

## **EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION: HOW TO ENHANCE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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### **Abstract**

Early childhood teacher education is a central component of the professional development process. Research points out that the training of teachers of young children is extremely important in the professional development of early childhood teachers, and for the development of the quality of educational contexts. This paper reflects on the contributions of in-service training for the professional development of early childhood teachers and for the development of their organizational contexts. Therefore presents an ecological model of professional development that involves all those implicated in the educational process.

**Key words:** Teacher education; professional development; in-service training; early childhood education.

### **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 change produced changes at several levels: the organization of society; at work; on relations and interpersonal communications; in teaching and learning (Dalin and Rust, 1996).

The constant changes in such 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 perpetual throughout professional life. Chapman and Aspin (2001), highlight the need for transformation of the existing education systems in order to support the new challenges of the knowledge and information society, which refers to a training perspective over life cycle. It is therefore necessary to acquire a number of skills, to learn a set of abilities and relearn other, to meet the new social and knowledge demands. This new model of society suggests a permanent learning that has to be carried out continuously, in order to improve the skills, knowledge and attitudes.

Teacher education is an important feature of school and educational systems that promotes 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; 2013; Perrenoud, 1993) and contributes to improve the quality of society.

Teaching is seen as a profession that entails: reflective thinking; autonomy; responsibility; creativity; research; personal judgments; and continuing professional development.

The reflection in and about the experience (Dewey, 1929; Shön, 1983; Zheichner, 1993), is fundamental for the construction of theoretical and practical knowledge, and for the professional development of teachers. According to Dewey (1953), reflective thinking requires three essential attitudes: open mind; absorbed interest; and responsibility. Another important ability required to teachers is autonomy, which enables them to develop a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for the group of children they work at. Autonomy allows teachers to find the appropriate resources for the educational environment and act appropriately, and with creativity when they face emergent and new situations.

An early childhood teacher, to properly exercise the professional activity should: a) have good knowledge and good relationship with content subject; b) know in depth the curriculum and be able to recreate it according to the work situation; c) meet the learner and learning needs; d) master the processes of education, the various methods and techniques and relating them to the objectives and curriculum content; e) be familiar with the work context, namely the school and the education system; f) know himself/herself as a professional. To accomplish these competencies requires an ongoing training which leads to a process of professional development throughout the professional cycle.

### **In-service training**

In-service training is a form of training for trained teachers, and has been the subject of study and theorization by several authors and researchers.

According to Formosinho "in-service teacher training is the training of teachers provided with professional initial training, targeting the personal and professional development" (1991, p.237). In-service training is distinguished from initial training, not by the content or methodologies, but by its recipients, professionalized teachers who had entered a teaching career. In this perspective, in-service training aims to improve and develop the technical skills of the teachers, and deepen and broaden their theoretical and practical frameworks within curriculum knowledge, content knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge (Spodek and Saracho, 2003).

Teacher's professional knowledge has been the subject of many studies and reflections. It is a mixture of knowledge and know-how which receives

input from multiple sources. Relies on the accumulated experience of the profession itself, with its traditions, norms and myths, as well as knowing who will design the interface between the profession and other communities with whom they interact more directly. It is a process that develops throughout the life cycle and enhances professional development.

### **Professional development**

Professional development refers to the development of a person in his or her professional role, and is defined as a growth that occurs through the professional cycle of a teacher (Crowther et al, 2000).

Teacher professional development has moved beyond simple in-service workshops and has expanded into a more robust system of continuing education. In order to advance in their careers, teachers should seek out professional development opportunities which are favored by collaborative contexts (institutional, associative, formal or informal).

Research in the area of teacher's continuing education stresses the benefits of training that is related with the organizations where they work, and connected with children's learning, and teachers' professional development (Epstein, 1993; Oliveira-Formosinho & Formosinho, 2001; Lino, 2005). Oliveira-Formosinho (2013) stated that professional development is a more experiential and more integrated process thus steadily moving away from the purely individual aspect towards valuing development in context. This model of in-service training is conceptualized as an ecological model of professional development, where teachers and their work contexts influence each other on the development of early childhood quality practices.

The ecological model of early childhood teacher professional development unfolds around a focused training that is carried out on the workplace, and is focused on teacher centered practices. This ongoing training model involves all individuals that work direct and indirectly with children, namely: teachers, auxiliaries, parents, principals, coordinators, etc., and links professional development to curriculum development, and to organizational development. This assumption means that teacher training cannot be turned off of specificities of the know-how of the profession, and has a direct connection to the context of the practice.

### **An ecological model of professional development**

The ecological model of professional development stems on a systemic perspective of school improvement, where the professional development influences and is influenced by the organizational context in which the intervention takes place (Fulan, 1982; Oliveira-Formosinho and Formosinho, 2001; Lino, 2005). The professional and organizational development develops around a focused training that is carried out in the workplace, and is focused on teacher-centered practices.

