, like Pratt, sees meaning-making shaped by an established belief system, a frame of reference that is a product of early life experiences. Cranton (1994: 26) states that it evolves 'from the way we grew up, the culture in which we live, and what we have previously learned'. A frame of reference is comprised of meaning schemes, which 'are sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes and judgements that tacitly direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, typify objects and attribute causality' (Mezirow 2000: 5). Meaning schemes—indicative of beliefs about teaching and learning—develop as the result of early life and school experiences. Conceptually, these beliefs established early in an individual's life will continue to perpetuate, even as they enter the practice of teaching adults. A first step of helping adult educators develop new beliefs about teaching adults could be better understood by exploring the relationship between their present beliefs about teaching adults and their prior school lives.

### **Literature review**

Research on teaching beliefs has centred predominantly on understanding beliefs of prospective K-12 teachers (early childhood through high school education) prior to the advent of formal training in the teaching profession. Nemser (1983) identified three accounts of pervasive experiences indicative of early influences on learning to teach. They include an evolutionary, a psychoanalytic and a sociological account of basic pedagogical predispositions in teachers. An evolutionary account recognizes that the survival of human beings has persisted because of their inherent nature to teach and share with others about life and living. This predisposition continues to persist, so that children not only learn what they are taught by parents and teachers, but they learn to be teachers as well. Further, researchers like Stephens (1967) found these influences to be far more powerful than present teacher-education efforts. A psychoanalytic account of how childhood makes a teacher is explained by the process of identification with significant former teachers. Often, there is a conscious identification with past teachers who play an important and formative role in shaping the child's view of teaching and learning. A sociological account recognizes the role of being a student and how it contributes to learning how to teach: 'Teacher socialization occurs through the internalization (largely unconscious) of teaching models during the thousands of hours prospective teachers spend as students in close contact with teachers' (Zeichner and Tabachnick 1981: 8). In Lortie's (1975) classic sociological study of schoolteachers, he found that teachers consistently acknowledge the influence of former teachers in shaping their practice. Furthermore, even though many recognize the influence of former teachers:

many are probably influenced in ways they do not perceive. In the press of classroom interaction, teachers end up imitating internalized models of past practice, (e.g., doing what their second-grade teacher did when the children got restless). (Lortie 1975: 153)

As a student begins formal instruction in teaching, these latent beliefs are activated and become a major influence in shaping his or her perspective of the role of a teacher in the classroom.

In a more current review of the teaching belief literature, Richardson (1996: 105) identified three overlapping forms of experience that contribute to the development of beliefs and knowledge about teaching. The first is personal experience, illustrated predominantly through case studies of teachers, which includes 'aspects of life that go into the formation of world view; intellectual and virtuous dispositions; beliefs about self in relation to others; understanding of the relationship of schooling to society; and other forms of personal, familial, and cultural understandings'. The second, and most relevant to this study, is teachers' direct experiences from their own previous schooling and instruction. In particular, the most significant formative school experience 'is the student's exposure to different teacher models prior to student teaching' (Pruitt and Lee 1978: 69). Studies have shown that when student teachers are asked to describe a good teacher, and in the same survey asked to describe their favourite teachers from their past, these teachers are essentially found to be the same. The third experience that shapes teaching beliefs is the experience with formal knowledge. This knowledge includes both the development of beliefs about particular subject matter as well as various pedagogical practices. Other studies have shown that the conception of the subject matter held by the teacher had a strong impact on the development of that person's ideas about planning classroom instruction and curriculum (Lenhardt 1988). Another type of formal knowledge is pedagogical knowledge, which relates to the teacher's role and specific practices, such as a methods course given to pre-service teachers. This form of pedagogical knowledge has been found to be one of the least powerful factors in shaping beliefs about teaching (Richardson 1996).

