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Book Review

Teacher Beliefs as a Complex System: English Language Teachers in China, by Hongying Zheng, Cham, Springer, 2015, 170 pp. 99.99 € (Hardcover), ISBN 978-3-319-23008-5 9

The recognition of teachers as active thinkers and decision-makers who play vital roles in shaping classroom events has driven the rise in research in teacher cognition or beliefs (Borg, 2006). One strand of these studies has centered on the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. Most of the studies have examined the complex relationship based on the measurement of consistency and inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. A recent book written by Dr. Zheng opens another window into the dynamic and reciprocal interactions between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in high school English teaching contexts in China, where a new round of English curriculum reform in schools has been implemented.

The book consists of eight chapters following the format of an academic thesis. The first chapter, 'Introduction,' anchors the rest of the book by illustrating the rationale and aims of the study, methodology and the book structure. Chapter Two could be regarded as a literature review which lays out a theoretical foundation of the study by defining the concept of teacher beliefs, critically reviewing the existing educational studies on teacher beliefs both in western countries and in China, and establishing the theoretical framework of the study with insights from complexity theory. Chapter Three focuses on the context of the study, which specifies Chinese educational reform and the dilemmas that Chinese EFL teachers confront.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six are the main parts of the book and present the findings of the study in terms of teachers' belief systems, the interaction between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices and coadaptation between teachers' beliefs and the specific contexts. Chapter Four illustrates the heterogeneous and interactive features of teachers' professed beliefs. Chapter Five investigates the interactive dynamics between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices at three levels: unit, lesson, and activity. Chapter Six describes ecological teaching contexts of macro-society, exo-school and family, and micro-classroom in this study. This chapter reports how teachers' beliefs adapted to the contexts and the adjusting of contexts, as well as how teachers self-organized their complex belief systems when faced with tensions to achieve dynamic stability.

Chapter Seven revisits the findings of the study with thorough discussion according to complexity theory. Chapter Eight discusses theoretical, methodological, pedagogical and research implications based on the findings of the study.

The book is an insightful one considering its four merits. First, Dr. Zheng borrowed the complexity theory from the natural sciences to interpret the beliefs of six high school Chinese EFL teachers and their classroom practices over a period of time. Due to the integration of complexity theory with an interpretivist approach, some non-linear and unpredictable characteristics of the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their

classroom practices has been revealed. Second, in her study Dr. Zheng found interaction among teachers' professed beliefs, interaction between teachers' professed beliefs and beliefs in practice, interaction among teachers' beliefs in practice, ecological contexts of EFL teaching, and self-organization of the belief systems in teaching dilemmas. These interesting findings could contribute to existing literature. Third, teachers' beliefs were explored against the backdrop of curriculum reform in China by applying western theory. It might be interesting for readers to see to what extent western theory can be applied to Chinese educational contexts. Fourth, multiple qualitative methods were employed to capture the complexity of teachers' belief systems, namely semi-structured interview, classroom observation, and stimulated recall. These are powerful instruments in the studies of teacher cognition. In addition, Dr. Zheng employed the tabulation method to juxtapose teachers' beliefs, their classroom practices and contextual influences. This data analysis method makes the interactions among these three variables visible and convincing, and conceptualizes the abundant data elicited from qualitative explorations.

Despite the theoretical significance and methodological advantages of the book, it also has some weaknesses. First, although reciprocal interactions among teachers' beliefs, practices and contexts are claimed, the influence of teachers' beliefs on contexts and the influence of practices on teachers' beliefs are not obviously revealed. Second, Dr. Zheng identified the dynamics of teachers' belief systems by focusing only on the interactions among different beliefs, between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices, and between teacher beliefs and contexts. Dynamics also means change and development of teachers' belief systems over time. The analysis of changes in teachers' beliefs is limited in the book. Third, the latest studies on teachers' beliefs and practices need to be updated in the literature review (i.e., Chapter Two) to justify the research gaps that this study attempted to fill.

In spite of the above-mentioned weaknesses, this book should be recommended for postgraduates, teachers, teacher educators and curriculum designers who are interested in researching EFL teachers' beliefs or expect to shape classroom events in a desirable way.

Reference

Borg, S. (2006). *Teacher cognition and language education*. London: Continuum.

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