

## THE IMPACT OF TEACHER EDUCATION ON CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE IN THEIR OWN LEARNING:

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**Abstract:** *This study aims to understand the effects of two postgraduate programs in teachers' professional development, and its relationships with children's learning. The study investigates the impact of two postgraduate programs of University of Minho, Braga, Portugal, in the development of quality practices in early childhood education, analyzed through children's competence of making choices, planning their actions, and ability to take initiative. The sample of this qualitative case study includes 40 preschool teachers. The PIP Program Implementation Profile (HighScope Educational Research Foundation, 1989) was used to assess the quality of practices, and opportunities given to children to develop their ability to make choices and take initiative. The data emphasize learning pedagogy as a long process that requires learning skills of a complex nature. Highlight the interconnected relationship between teacher education, professional development and children's learning. Emphasize also that not all teacher education guarantees the right of children to participate actively in their own learning (Oliveira-Formosinho, 2004).*

**Keywords:** *Teacher education, professional development, quality in early childhood education, children's choice and participation.*

### **Introduction**

Teacher education is a central component of professional development throughout the life cycle process. Research points out that only quality practices in early childhood education have a short and long lasting effects in children's lives (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997; Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, and Nores 2005 ), and stresses also that teacher education is a key factor on the development of quality practices.

This research studies two postgraduate programs for early childhood education. The teacher education paradigms underlying these programs are of different nature: one is context based training, with an emphasis on the liaison theory/practice and the other one has technician nature, with a focus on the development of specialised and technical skills.

The case study of this research is qualitative and evaluative, and allows constructing knowledge about the contributions of two paradigms of teacher education

to the development of quality practices in early childhood education and children's learning.

The data analysis allowed understanding the impact of two different paradigms of teacher education on the quality of preschool educational contexts and children's learning assessed through the application of *PIP (Program Implementation Profile)* (HighSope Educational Research Foundation, 1989).

Data analysis is sustained in the pedagogical legacy of two major pedagogues of twentieth century – John Dewey and Celistin Freinet.

### **Teacher education**

Societies, over time, have gone through different stages in an evolutionary process that has followed different technological revolutions: agricultural, industrial, post-industrial and information. These processes of constant transformation produced changes at several levels: the organization of society; at work contexts; relations and interpersonal communications; and at processes of teaching and learning (Marcelo Garcia, 1999). The permanent changes in societies are reflected in the situations faced by children and their teachers (Hargreaves, 1998, Day, 2001), and require a conceptualization of education as an ongoing and constant process that begins with initial training and continuous throughout working life.

Chapman and Aspin (2001), editors of the *International Handbook of Lifelong Learning*, highlight the need for transforming the current educational systems in order to face the new challenges created by knowledge and information society, which leads to a perspective of training over lifecycle.

This emerging society is characterized by easy access to information and the ability to use it properly, that is, to create knowledge. In this perspective, there are several challenges that require the social organization in its various dimensions, including educational institutions, social and professional role of teachers as well as students. One of the features of this society is the constant demand for change, causing individuals spend much of their life in permanent process of learning in order to meet these challenges. It thus becomes necessary to master a range of skills, to reconstruct the previous knowledge, according to new social demands. This new model of society suggests a permanent learning with the purpose of improving skills, knowledge and attitudes to meet the new challenges.

The World Education Report emphasizes the crucial role of teachers as agents of change, and advocates the importance of investment in teacher education and continuing professional development, identified as a critical indicator of quality in early childhood education (UNESCO, 1998).

Teacher education is an important feature of the school and educational systems to promote reforms and transformations claimed by an ever-changing society (Day, 2001; Escudero, 1998; Flores, 2003; Nóvoa, 1992). In this sense, teacher education is conceptualized as a process of training throughout the life cycle (Oliveira-Formosinho, 1998, 2001; Perrenoud, 1993) and contributes to improving the quality of society.

The concept of teacher education is a complex concept and has several definitions. In fact, different authors have written about teacher education, emphasizing

various components and dimensions that lead to different perspectives. Some perspectives emphasize the individual character of training as a process to acquire or improve skills (Ferry, 1991), while others emphasize their collaborative and reflective nature (Shön, 1983; Marcelo Garcia, 199).

### **Context based training**

Research in teacher education emphasizes the advantages of context based training for teachers' professional development and children's learning (Epstein, 1993; Formosinho & Formosinho-Oliveira, 2001).

This perspective of teacher education requires that training is focused on professional practice and promotes the active participation of teachers in their own education (Kishimoto, 2002). The context based training is school's driven and is developed from analysis and reflection of work situations, which allows to identify training needs and develop training projects that integrate teachers, educators and trainers in a cooperative and collaborative process of construction and reconstruction practices.

