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An Action Research Project

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Abstract

The study is a six-year action research project about in-service for Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers. The aim of our research project is to investigate new teaching approaches in teacher's education that encourages their professional development and life long learning. We used qualitative interviews and direct observations in order to evaluate the adopted teaching model namely experiential learning and teacher's views about their new learning experiences. Statistical analysis was conducted on questionnaire data. Interpretive interviews were analysed and observation of the participants took place during the courses. The findings demonstrate that ECE teachers after the training program adopted new perceptions about their personal and professional status as educators. They started to express greater pleasure and personal interaction with their students and exhibit a greater appreciation for their teaching style. Finally, teachers pointed out that a training course can only be effective when they are given the opportunity to be actively involved in the learning process.

Keywords: In-service education, Professional development, Experiential learning

Introduction

International economic, technological, social and cultural development renders it necessary to reform adult education for Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers so as to acquire more knowledge and skills respecting their personal and professional needs.

Acquisition of qualifications and knowledge for ECE teachers is predominantly obtained from in-service training that occurs after five years of professional experience. Noyé & Piveteau (1997) suggest the structure of this type of education aims to fulfill three objectives:

- Furthering knowledge about general education
- Acquisition of new technical knowledge involved in professional employment
- Acquisition of basic social skills (planning, alternative solutions, adaptability and growth of interpersonal relations).

Eurydice (1995) adds that in-service training programs also aim at improving professional skills and capacities by:

- Updating basic knowledge about teaching techniques and subjects skills
- Learning new teaching methods for specific subject areas

A two-year in-service training program is provided at the Marasleio Teacher Training College (n. 2327,

Presidential Decree 156/31-7-95, www.dna.ecd.uoa.gr), for ECE teachers under the age of 40 with at least five year's teaching experience. The training focuses on research and the scientific study of subjects relating to psychology, education, and primary education policy. This program lasts for four (4) semesters and teachers participate after having taken written exams. They are exempt from their instructive and administrative duties while in the program.

Literature Review

Experiential Learning in Adult Education

Initial knowledge, values, skills and experiences acquired during an ECE teacher's initial training operate within a social framework (Jarvis, 1987) that influences their educational process in the preschool educational system.

Traditional pedagogical methods are frequently used in educating ECE teachers. The results of this kind of education are evident from an ECE teacher's style of teaching and the way he/she facilitates learning with children. For example, they organize their classroom with traditional activity areas such as: surgery, cookery, and constructive materials and afterwards remain inactive. They simultaneously apply the same activity to all the children and ignore that all the children do not have the same interests, possibilities and rates of development (Eadap, 2003).



Future ECE teachers play a crucial role in increasing the quality of early childhood education. Professors are called upon to not only teach new knowledge but also plan, organize and evaluate their ECE teacher's future educational work according to student's needs and the current social context.

ECE university professors need to take into consideration the skills and experiences of adult students in teaching new subject matter. The relationship that these professors develop with their students occurs within the process of mutual decision-making, common planning and evaluation of the program's content and objectives. A professor's authoritative status is intended to give way to importance of collaboration and creativity.

Researchers stress a need for reforming these "traditional" teaching methods in universities. Lectures only seem effective for students in that they improve their ability to collect information and give oral presentations (Chickering, 1997, Pugsley & Klayton, 2003). It is very difficult for the professor to introduce new learning techniques, styles and processes into a traditional system of education. Some of them try to continue their life long learning by reflecting on their educational experience, their attendance at international conferences of collaboration and by assessing their own attempts at integrating newer teaching methods.

Education in formal environments differs qualitatively from out of university education namely «social education» (Gotovos, 1985). The individual, the social framework and the process of education influence these two different aforementioned approaches of education. The first approach in training ECE teachers is competitive, mainly theoretical and without a clear sense of pragmatic application. The second teaching approach is cooperative, is not limited to just high theory and is situated within the field of practice (Resnick, 1987).

We planned a six-year research project based on the assumption that teaching is a method that facilitates learning (Jarvis, 1995). The aim of our study was to first develop an experiential learning style for ECE teachers during an in-service program, and secondly to explore how adult ECE learners perceive this experiential learning style. A lot of education theorists (Kolb, 1984, Keeton, 1982, Rogers, 2001) have maintained that learning is supported, socialized and nurtured through experience.

We decided to stop using a "lecture style of teaching" and to adopt a different method that takes into consideration the ECE teacher's beliefs and that strongly emphasizes putting theory into action (Vratsalis, 1996). Within this new teaching approach we reinforced that informal learning is an essential component in order to improve ECE teacher's personal and professional skills. This pedagogical shift is based on an experienced-participative

teaching method. It is a way to translate theoretical principles into action (Torkington & Landers, 1995) and favours research and challenge despite passive acceptance.