This training model links professional development to curriculum development and to organizational development, and involves teachers, parents, auxiliaries, directors and other staff in curriculum development, improvement of teaching methods, and fosters children's learning and development (Oliveira-Formosinho & Formosinho, 2001; Lino, 2005).

The characteristics of a context based training that promotes professional and organizational development are as follow:

- Context driven training.
- Co-operated training.
- Common and shared theoretical framework.
- Reflection and assessment.
- Mentoring.
- Development of projects and action research projects.

### **Context driven training**

The workshops are a common approach in continuing training; however, to have an impact on the professional development must integrate a set of characteristics, namely: active participation; sharing opportunities among peers; follow-up sessions as educators seek to implement their ideas (Epstein 1993).

The workshops' planning stems on teachers, auxiliaries, parents, principals, identification of needs and interests, and aims to improve the quality of services provided to children and their families. The identification of needs and interests is done by the workshops' leaders, specialized professionals from different field areas, in collaboration with the professionals from educational contexts. Thus the topics to be developed at workshop sessions are agreed by all participants involved in the training process: the trainers and the trainees.

The workshops are organized in different sessions, according to different topics, and include theoretical and practical experiences, which are always followed by an implementation of different subjects at teachers' work context. They also include follow-up sessions, aiming to create opportunities for teachers to share their experiences from the field, and reflect on ways to better implement the new ideas and knowledge.

### **Co-operated training.**

The process of training in context is a complex and demanding process that requires co-operative interaction of teams of trainers and agents in the context of early childhood education. It is a task that requires a learning community that promotes learning organizations (Senge, 1999; Oliveira-Formosinho & Formosinho, 2001; Lino, 2005). This complex process, which articulates the development and learning of children with professional development and organizational contexts of action, relies on sustained support from professionals and contexts through collaborative processes where training in the context plays a crucial role.

Team work is, therefore an essential component of context based training. The work in educational teams integrates elements with different levels of experience, knowledge and learning which enhances the learning at level of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1979), where the less experienced teacher learns and builds knowledge with the support of more experienced and competent teacher through processes of collaboration and negotiation. This is not to transfer knowledge or skills but rather create, develop and communicate meanings through the collaborative use of mediated means (Daniels, 2003). This process actively involves teachers (the more and less experienced) in searching new ways to solve the problems and issues they face at their work contexts, and allows for continuously collective learning of all the members that make up the educational team.

Another important feature of co-operated training and professional development is the involvement of parents on the daily work of educational institutions, and on their children's learning.

The educational services for children and their families stems on the assumption that these services are a right of all families and communities, and an expression of social solidarity with children and their families (Moss, 1992). Thus aim at creating an educational context to meet the needs of children and of their families, actively involve them in children's learning in order to guarantee the right to a quality educational service.

This perspective leads to development of programs involving teachers and parents as partners in cooperative work at various levels, such as: educational planning; observation and documentation of children's experiences; and implementation of educational activities, whether carried out in the context of practices in the educational center or those that occur at home. The right of participation of parents in terms of curriculum decisions requires the training of early childhood teachers and other professional involved in children's care and education, in order to develop a cooperative work with parents. It also requires training programs for parents (Whalley, et al 2001).

Team teaching is the ability of being able to work and share events, tasks and responsibilities with other adults which fosters the professional development of early childhood teachers. To work in teams enhances the creation of educational partnerships that promote co-operative learning (Vygotsky, 2000), creating real zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1979). The work of teachers who are part of the educational team promotes sustained learning, where more experienced and competent teachers support the less experienced. Thus, by participating in the area of potential development teachers learn at inter-psychological level what they need to act autonomously at intrapsychological level (Vygotsky, 2000), which promotes their professional development.

### **Common and shared theoretical framework**

The education of the early childhood teachers is focused on central questions of pedagogy, theories of development and learning, curriculum models and teaching methods for early childhood education, styles of parental involvement, techniques and tools of child observation and assessment, evaluation of quality practices for young children. The parent training focuses on key aspects of children's learning issues, and forms of how to help parents to understand and promote their children's learning.

The context based training, the training of early childhood teachers and other professionals working at the educational team, enables the development of a curricular approach for children that focuses on the capabilities of children which are actively involved in the construction of knowledge.

### **Reflection and assessment**

Reflection on and about action is a central dimension of teachers' professional development widely cited in the literature of teacher education (Shön, 1983; Zeichner, 1993; Alarcão, 2002), and stressed by some childhood educators, such as Dewey. In fact, the importance of reflection in building quality practices for children and for teachers professional development was analyzed by Dewey in several of his works. In "The sources of the science of education", he advocates that "science education is not found in books or in the experimental laboratories, or in classrooms where teachers teach, but in the minds of those who teach the educational activity" (Dewey, 1929, p.32).

Reflection is one of the tools used to support the development of quality practices for young children, as well as to enhance teachers' professional development. Teachers and all those involved in the process of context based training are invited by mentors, trainers and researchers to reflect on their educational practices, and about the process they have to go through in order to improve their professional knowledge.