From this review of the K-12 literature, teaching beliefs seem deeply rooted in prior personal and school lives, and are well developed before prospective teachers begin work in the classroom. However, when looking in the field of adult education, what research there is focuses predominantly on how beliefs influence the teaching of adults, with nothing reported of how past school lives of adult educators are related to their present beliefs about teaching adults (Taylor 1999). What the research demonstrates is that beliefs are significant in influencing an adult educator's practice (Dirkx and Spurgin 1992, Pratt 1992, 1998, Taylor *et al.* 2001). In addition, a number of other related findings are worth mentioning from the few studies that have been completed. Teaching beliefs of adult educators have been found to be culturally bounded, and also framed by political perspectives, social values and different ways of knowing (Pratt 1992). They also seem to be strongly reflective of and influenced by the discipline from which an educator instructs. Dirkx *et al.* (1999) found that teachers 'approach curriculum integration largely through the lens of their respective disciplines, a position which both reinforces and is reinforced by the organizational structures within which they practice' (1999: 99). Also, there is a high degree of consistency between espoused

beliefs about teaching and how beliefs manifest in practice. This internal consistency seems to provide the adult educators with a sense of logic and control over their teaching (Taylor *et al.* 2000). It is apparent that adult educators, like K-12 teachers, gradually develop a 'personal cohesive pedagogical system that they support without reservation' (Kagan 1992: 85).

### Methodology

The methodological design of this study involved an interpretive qualitative orientation where the researcher explored the relationship of adult educators' prior school experiences and their present beliefs about teaching adults. In interpretive research, 'education is considered to be a process and going to school is a lived experience. Understanding the meaning of the process or experience constitutes the knowledge to be gained from an inductive, hypothesis-or theory generating (rather than a deductive or testing) mode of inquiry' (Merriam 1998: 4). The qualitative method allowed for a descriptive understanding of the participants' prior school lives, made up of significant learning events and memorable teachers and peers while they were students. These prior school experiences analysed in conjunction with a descriptive understanding of their present beliefs about teaching adults provided an excellent medium for exploring how past school experience might be related to present beliefs about teaching adults.

A purposeful sample of 16 adult educators was selected through the cooperation of several graduate programmes in adult education in the northeastern part of the USA, based on the following criteria: (a) each participant was currently teaching adults on a regular basis in some capacity in a group setting and (b) each had recently enrolled in a master's of adult education graduate programme within the last year. This sample included both men and women who teach in a variety of adult education settings, such as computer instruction, bank employee training, adult literacy, continuing professional development for nurses, adult basic education in corrections, quality management training, and community college instruction. All participants in the study were white, 11 were female and five were male. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the confidentiality of each participant in the study.

The primary method of data collection was two in-depth semi-structured interviews of 60–90 minutes in length with each of the 16 practicing adult educators. The first interview had a biographical emphasis, focusing on the past school lives of the participants and delving into significant educational experiences and descriptions of former teachers whom they remember as most formative to their early school experiences. The questions for the first interview were drawn from and modelled after several studies conducted in the K-12 field on the prior school lives of teachers (e.g. Lortie 1977, Richardson 1994). The second interview followed the first interview about 30–45 days later and involved the use of two interview prompts to help participants elicit teaching beliefs that at times operate outside the conscious awareness of the individual and to set up a more relevant context for the interview experience. One prompt was a 'photo-elicitation' technique, where photographs are put to use as an additional means for expressing beliefs about teaching adults. This technique is used with 'the express aim of exploring participants' values, beliefs, attitudes, and meanings and in order to trigger memories, or to explore group dynamics or systems' (Prosser 1998: 124). To

initiate the photo-elicitation technique, each individual was given a disposable camera during the first interview, with an assignment to photograph three visual images, that of a teacher, a student and learning. Participants were encouraged to make notes of their thoughts about the pictures soon after they were taken. Once the pictures were completed, the film, along with any notes, was returned to the researcher by mail to be developed before the second interview was conducted. During the second interview, the photographs were described by the participant (not interpreted by the researcher), helping them elicit their beliefs, for example, about the meaning of teaching, the role of the student and their understanding of learning (for a similar study using photography and beliefs structures, see Perka *et al.* 1992).

The second interview prompt used in the second interview involved the participants' lesson plans, course material and any other information that they used to organize and guide their teaching practice. These materials were explored and described by the participants in their discussion about how they planned and organized their teaching practice. These two prompts help set a more realistic context for exploring their beliefs about teaching and provided an opportunity to delve greater depth with additional questions about participant's beliefs of teaching adults. Many of the questions used in the second interview were drawn from Pratt's (1994) extensive work on the teaching beliefs of adult educators and Richardson's (1994) work with K-12 educators'.