Consequently, the theoretical background of the course is no longer based on academic lectures, but instead it results from the experienced exercises of the student's personal views of his/her professional and personal life (Boud & Walker, 1993). This model emphasizes active and empirical learning rather than teaching. Practice is, thereby, the fundamental principle through which theory is understood.

According to Sfard (1997) the active or participative learning models differentiate learning into a traditional cognitive model the acquisition of knowledge and meanings and a participative approach centered within learning through practice. Cognitive learning is a group of activities that takes place inside an individual's brain. In participative learning, however, human activity emerges from a social-cultural framework. Social interaction is constituted by adults who find themselves in a group learning process that transcends one's own educational personal framework, abilities or skills. Participative learning stresses that adults learn through the analysis of participating in socio-cultural activities (Rogoff, 1990). Participative learning is efficacious because students can check the content of their learning and adjust it based on their experience (Schof, 1987). Professors, meanwhile, share "power" and control with students by adopting a cooperative and participative perspective to education (Eadap, 2003).

According to the experiential-participative model of teaching, the largest portion of learning results from student involvement. An individual is physically, emotionally and mentally influenced by the learning process. Adults begin to learn from what they feel and see. In living with new situations, adult learners face problems by experientially learning to adapt and cope with situational experiences (Tsay, 1998). By connecting new experiences with previous ones, learners find themselves critically reflecting upon their experiences with people who hold distinctively different positions from themselves by using newly emerging criteria for evaluating and learning (Rogers, 2001).

The aim, therefore, of experience-centered teaching is not the exact transfer of knowledge and theories to the professional, but instead the inquiring attitude from students about their continuous self-assessment of instructive actions.

Method

We formulated our research question after observing an increase in attendance and interest by teachers during participative oriented teaching courses and

we wondered will ECE teachers demonstrate a perceptual change in how they intend on teaching young children in their future classroom. We anticipated that ECE teachers would in the future modify their traditional lecture style for an experiential-participative teaching approach and that they will demonstrate this purposed shift in their classrooms.

During our research project the ECE teacher’s participants continued to help us to restore our results and to infuse this new narrative back into the paper. This action research project (Elliott, 1991) lasted six years. For three years at Athens University we taught our ECE in-service training course¹ by applying the experiential method. The students who attended the course amounted to 119 coming from all over Greece and having at least a five-year professional experience. During our courses we observed certain student interaction, the nature of collaboration and the duration of involvement in an activity.

Among the techniques we used in order to collect the data was participant observation through keeping notes in a diary (Lapassade, 2000, Elliott, 1991, Jorgensen, 1989). We combined our direct observations with the content analysis of our videotaped courses (Fontaine, 1997). We triangulated this analysis by comparing the results of the two aforementioned techniques with the questionnaires given to our students at the end of the course. All three of them focused on professor-students interaction, student to student interaction and collaboration, student involvement, demonstration of interest.

As professors in the in-service training course for ECE teachers we adopted the experimental-participative teaching method. Our content objective was concerned with teaching about the psychomotor skills of young children. Our teaching focused mainly on the ECE teacher’s personality, feelings and expectations about our course and not necessarily on what they specifically will teach when they are be back in their classes. We made this decision because we believe that teacher’s communicability, intuition, rhythm of teaching, sensitivity to non-verbal messages and creativity are essential to their teaching styles.

In the first courses we emphasized a climate of confidence, safety and communication that supported educators who shared experiences and concerns. We also tried to create a pleasant and happy environment, because leisure during courses is often cited as a goal for adult learners (Else, 1986). We addressed to ECE teacher’s needs, desires and concerns. As a learning community we decided on the course content and through the

negotiation of various proposals we made an agreement that committed us to specific topic areas (Anagnostopoulou & Papaprokopiou, 2003).

A different method of evaluation was also adopted by the professors. ECE teachers were not evaluated in the achievement of activities or in the acquisition of new knowledge. Groups of ECE teachers instead decided the criteria for evaluation (Chretiennot, Hardy & Platone, 1989).