Another important dimension of context based training and thus of teachers' professional development is assessment: children's assessment and educational environment assessment. To accomplish these tasks teachers, other professionals and, sometimes, parents are trained in the use of various assessment tools in order to enable them to monitor the quality of their own practices, and to assess children's learning. This collaborative process is done by all of those that are involved in the process of context based training: teachers, trainers, mentors, auxiliaries, principals and parents. Data resulting from assessment is analyzed and reflected by the educational team, highlights strengths and weaknesses of their members, allows the identification of new training for teachers and other professionals, and informs about children's progress, interests and needs.

The context based training uses a model of teacher education that links teachers, organization, and children's assessment to inform and support the development of a training plan.

### **Mentoring**

“Mentoring in the early years is a dynamic system of advice and support in the context of ongoing training and development which makes sense of reflective practice” (Robins, 2006, p.10).

The individual and group support is an essential element of the context based training. The cycle of observation, feedback and discussion that develops under the mentoring process focuses on the reflection of the contextualization of the content covered at the training workshops. Thus, teacher and mentor engage in a collaborative process of documentation, analysis and evaluation of early childhood practices, which is the basis for change, and for the reconstruction of educational contexts. This reflective process around the practical training is central to the professional development of early childhood teachers and other professionals working with young children.

### **Development of projects and action research projects**

The development of quality pedagogical practices in early childhood education is only possible through the involvement of team members in research and reflection of practices centered on various childhood pedagogical issues and questions.

Teachers, parents and other members of the educational team are encouraged to engage in small-scale research projects with different focus, such as: the well-being of children; the importance of observation; parental involvement strategies; etc. The research projects undertaken have the support of collaborative partnerships that integrate early childhood teachers, principals, auxiliaries, parents and researchers from higher education institutions. The importance of partnerships between academic and early childhood educational centers has been highlighted in childhood pedagogy literature, particularly by John Dewey, who advocated that is only possible understand the importance of scientific discovery by connecting it to the contexts of practice. "The concrete educational experience is the primary source of all inquisition and reflection because it points the problems, and confirms, modifies, and corrects the conclusions of intellectual inquiry" (Dewey, 1929, p.56).

Dewey (1929) rediscovers the importance of connecting theory and practice, the theoretical investigation and trial practice through processes of reflective thinking. He proclaims that scientific and pedagogical innovation does not just happen at theory level, but involves a partnership between theory and practice, between academia and practice centers.

There only is a transformation of practice when summon the scientific knowledge and researchers, teachers, parents, and other professionals collaborate in partnerships for the co-construction of pedagogical science.

### **Conclusions**

Professional development is considered a right of every teacher and group of teachers that integrates an educational community. It is an individual right of every teacher who belongs to a group, and a right of the group that works together as a whole (Rinaldi, 1994). According to Rinaldi, the "good professional development" is a vital aspect of teachers' personal and professional identity, and of their daily work, which implies change, renewal, and is a key element to improve the quality of interactions between teachers and children, and between all adults involved in the educational process.

Professional development is an important element of collective and individual processes. On one "hand", professional development is favored by collaborative contexts (institutional, associative, formal or informal) where teachers have the opportunity to interact with others and feel supported by them, where they can check their experiences and gather important information from the context where they act. On the other "hand" the teacher professional development has an influence on the development of the organizational and social context.

The ecological model of professional development aims to improve the professional knowledge of individual teachers, groups of teachers working at the same institution, and, simultaneously, to enhance the development of the quality services provided by the educational context. This requires a training that involves all the actors directly and indirectly implicated in the teaching and learning process, namely: teachers, auxiliaries, principles, coordinators, parents, and other adults working at the educational setting.

The ecological model uses an approach of context based in-service training that has specific characteristics, which can be presented as a form of lessons. There are six lessons learned about the characteristics of a continuous and context based training. The first lesson is that training with significant impact on practices must be carried out in the workplace. The second lesson is that only the continuous and consistent training take effect at the level of practice. The third lesson teaches that the training is more likely to be effective when based on a coherent conception of teaching and learning. This means that training should be developed from a comprehensive and well-articulated perspective about how children learn, and the proper ways to provide meaningful learning experiences. The fourth lesson learned maintains that the training of adults should be congruent with the way they are expected to organize the educational contexts for children. In fact, there is an analogy between the continuous training format proposed and the way teachers develop the curriculum. The fifth lesson states that continuing education requires time and continuity in order to produce meaningful learning and then professional development will occur. The sixth and final lesson teaches that the organization of an optimal environment for children is related with the creation of optimal learning environment for adults who work with them.



This model emphasizes the connection and integration of the organizational context on in-service training projects, which means the involvement of all adults participating in the educational process - educators, teachers, auxiliaries, parents, principals, and other elements of the community at large. It also emphasizes the centrality of collaboration and co-operation between peers and the organizational context as a key factor in career development and for the construction of a common educational vision, and assumes reflection as a transversal dimension for professional development.

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