The transcription of each interview was analysed using a constant comparative method. Each set of a participant's interviews, one focusing on the past school lives and the other involving their present teaching beliefs, were read and coded, with a specific focus on connections and repetitions between the two (Patton 1990). Data was bracketed and removed from the original transcript in order to view the data in their unique form, separating and identifying their essential elements. It was then organized into categories and themes, using a graphic organizer to display dominant themes that emerged from the interviews. Finally, these connections from the past to the present were expanded and refined into various categories to enhance their definition in an effort to illuminate the inter-relationship that exist, between prior school lives and present beliefs about teaching adults.

Lastly, it is important to talk about limitations associated with this study. Most significantly, past teaching experiences, particularly those long ago, are not completely static events that can be recalled unencumbered by present experience. Memories are constructed, whereby they can be shaped and influenced by present events as they are recalled (Schacter 1996). Therefore, it is important to recognize that as these adult educators described their past educational experiences, their memories are being constructed in relationship to their present experiences. A possible influence on the construction of their past school lives could be their recent enrolment in graduate school and their participation in a community of practice at the educational institution where they teach adults. To minimize these influences, participants were selected who had only recently enrolled in graduate school, such that it would lessen the influence. In addition, much time was spent during the initial interview exploring a variety of past school experiences, looking for consistency of meaning-making over time. For future research in this area, a possible technique to further address this concern of more accurately interpreting past experiences is incorporating past school photographs and memorabilia (if available) as an interview prompt in the exploration of past school lives.

## Findings

Five themes identifying a significant relationship between the past school experiences of the participants and their present beliefs about teaching adults emerged from the interviews. Each theme is discussed below and is supported with data from the interviews of the participants.

### *Past positive teacher models mirror present descriptions of ideal teachers and present descriptions of self as teacher*

This category illustrates how experiences with former significant positive teachers in elementary and secondary school played a significant role in shaping the present conceptions of not only an ideal teacher, but also a description of self as teacher. When discussing their past school experiences, the participants' discussion often centred around the teachers whom they remember as most significant to their learning as young children or adolescents. For example, in her first interview, Beth, a computer software trainer for a large corporation shared her description of two past elementary teachers:

My second-grade teacher, her name was Mrs Nunn. [She was] very, very polite. Very nice. And then my fifth-grade teacher was that way. Her name was Mrs Jones. She was also very compassionate. Things that I struggled with, she seemed to build me up on. [She had a] very positive attitude.

When asked to describe what she believes are the characteristics of an ideal teacher in the second interview, she states that they are 'compassionate, understanding, listening, connecting and follow through'. In addition, when participants were asked if this description of a teacher is descriptive of themselves, most replied with a 'yes' or discussed it as a goal that they were striving for. For example, Beth responds:

I'm hoping that these areas I focus myself on. When I'm teaching a class, I try to be compassionate because I don't know where that person just came from . . . I'm always available. To me, there have been things from different areas of teaching, not necessarily one teacher, but things I've pulled from teachers that I've said, this is good. I want to adopt this into myself.

Another example is provided by Melody, a trainer in a large bank, who described a significant third-grade teacher from her prior school life: 'She was one of the first ones, I think, that really made you feel more than just, oh you're the teacher, and I'm the student and whatever you say, I'll just do what you tell me. She kind of treated us more like people, than most of my other teachers prior to her'. This sense of equality and respect toward students emerges in Melody's description in the second interview of an ideal teacher and of herself as a teacher. Melody states that an outstanding teacher:

is not just intelligent, but a person who enjoys conveying knowledge in a way that a person feels kind of on equal ground . . . A terrific teacher really has a

way of being able to make them feel comfortable. Although they may not know as much knowledge, they're just as important as the teacher in the learning situation.

When asked if that description is indicative of herself, she responded by stating: 'That's something that I try very hard to strive for'. Melody goes on to say that 'I think my biggest belief right now is that the last thing on earth I would want to do to anyone I am training is make them feel that I know more than them or they're inferior to me because I'm the trainer and basically I'm running the course. A terrific teacher really has a way of being able to make them feel comfortable'.

These examples illustrate the strong link between positive experiences with particular teachers in the participants' early school lives and their present beliefs about what is an outstanding teacher. Also, it reveals that their image of an outstanding teacher is similar to the image of themselves as a teacher and/or an image of a teacher they aspire to be like.