The thematic units that ECE teachers suggested mainly concerned personal needs rather than subject matter intended to improve their professional skills. Their expectations from the course were to feel pleasant, acquire new ideas and to feel free through having a better relationship with themselves. They specifically proposed the following thematic units, without knowing the professor’s intention about the content of the course:

- Activities in order to get to know each other better
- Techniques in how to constitute and motivate group work
- Activities for supporting group communication
- Awareness of one’s own body
- Improving self image and self respect
- Techniques for relaxation, breathing and speech training
- How body-language conveys meaning
- Activating imagination and reinforcing creativity

A basic «tool» of the course was the ECE teacher’s body. We began with concrete sensory-motor activities that activate the body of students and help in their awareness. We encouraged spontaneous activity and movement in space, bodily contact between them and their team and we provided space for relaxation. We continued with the observation and the discussion of new experiences and feelings throughout the activities. In the end, we connected the new experiences with previous ones and acquired new knowledge about the psychomotor education of young children. In this way the knowledge was created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984).

During the courses we followed an *active* technique of teaching (Goguelin, 1987) based on the principle that somebody best retains what he/she learns by combining action with speech and by classifying new knowledge into his/her previous knowledge. This technique is not always easily understood, and, yet, the participants in a training course are invited to appreciate the activity as a means of acquiring knowledge.

During the courses, the ECE teachers were either divided in small groups or they carried out individual experiential work according to our instructions. At the end of each activity there was a fifteen- to twenty-minute discussion among all the

¹ With the term “course” we mean a series of lectures with distinct goals.

participants, and an exchange of views and experiences, led to a conclusionary analysis.

Other techniques we used were:

- Simulated role-playing
- Case study work to analyze complicated situations learners would face at work (Walsh & Sheldon, 1991)
- Self-observation
- Projects at the end of the academic year that asked that the group focus on preparing a psychomotor activity (Helm & Katz, 2002).

At the end of the courses we observed through the experience of concrete activities and their personal experimentation that students abandoned their passive attitude toward learning and became reflective researchers of their own teaching styles and practices. They began to understand how important it is to experience a new pedagogical approach before applying it in the classroom.

Our role during the courses had radically changed, from what we maintained in previous years. At the beginning it was difficult to introduce experiential methods and sometimes we regressed to traditional lecturing and to the security of the blackboard. These lecturing periods mainly occurred when we did not feel we were in control of the students or when certain activities that we proposed did not have the expected result.

Our lack of experience in using these new techniques of adult education became apparent from the start. Through our parallel participation in an adult education program and from the content analysis of our videotaped lessons, we began to develop a "profile" to adopt a new role for ourselves that better coordinated our teaching within the course. The professor's role can now be described as both facilitator and mediator of knowledge.

We were sincerely interested in:

- Understanding the personal and social history of our students
- Assessing and benefiting from their previous experiences
- Organizing the learning environment in order to facilitate life-experienced learning (Kolb, 1984)
- Facilitating the dialogue between the students in order to help them consider it part of the learning procedure
- Choosing the appropriate course content that would address their needs
- Continuously evaluate the educational process

We tried hard to improve ECE teachers' interactions because when the levels of interaction are high, then learning increases (Tsay, 1998). This learning environment provided them with a friendly atmosphere and a feeling of safety so as to express their concerns and apprehensions.

Results

ECE Teachers' Perceptions: At the End of the Courses

At the end of each academic year, (1998-99, 1999-00 and 2000-01) we presented ECE teachers with anonymous questionnaires in order to evaluate our course and to learn about their perceptions about our newly introduced teaching method. Questionnaires contained both open and closed items and they asked about course, content, teaching methods, teaching techniques, course aims, interactions between professor and students, course evaluations of the professor and student, intentions in applying concrete activities in his/her personal and professional life etc.

We collected 105 questionnaires from a total population of 119 students. The questionnaire consisted of thirty questions. The answers of the open questions were treated with content analysis and the closed ones with statistical analysis. Below are listed only the answers we collected from the questionnaire that are relevant to the questions of our research.

The findings reveal that the ECE teachers reflected on the new learning process by suggesting:

For example, to the open question "*What new, unexpected elements did you find in the course?*" they answered:

- active participation instead of simple observation
- interaction with our colleagues through the exercises
- immediacy within the relationship with our professor
- activities for adults and not only for children
- the course is a change from traditional teaching and the everyday classroom routine
- using the body to experience things can lead to the acquisition of knowledge
- relief from muscular pains
- balanced combination of practice and theory