The context based training adopts active and experiential methodologies (Canário, 1997), involving teachers and educators in the process of research, action and reflection on, and upon experiences. Experiential learning recognizes the agency of the subject and highlights the role of reflection (Dewey, 1952) for professional development in teacher education (Cavaco, 2002).

Dewey (1971) was one of the first authors to emphasize the value of experience for students and teachers' learning. The concept of experience in the teaching and learning process is a key element of his theory. The need for a theory of experience is a key assumption of the new education advocated by the progressive movement and requires the existence of an organic connection between education and personal experience (Dewey, 1971). Dewey states that not all experiences are educational; it requires acknowledging the agency of the subject and the continuity of the learning process.

Another feature of the educational experience is their reflective feature (Cavaco, 2002). The whole experience involves thinking, is not just sensory exploration, involves conscious of the reciprocal relationships between the individual and the physical and social environment. According to Dewey (1971), experience and thought are somehow the same thing. The experience to be meaningful and lead to relevant learning always requires some degree of reflection (Dewey, 1952). The reflective nature of the experience in teacher education emerges in Dewey's theory and is followed and developed by many educational theorists, as is the example of Shön (1983), Zeichner (1993), Kolb (1984), among others.

### **Method and instruments**

The case study of this research lies in the qualitative paradigm and has an evaluative nature. The object of research of this study is to compare two preschool teacher educational programs and understand their contributions to early childhood teachers professional development, with emphasis on what is observable (the quality of contexts and children's initiative) (Stake, 1995).

The research objectives are: i) to understand the contribution of postgraduate programs for teachers professional development, analyzed through the quality of the educational context, ii) to understand the relationship between the educational context (s) created and children's learning.

The data was collected through direct observation with the application of the *PIP-Program Implementation Profile* (HighSope Educational Research Foundation, 1989), and field notes. The *PIP* is a five point Likert scale that allows assessing the quality of early childhood programs. The *PIP* allows evaluating the various dimensions of preschool programs, namely: the organization of the physical environment, space and materials, the daily routine, the nature of adult-child interaction, team teaching and parent involvement. The scale is organized in four sections, with a total of 30 items: 1) physical environment (10 items); 2) daily routine (5 items); 3) adult-child interaction (8 items); 4) adult-adult interaction (6 items). The *PIP* items are evaluated with a five-point Likert scale, ranging from a low quality (level 1) at a high quality level (level 5). This assessment tool also identifies the training needs of early childhood teachers and other professionals working with young children.

The observations were done in periods of 3-5 hours, and included morning and afternoon sessions. In some classrooms it was necessary to make observations over several days to obtain the necessary information to enable accurate evaluation of *PIP* items.

The data presented and analyzed in this study is related to the following *PIP* items: **12** - *The daily routine includes time to plan, work and remember*; **13** - *The adults use a variety of planning strategies based on the individual needs of children and help children to achieve their goals and plans*; **14** - *The adult uses a variety of recall strategies for individual and small groups of children*.

The programs selected for this study are designated **PA** (Program A) and **PB** (Program B). The content of PA is focused on childhood pedagogy and its dimensions: space structure and organization, daily routine, adult-child interaction; team teaching; observation/assessment/planning; activities and projects; groups' organization. The main goal of the program is to support preschool teachers in a process of co-construction of knowledge, and enhance their reflective skills for the reconstruction of their own practices. This means that training cannot be disconnected from the know-how of the profession, is context based, with direct relation to the contexts of practice, (Dewey, 1971), and to the dimensions of childhood pedagogy (Freinet, 1973). The professional development model underlying the PB is characterized by a concentration on theories, and aims to develop a specialist art's teacher for young children. Training is also characterized by an individual perspective of professional development, has a technician nature, and is focus on a curricular dimension of preschool education: arts for young children.

The total of preschool teachers selected was 40: 20 from PA and 20 from PB. They were selected according to the GPA at the end of the program, and professional experience (minimum of 5 years as preschool teachers). The preschool teachers of this research group work in public and private non-profit institutions.

## Results

The data presents the mean for *PIP* items 12, 13, and 14 for **PA** and **PB**, and field notes content analyses.