*Past positive teaching experiences are about making the act of imparting knowledge engaging and interesting*

As revealed in the previous category, there was a strong link between the participants' past teacher models and their present description of themselves as teachers. A variety of descriptions from both past significant teachers and present beliefs about teaching were given, such as compassionate, caring, experiential, fun, etc. However, in the second interview when they were asked to explain the meaning of teaching, participants often conceptualized it as an act of imparting knowledge. For example, Beth describes the meaning of teaching as 'giving information that I've been given, to someone else to enable and fulfill their life'. Cindy, a nurse educator, conceptualizes teaching as 'sharing knowledge that's going to impact the learner'. Very similar to Beth and Cindy was Ralph, a part-time community college instructor, who photographed a teacher standing and holding an opened book as his visual image of a teacher. His interpretation of the picture reveals how the meaning of teaching is about imparting knowledge to the students:

Obviously, teachers teach from a book . . . Maybe a lot of teachers don't, but it's got to be 90 percent of teachers, unless you wrote the book or something . . . you rely on the book as well for your instruction, so the book was kind of a symbol to me that there is a teacher, he's using the book, he's imparting the wisdom of the book to the students.

However, when exploring the participant's prior school experiences, there is little discussion about teaching or learning rooted in the act of imparting knowledge. Instead the focus in the past is more about teaching as an activity that is fun, active, caring and experiential, as if to suggest that teaching is about finding ways to make the act of imparting knowledge engaging and interesting. For example, Ralph, who previously spoke about the meaning of teaching as 'imparting' knowledge to the students, describes a schoolteacher from his prior school life who, in many ways, reflects his perception of himself as a teacher:

He always tried to get us to do the homework and get us to understand it and maybe a little excited about it. He was somebody that loved math, and he had no concept why I could not and we joked about that too . . . His personality was very open, very funny, always cracking jokes. I don't know if I'm consciously, I'm that way when I teach or not, but that describes me too . . . I try to be amusing, for lack of a better word. I guess I'm the equivalent to a class clown now in front of my class. . . . He was that kind of teacher. Very nice, never offended anybody . . . He was definitely the number one teacher that I was affected by.

Chris, a trainer for a telecommunication company, offers another example that illustrates the importance of imparting knowledge in an engaging and interesting manner. Chris, like the previous participants, conceptualized the meaning of teaching as 'giving' knowledge to the students. However, when he describes a significant teacher from his past school experience, what seems to be important is how that information is presented:

He understood the business world. He understood corporate America. He understood economic policies from way back in the colonial times, and I didn't even know we had one, but he was able to diagram one. He knew this. It made it so interesting because it was his way of presentation, the way he was able to draw on his vast readings and his vast knowledge . . . I mean, it was just fantastic.

This example also reveals the importance of sharing that knowledge in engaging and interesting ways. A third example is provided by Patsy, a bank executive and trainer, whose perspective of teaching was similar to the previous participants. Patsy identified with teachers from her past that she described as being 'fun' and active, such as 'moving around, asking a lot of questions, getting your input, you know, your opinions on things'. In her second interview, when asked to describe an important goal while in graduate school in adult education, she stated: 'hopefully I'm going to learn . . . better ways to present things to them that will make it easier for them [students], more interesting for them, more fun for me, more fun for them'. The participants in this study predominantly conceptualized the meaning of teaching as imparting knowledge. However, it was important that it was done in a way that was similar to what they experienced and found most helpful as students in the past, but in a manner that was engaging and interesting.

*Past positive learning experiences relate to present conceptions of learning*

This third category reveals a link between past positive learning experiences of the participants and how they understand and define learning in their present practice. When participants were asked to explain their present beliefs about the meaning of learning through the use of a photograph interview prompt, a relationship was found with their memorable learning experiences of prior school lives. For example, Lessley, a computer instructor at a large university, describes her present beliefs about learning:

It comes down to my theory of learning. I define learning as transfer of learning to be able to do something. If when I'm teaching, I need to share as

much as I can with the hooks to real life so that somebody can make that transfer and actually do something.

Lessley's emphasis on learning as doing is quite pronounced in the previous quote. When exploring her prior school experiences, this same emphasis on doing emerges. For example, Lessley describes the kinds of learning she enjoyed most while in school.

In the early years, my main contribution, outside of grades, would be bringing things in for show and tell. I'd bring really cool stuff in. As I got more opportunities and I started growing and finding who I was, I started becoming involved in a lot things. I was always really good at art, so I'd be doing posters for plays and decorations and sets for plays. I did the yearbook. I was an editor.