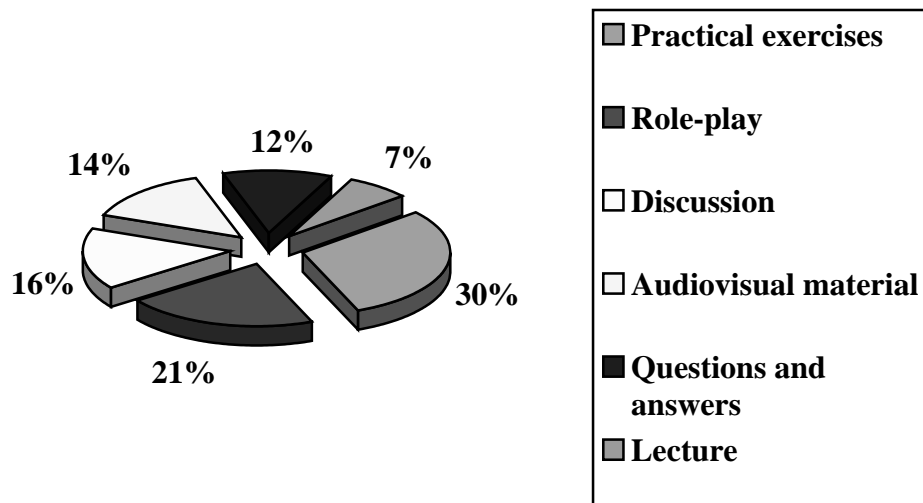
To the open question "*What do you believe would make the course more interesting?*" they answered:

- evaluating an activity at the same time as the function that it serves
- organizing daily schedules for kindergartens and analyzing the schedule in a group
- videotaped psychomotor activities in various kindergartens in Greece and abroad
- children's participation in certain parts of our courses
- better facilities and equipment
- small number of students in the courses

To the closed question "*Which of the techniques I used did you find effective?*" the highest percentage of effectiveness was given to practical exercises

(30%), role-play (21%), discussion (16%), using audiovisual aids (14%), questions and answers

(12%) and finally a very small percentage to lecturing (7%).



Graph 1

The techniques of teaching

To the open question “*What do you intend to use in your Kindergarten as a result of what you learned in the course?*” they answered:

- I will not hesitate to let the children “turn the world upside down” in order to experience it
- I will use relaxation, trust and communication activities in class
- It will help me deal with children in the kindergarten
- It will improve my respect for others and especially toward children
- It helps me perceive some things related to the children in a different and in a more productive way
- It assisted me in better understanding my children as more than just a brain
- It taught me to more effectively observe children

To the open question “*Do you intend to use what you learned in the course in your personal life? Yes or no, and why?*” they answered positively by stating:

- to relax
- to express myself spontaneously

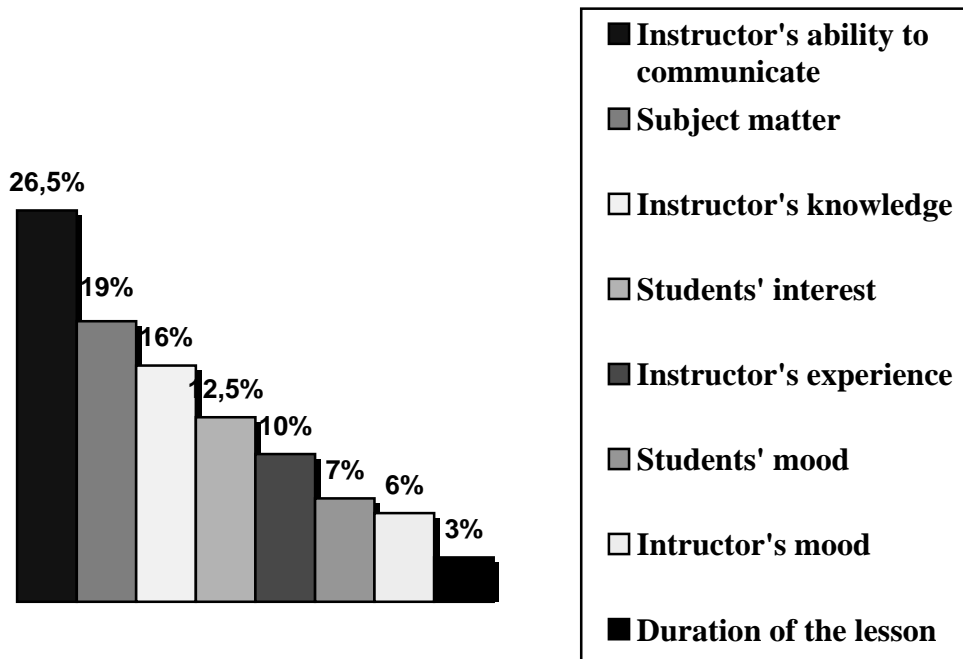
- to try to communicate more effectively with others
- to use movement in order to handle a lot of problems in my personal life
- to understand the way we react to the others