**Table 1** - Opportunities given to children to plan, carry out their choices and plans and review activities with support from adults and peers

<b>PIP ITEMS</b>	<b>PA mean</b>	<b>PB mean</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>4.15</b>	<b>2.7</b>
<b>13</b>	<b>3.85</b>	<b>2.3</b>
<b>14</b>	<b>3.65</b>	<b>3.35</b>

The analysis of the results shows, among other things, that:

- The mean for items 12, 13 and 14 is higher for **PA** than for the **PB**;
- The **PA** mean is, for the three items, above the point 3.5, which is the point that defines the quality of the program;
- The **PB** mean is, for the three items, under the point 3.5, which is the point that defines the quality of the program;

The field notes content analysis highlights that in **PA** classrooms:

- The daily routine includes time for children: choose or plan their activities; carry out their choices and plans; recall and reflect about what they have done.
- During planning time teachers create opportunities for children choose activities, materials and people whom to interact with (adults or peers).
- All the areas and materials of the classroom are available for children to make their plans.
- The range of strategies used by teachers to support the children's planning include: make planning a regular part of the program; ask open-ended questions; listen attentively to children's plans; support, accept and extend all the ways children express their plans, write down children's plans, and enhance children's skills to develop complex and detailed plans.
- Children have, daily, opportunities to carry out their plans with the support of adults and peers. That means that children work with a purpose, it's not free play.
- During reviewing teachers encourage children to recall and reflect about their activities and share with adults and peers what they have done.

The field notes content analysis highlights that in **PB** classrooms:

- Time for children planning, carry out their plans and review and reflect about their activities is not part of all daily routines observed.
- The daily routine doesn't include time for children plan their activities. Some daily routines include time for children make choices – choose an activity or materials to work with. But not all daily routines set up a time for children's communicate their choices.

- When children have an opportunity to make choices the teachers don't encourage them to make real plans, which means that they don't encourage them to think and reflect about what they want to do.
- Not all daily routines include time for children carry out their choices or initiatives. When children go to the classroom areas they engage in free play, without a purpose or an intention.
- The daily routine doesn't set a time for children reviewing and reflect about their activities and share with adults and peers what they have done. Occasionally, in some classrooms, children are asked about what they have done, but they aren't encouraged to reflect about their activities.

Data shows that in **PA** classrooms children are encourage by teachers to think and reflect about their plans, which foster their capacity to think in alternatives and make decisions about what they want to do. From a constructive perspective, choice is an individual activity that is essential to cognitive as well as social development. Although planning, is more than making choices. Planning is choice with intention. Planning involves deciding on actions and predicting interactions, recognizing problems and proposing solutions and anticipating consequences and reactions. To engage children in planning is to encourage them to identify their goals and consider the options available for achieving them (Epstein, 2003). Planning allow children to work with a purpose and to look for achieving the goals that they have establish.

Recall and reviewing the activities and what they have done involves children in a process of reflexive thinking. Reflection is more than memory or recitation of completed activities. "Reflection is remembering with analysis...Reflection consolidates knowledge so it can be generalized to other situations, thereby leading to further prediction and evaluation" (Epstein, 2003, p. 2).

Dewey (1971), in opposition to the traditional school, claims for a school that promotes children identity and freedom, which requires the capacity to establish and carry out their purposes. According to Dewey the purpose goes behind the impulse. Through a reflexive and individual process the purpose change the impulse into action plans which involves decision making about the future action.

Like Dewey, Freinet (1973) in the *Pedagogical Invariants n° 7* and *n° 8*, point out the importance of the children free choice within the learning process – "Everyone likes to choose his work, even if it is not necessarily the right choice" (p.177); "No-one likes to work aimlessly, like a robot – acting and conforming to ideas which form part of routines in which he is not involved" (p.178).

Following Dewey and Freinet thinking the preschool teachers of **PA** interact with children in an approach that enhance their skills to make choices and decisions and to reflect before and after the action. This process, allows children to establish plans for their future action, to act with a purpose for achieving their goals, and to learn through reviewing and reflecting about what they have done. This pedagogical approach promotes children's participation and control in their own learning and development.

In order to transform children's educational experiences we have to create educational opportunities for teachers. It is clear from this research that different

opportunities have different impact on teachers' professional development, as well as, on children's learning.

### **Conclusion**

To reconstruct educational contexts for young children require creating educational and training opportunities for preschool teachers. The data shows that context based training in preschool education promotes the development of quality educational contexts which enhances children's learning.

The data analysis emphasizes the vital connection between theory and the practices in early childhood education. It also emphasizes the need for training in the specific context of educational practices.

Reconstructing childhood pedagogy requires the reconstruction of its dimensions - space and materials, time, interactions, observation, assessment and planning, activities and projects, the organization of groups. This requires theoretical and practical training and expertise on all pedagogical dimensions.

Following the thinking of Dewey and Freinet, teacher education has an impact on changing practices and thus constitutes a pedagogical innovative articulation between the various areas of science and its integration in the know-how of the profession. The interconnected relationship between theory and practice, between researchers and teachers, allows the reconstruction of practice, the development of educational innovation, the professional development of preschool teachers, and enhances children's participation in their own learning and development.

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