Later in the interview, Lessley described significant learning experiences provided by a former biology teacher in high school: 'It was a lot of hands-on. I need to touch things, and he brought that . . . to class, which is why I hated math, because I never had any connection to it in the real world'. When she describes her beliefs in the present, the emphasis on 'doing' continues: 'I came to my current job here as a trainer. All of the time that I worked for the library, I was involved in teaching people how to do things'. Learning for Lessley seems rooted in 'doing', which seems to be a result of those past positive learning experiences that she found to be most meaningful. Accordingly, Lessley sees providing hands-on and tangible educational experiences as essential to successful learning.

Another example similar to Lessley's is provided by Tom, a chemist and part-time human resources trainer at a pharmaceutical company. Tom describes learning in the following way: '[Learning] is acquiring new information, but I think learning primarily for me is, is experiencing whether it's stuff at work, stuff at home; it's just experiencing new things. That's learning'. Tom's emphasis on experiencing as learning seems rooted in past positive learning opportunities that allowed him to deeply experience and apply what he learned. In describing his most memorable learning experiences, particularly in science classes, Tom stated: 'We got to do stuff, so it was taking it from the theory and, I guess, getting into stuff that I value, is that being able to get the theory, understand it, and then be able to apply it'. He goes on to describe the classes that he enjoyed the most, which again allowed him to directly experience the learning: 'I loved the labs . . . I like the interactive. Things where they were demonstrated'. The belief of learning as experiencing something directly seems rooted in Tom's early positive learning experiences that were engaging and interactive. Other examples of past positive learning experiences shaping the present conception of learning included participants speaking of learning as challenging and involving practice and reinforcement, which were strongly linked with similar positive past learning experiences.

*Past conceptions of self as a student reflect present expectations of adult students*

A fourth category was the relationship found between the participants' conception of themselves as a student and their expectations of students in their classroom. For

example, during the first interview Brad, a computer instructor on a college campus describes himself as a student during his prior school experiences:

I realize, they [past teachers] remember the really good ones [students] and they remember the ones who were the problems. The ones kind of in the middle just kind of passed through. They've got to think. Oh yeah, you were with so and so in class. That's me I was a good student, but I'm not an exceptional student. I don't know what my IQ is, but I'm not any wizard or anything like that . . . But I don't think that I would have stood out enough, for a lot of the teachers I was just another person coming through.

In the second interview, when asked to describe an ideal student/learner in his computer class, Brad states: 'She's kind of the middle of the class, she really doesn't know a whole lot, but she's not afraid to say, you know, I don't know, I missed this'. In a second example, Chris describes himself as a student in his early school experiences as: 'Average . . . I was always somewhere in the middle. I wasn't an exceptional student at all'. In the second interview, when asked to describe an ideal student, Chris responds directly: 'An ideal student to me is someone like me'. He goes on describe himself and an ideal student:

I guess an ideal student for me would be someone who we could see a certain kind of a little bit of fire in their eyes, a little bit of excitement about things, someone who maybe goes a little bit further than the norm . . . Someone who asks questions . . . although maybe they might think they're stupid, someone who's brave enough to, to ask questions, someone who takes initiative, exhibits a little bit of leadership. To me, that's a good student. It's not necessarily the student who has the highest grade average or the highest test score, either.

In essence, the participants' conception of a good student seems to closely mirror their own conception of themselves as students in their prior school lives.

*Past cultural experiences are reflected in present descriptions of adult students*

Many of the participants interviewed for this study attended school as children and adolescents in rural, predominantly white settings, with only a few participants matriculating near large urban areas. Even among the few participants who moved a great deal while growing up, there was little discussion about the experience of cultural difference in their prior school experiences. Also, as mentioned previously in the methodology section, all the interviewees were white. This lack of exposure to difference beyond their own predominantly working and middle-class backgrounds and their privileged position in society was reflected in their everyday description of the students in their present teaching practice. When asked to describe their participants, most did so along lines of academic ability, age, position of employment and, at times, gender. For example, Helen, a volunteer literacy teacher and first-aid instructor, shares a description of her students in the literacy programme: 'Men and women between the ages of 20 and 60. I even had one woman who was 81 years old in a computer class . . . Generally, I have a really . . .

a pretty wide age group . . . 21 to 81. But I generally see people 40 to 60, and . . . most of the time, it's women'. Another example is offered by Beth, who describes her students by job positions and personalities:

I would say 80% of them are engineers, dry personality. In fact, I have to almost dance through the classroom to get their sense of humor up sometimes. Very cut and dry. A lot of them I don't enjoy as much as my people skill classes. They're fun, and most of them are trustworthy people. I would say probably 75% of my class will trust me. The other 25 percent, it's another programme and it's going to be a waste of my time, get out of my hair, I don't want to be here.