Only 7% answered negatively to the question above for the following reasons:

- Because I came here for professional training that I did not receive
- The content of teaching was not clear enough
- Because I prefer traditional lectures
- Because the courses were very few

In response to a question with a multiple-choice response set, student’s responded to “*What do you believe plays an important role during a course?*”, by remarking that:

- Professor’s ability to communicate (26.5%)
- The object of teaching (19%)
- Professor’s knowledge (16%)
- Students’ interest for certain course (12.5%)
- Professor’s teaching experience (10%)
- Students’ mood (7%)
- Professor’s mood at a given moment (6%)
- The duration of the course (3%)



Graph 2

Factors that influence the conduct of the course

The students added their own free comments to the previous question such as: the professor's love for his/her subject, the originality in an era dominated by copies, the professor's feeling what he/she is teaching, the absence of assessment marks, the professor's scientific background, the group dynamics, and the relationship between the students and the professor.

The students were very enthusiastic about the course. They considered the teaching method very unusual for an academic context, their active participation satisfied them and they claimed that they had learned many things about the subject. They reported they would modify their traditional way of thinking about teaching techniques and their perceptions of preschooler's capabilities.

A Year After the In-Service Training Course

In order to see how students implemented the new teaching perspective we sent questionnaires by postal mail to the students who attended our course in 1998-99, 2001-02 and 2002-03.

The questionnaires were anonymous and included open questions. Some of the questions asked were:

- Based on your subject area, which course most influenced your personal perceptions?
- Was there a change in your mode of teaching and dealing with your pupils?
- Which of the activities that you experienced in my course did you apply in your class?
- How did the children respond to these activities?

- Was my teaching sufficient in order to meet your needs in your work?
- Which other course of the training program had a positive effect on your work?

The percentage of questionnaires returned to us (40%) was too small to draw any conclusions or to make generalizations. The small percentage of ECE teachers that participated in the completion of the post-questionnaires a year later demonstrated as Moser and Kalton (1971) suggest that a lack of response is a problem, because practice has repeatedly proved that, usually, the people who don't answer questionnaires are different from those who do answer them.

As this part of the data collected was not helpful in illustrating our argument we decided to use informal interviews with 20% of the ECE teachers that we managed to meet over the following years.

From the interview data, ECE teachers maintained that our course about psychomotor activities and the way it was taught influenced them in their personal life, their relations with others and the children and in the improvement of their self-esteem. In their work they used the exercises of relaxation for children, communication, body expression, activities of creativeness and imagination. They all agreed that the children accepted the new activities with enthusiasm and they kept asking them to repeat them.

In addition, ECE teachers concluded that very few courses from the twenty-five accomplished by other professors, during the two year in-service training, influenced their manner of work or helped them renew their knowledge. Most ECE teachers

continued following their old teaching methods and the two years of in-service training was just viewed as a break from their routine. The courses that drew their most positive comments were those that broached the subject of communication in the classroom and those that had a practical application.

Conclusions

The 26 hours of teaching during the semester led ECE teachers to the adoption of new attitudes and perceptions about their personal and professional life. Most importantly, some teachers started approaching their children and teaching differently by emphasizing the importance of using the 'body' as experiential tool in learning through pleasurable activities. Therefore, they stopped worrying strictly about the acquisition of knowledge and instead shifted their focus toward 'how' to teach children.

Through the questionnaires and the interviews, ECE teachers pointed out the need for extending the duration of the in-service training program and suggested that it be accompanied with a direct practical application within the kindergarten classroom. The personal and professional implication of teachers can, consequently, be strengthened (Eadap, 2003) through a type of

continuous school based training and support teachers to connect the acquired knowledge with the daily reality in the kindergartens. This in-service training has to take into consideration the students' needs and to involve them actively in the learning process. ECE teachers' comments were focused on an academic style of teaching, which did not give them the possibility to be involved in a process of active learning as a way in which to learn new information. Implicit course objectives and the lack of professorial experience about the school's expectations, norms and rules disappointed many students. Their preference for some professors was mainly connected to the professor's personality and his/her interest in the difficulties that they cope with in every day school life.

Teachers might undertake the responsibility of their educational action, allowing them to check continuously, and self-regulate their involvement and to confirm systematically the appropriateness of their teaching techniques. This type of in-service training can improve the educational workplace by strengthening the professional role of the teacher and by establishing in the school unit a positive pedagogical climate for learning and social exchanges between children and adults.

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