Even in the case where participants were prodded with follow-up questions about the background of their students, race and ethnicity was not often discussed. For example, when Lessley, was asked to describe her students, she provided their institution position: 'any faculty or staff of the university libraries'. The researcher responds with a question: 'Can you describe anything else about them beyond faculty or staff?' Lessley responds:

They have very mixed educational backgrounds. Some of them have high school, some, any level of . . . a college course through a PhD. And some are lifelong learners, and some have to do something to do their job, through automation of people, and they don't have a choice.

Chris, one of the few participants who described his participants by their cultural background, also spoke of a significant past school cultural experience. For example, Chris shares the experience of moving into the sixth grade:

For me, it was social growth because I got to meet people my age, and sixth grade is a growing period for people. And I got to meet people of other faiths, and some of my subsequent good friends of mine . . . It was unique. I was going to a Lutheran church and right aside of my church was . . . a Jewish synagogue. Three of my better friends to this day. . . . We would go to dances at the synagogue . . . It was just fantastic. It was a growing experience.

It was apparent in the interviews that, if the participants were asked directly to describe the cultural background of their students, they would have responded accordingly. However, because they are white and have had predominantly culturally homogenous prior school experiences, race or ethnicity seem not to be at the forefront of their perspective when thinking of their students.

In conclusion, it is important to note that these categories were based on a significant majority of the participants of the study. There were no participants in this study whose present beliefs about teaching were not predominantly consistent with their prior school experience. The few discrepancies found that did not fit within a particular category seemed to be the result of a less than positive prior school experience. The few participants who did not have a positive past school experience seem to demonstrate less consistency between their present beliefs about teaching adults and their prior early school experiences. For example, Laura—a computer instructor on a college campus—seemed more influenced by her

experience as an undergraduate student in a teacher-certification programme and as a former administrator of a private elementary school than by her early school experience as a child, which she described as somewhat boring and unchallenging. Some of her beliefs about teaching seem to be in reaction to her less-positive school experience prior to undergraduate school.

### **Discussion and implications**

The findings of this study begin to reveal a picture of belief development of adult educators that is very consistent with the research from the K-12 field. The teaching beliefs of the participants in this study seem to be related to their prior school lives. Their experiences with positive teacher role models and positive learning experiences seem to have had a significant impact on how they view the role of teaching and learning in their present practice. Also, their expectations and descriptions of their adult students demonstrate a connection to their conception of themselves as a student and the degree of diversity they experienced in childhood.

Several conclusions emerge that begin to offer insight into how adult educators' prior school experiences influence their present teaching beliefs. One is the strong link between past favourite/memorable teachers and how they act as role models for the participants' present beliefs about teaching adults. This finding is consistent with K-12 research that refers to the significance of teachers' socialization process in the classroom as the result of their previous experiences as students observing others teach (Zeichner and Tabachnick 1981, Pajares 1992). Also, studies have shown that when student teachers are asked to describe a good teacher and, in the same survey, asked to describe their favourite teachers from their past, they are often found to be very similar (Pruitt and Lee 1978). However, this study takes the link a step further, revealing that not only are adult educators' conceptions of an ideal teacher similar to their past favourite teachers, they also are similar in their description of themselves as teachers and/or teachers they strive to be like. This strong connection between past positive teachers and present conceptions of practice needs to be explored further, recognizing that it would seem that most participants would want to identify their practice with a teacher they admired in the past. A follow-up to this finding would be to observe participants in practice and look for consistency between what they describe about their practice and what actually happens in their classrooms.

The descriptions of favourite teachers also offer insights into how adult educators conceptualize learning. By discussing significant past learning experiences, the participants are offering a window into their underlying assumptions about learning. Since most of the participants in this study had little or no formal education in the study of teaching and learning, it would seem logical that learning would be framed in prior positive learning experiences and not in a particular theoretical framework learned while in the study of education. This is not to say that the context in which they teach does not have some role in shaping their perspective. For example, Lessley, who emphasized learning as doing, also teaches computer software, which takes place in a setting that is predisposed to 'doing', inclusive of hands-on activities. It is possible to conclude that her present teaching setting plays some role in shaping not only how adult educators conceptualize learning, but how they make meaning of their past educational experiences. What

resonated with Lessley's prior school lives was possibly rooted in what had the most the most significance in her present teaching situation.

In addition, even though the participants' conceptions of learning often seemed rooted in experiential and interactive forms of learning, the findings reveal that the meaning and purpose of teaching appears to be more about sharing knowledge and explaining things clearly to their students. In essence, their approach to teaching is about finding ways to make the act of imparting knowledge more active and engaging. This finding is consistent with what Wilson (1990) found in the entering beliefs of her student teachers:

Many of my students will tell you that they believe in active learning, in engaging students in such educational experiences as using manipulatives, writing stories, and conducting experiments. However, an examination of how they talk about these activities reveals that they see them as pleasant methods to make the business of learning more palatable—not as methods that reflect different assumptions about how and why learning takes place, about what is to be learned, and about what role the teacher plays in the enterprise. No matter what students do on their own, teaching ultimately means that students learn something specific that teachers provide. (Wilson 1990: 206)

The participants' views of teaching in this study could be predominantly characterized as passing on information, skills and tools of a concrete and conclusive nature, subject to little change or refutation. At the same time, there seems to be little recognition of the interpretive and constructivist nature of teaching. This description of teaching is similar to the transmission teaching model outlined by Pratt (1998). It is defined as: 'the most "traditional" and long-standing perspective on teaching. It is based on the belief that a relatively stable body of knowledge and/or procedure can be efficiently transmitted to learners. The primary focus is on efficient and accurate delivery of that body of knowledge to learners (Pratt 1998: 39–40). Furthermore, for most of these participants, this finding seems indicative of their lack of exposure to alternative educational perspectives, something that might possibly change as they proceed through their graduate school experience in the study of adult education. It also needs to be mentioned that there are other extenuating circumstances that could possibly shape their present conceptions of teaching. For example, several participants spoke of time constraints and the requirement of a 'canned curriculum' that set definitive expectations of knowledge and skills to be taught, all of which allowed little opportunity for dialogue and interchange among students and teacher. This is consistent with Creeson and Dean's (2000) study, which found that the majority of their participants strongly endorsed the basic tenets of lifelong learning; however, the ability to act on those beliefs was less strong. Their reasons for being unable to act on their beliefs were reflected in four themes: 'limitations based on program practices, limitations stemming from institutional policy, limitations of the adult learners and limitations of the adult education' (Creeson and Dean 2000: 97). These situational constraints could further reinforce a conception of teaching as 'telling'.

Similar to the influence of prior significant teachers on present beliefs about teaching was how the participants' present expectations of their students were

found to be related to their past perceptions of themselves as students. This perception of self as a student in the past reveals itself not only in present-day expectations of participants' students, but also in what they emphasize when describing their students. The participants described their students by using descriptors of personality, age, employment or academic performance rather than cultural difference. Even though the students in the participants' classes may have been white, race was rarely used as a descriptor. This response might be explained by the past school experience of most of the participants, which took place in rural areas in the northeast in predominantly white enclaves providing with limited experiences with different cultures. This limited exposure to different cultures is often found among new teachers (Gomez and Tabachnick 1992). Studies have shown that when it comes to beliefs regarding diversity, entering teachers tend to be somewhat conservative and individualistic in orientation and emphasis (Paine 1989, Sugrue 1996).

There are also several implications of these findings in both theory and practice in the field of adult education. For one, they support to a great extent the assumption that Mezirow (1991) raises about the development of meaning schemes (beliefs) and frame of reference in transformative learning theory. Meaning schemes develop early in life and self-perpetuate unless strongly questioned and critically reflected upon. It seems apparent that the participants in this study developed deeply rooted conceptions about teaching and learning through years of socialization as students in the classroom that significantly influenced their present beliefs about teaching adults. It is these prior school experiences and present beliefs about teaching that provide a terrific medium for fostering critical thinking and possibly transformative learning. It would seem that unless institutions responsible for preparing future adult educators spend time promoting reflection among their students about their prior school experiences and how these experiences gave shape to their present beliefs about teaching adults, little long-term change can be expected in the students' practice. Belief change during adulthood was reported in a recent review of the K-12 literature as 'a relatively rare phenomenon, [with] the most common cause being a conversion from one authority to another or gestalt shift' (Pajares 1992: 325), which is consistent with the transformative learning literature (Taylor 1998). For example, studies have shown that preservice teachers do not necessarily develop new perspectives about teaching while in a teacher education programme; they simply become more knowledgeable at defending the beliefs they already possess. In addition, changing instructional practices was found by several studies to rest on a factor of congruency between the teacher's beliefs and the underlying assumptions of the new teaching method (Rich 1990).

Secondly, Pratt's (1998) conceptual model of teaching beliefs offered a helpful framework for the investigation of the study. In particular, it provided a comprehensive lens in which to address major components of teaching. For example, asking participants about what they see as the purpose of education and learning (epistemic), how they see their role as a teacher in addressing the purpose (normative) and getting them to talk about specific strategies and techniques associated with that role (procedural), allowed for the development of a comprehensive perspective of their belief system about teaching adults. A difficulty or limitation arises when participants are asked questions that they clearly have not given much conscious thought to. For example, when asked how they decide what

they are going to teach their students, several of the participants saw this as a given, since the curriculum was determined by the text or by the institution sanctioning the education or training. In general, it was less difficult for participants to describe their normative and procedural beliefs than to speak about the reasons behind what they choose and how they teach.

Third, this study seriously begins to question a narrative in the field of adult education that the practice of teaching adults is different from the practice of teaching children. Based on the findings in this study, there was little discrepancy from the participants' perception of their past school lives and their present beliefs about teaching adults. This means that their teaching beliefs framing their present practice of teaching adults are consistent with the description, in many ways, of their prior school experiences. Another way to think about this issue is to change the lens of analysis from adults to children, and ask what this study reveals about how children and young adults are taught. The study implies that children are taught similarly to adults, particularly teaching that involves experiential methods. These participants—by teaching their adult students in a manner consistent with their prior school lives—question the conception of andragogy that was propagated by Knowles and others in the 1970s and 1980s—that of the intent to define the practice of teaching adults as a unique and separate method of education.

Recognizing that this study is only an initial exploration into how the past shapes the present, it still raises a call for educators of future teachers of adults to begin spending time with their students, reflecting on their past school lives. More specifically, it means having them discuss among themselves about significant teachers and mentors that contributed to their present beliefs about teaching. It also means having them give attention to their own assumptions about how people learn and reflect on how those assumptions are related to their own teaching and learning experiences from the past. If future adult educators are going to take on new practices that reflect variant assumptions about learning, it is important to explore how compatible those assumptions are with their past learning experiences.

Furthermore, it means having graduate adult educators think about students they have had the least success with in their teaching practice in relationship to their past conceptions of themselves as a student. Encouraging adult educators to reflect about themselves as students both past and present could offer insight into why they experience success with some of their students and not with others. Possibly, conceptions of themselves as a student in the past are not consistent with the expectations of the those held by some of their students. Understanding this link could help adult educators recognize what shapes their present beliefs about students and help them to develop greater empathy for students they perceive to be different than themselves. Also, having adult educators share personal narratives about their past school experiences could be a way to begin to illuminate how and what they give attention to in constructing and reconstructing their past. These narratives also offer a great venue for students to reflect on their own culture, how they conceptualize issues of race, class, gender and sexual orientation and how those conceptions shape their relationships with their present-day students.

In addition to implications for practice, there is a need for continued research about teaching beliefs of adult educators. There are many unanswered questions, such as: how and where are discrepant teaching beliefs from the past school lives developed? What influence do the parents of adult educators have on the development of their teaching beliefs? What formal and informal learning

experiences contribute to the change in teaching beliefs? To what extent do espoused beliefs actually impact and shape practice, regardless of the teaching context? Also, by exploring the prior school lives of adult educators, much insight could be gained about the development of adult learning preferences and teaching styles. All of these questions and more encourage adult educators to not only take advantage of what has already been researched and learned in the K-12 field on teaching beliefs, but also to continue to explore their significance in the field of adult education as well. By searching the past with the intent of gaining a greater understanding of the present, researchers in the field of adult education could take an important first step toward refocusing the practice of teaching adults, an area of research given little attention over the last decade.

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