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Using reflective practice to enhance professional development through written, spoken and visual materials

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Abstract

The study provides a two-year reflective overview of the professional development process of one early education professional team (RODACIE: Romanian Danish Center for Integrated Education Center in Bucharest). This paper reflects on various materials gathered within a three years action-research project in which the authors are involved. More specifically we discuss results of photo analysis of everyday interactions with children and a self-assessment tool on professional practices of RODACIE staff. Both photos and self-assessment tools give practitioners the opportunity a) to reflect on their professional practices in relation to everyday interactions with children and b) to focus on their own practices in relation to different formal indicators of professional development through their own cognitive and emotional interpretation of practice. Main topics approached through crosscutting analysis of written, spoken and visual materials are the following: health and nutrition, care and development, planning and spontaneous, body and mind, autonomy and discipline, competition and cooperation etc.

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1. Paper rationale

Set up in 2012, RODACIE intends to be an innovative professional development laboratory, nurtured by Romanian and Danish values and quality early education trends. RODACIE development grounds on partnership between two universities, one non-governmental organisation (ProVocatie) and DGASPC (The General Direction of

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Child Protection in Bucharest, Sector 1 and involves experts and trainers from both countries.

There are 13 full-time employees. The structure of the staff is different from a traditional crèche in Romania. The medical model, which is the mainstream model in Romania is replaced by an integrated educational model. Each member of the staff - the nurse, the teacher and cook – is playing an educational role therefore they complement each other in regular activities in the crèche. Up to 7 out of 13 staff members are contracted as educators and only two as medical nurses. They are supplied by a number of Romanian and Danish bachelor interns.

Romanian and Danish experts are working with the staff in order to implement a child-centered approach which balances educational values from both cultural contexts. Researchers play the critical friends role in order to stimulate the change process by shadowing and mirroring professional development of RODACIE staff. From this perspective we intend to document the change process within a community of practitioners which implement an innovative early education practice. Main question we address is how to enhance professional development by reflective practice stimulated by on-the-job training nurtured by written, spoken and visual materials generated by daily practice in the crèche?

2. Theoretical foundation and related literature

The theoretical ground of our research is founded on professional development framework and reflective practice stimulated through various methodological approaches (narratives, reflection on own practices based on standards and photo taking).

Professional development can be structured and organized in a number of different ways, and for a number of different reasons. While most professional development experiences might be considered as means of introducing or enhancing knowledge, skills and attitudes, it cannot be assumed that this is uncontested (Kennedy, 2005). Thus, Balduzzi (2011) considers that the development of educators' professionalism is strictly linked to environment, to institutional culture (rules, practices, habits etc.) and to relationships between colleagues, children and families.

Therefore, we can assume that teachers in early childhood education will feel at their most professional level if they are given the opportunities to understand and explore teaching and learning in their own contexts and feel trust in finding solutions to problems and improving their practice. Taking into consideration such an understanding of professional practice, the reflexivity becomes an attitude and a fundamental cognitive tool for the development of professionalism (Schön, 1983). Trying to analyze and expand Schön's views on reflection as a tool for professional development (1983) Eraut launches the idea of embracing a broader view of the concept by redefining the key prepositions); 'reflection in' refers to context, 'reflection on' refers to focus and 'reflection for' refers to purpose (Eraut, 1995).

Analyzing reflection in professional development of teachers, Davis (2006) has differentiated between productive and unproductive reflection, stating that unproductive reflection "is mainly descriptive, without much analysis, and involves listing ideas rather than connecting them logically" (p.284). In contrast, productive reflection includes questioning assumptions, being open to different perspectives, being analytical and able to generate alternative solutions. From another perspective on reflection as a tool for professional development of teachers, Larrivee (2008) defined four levels of reflection (pre-reflection, surface reflection, pedagogical reflection and critical reflection). We used as a framework Larrivee's levels and adapted it to specific characteristic of early childhood practitioners' professional development:

- Pre-reflection – represents the 'zero' level of reflection in which educators react to children actions and situations automatically, without conscious consideration of alternatives;
- Surface reflection – educators' reflections focus on strategies used to reach predetermined goals;
- Pedagogical reflection – educators reflect on educational goals, theories underlying approaches, and connections between theoretical principles and practice;
- Critical reflection – teachers reflect on moral and ethical implications and consequences of their practice on children development.

Another conceptual landmark is generated by our methodological approach used to stimulate reflective practice. We chose narrative materials as an effective approach to stimulate reflective practice for several reasons. The

narrative key is necessary for understanding the others' actions (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 219): "when we succeed to establish and understand what someone is doing, we always tend to place a particular episode in the context of a series of narrative histories which are equally histories of the individuals to whom they refer to and of the frameworks within they act and suffer". Because we all live narratives and understand our life in a narrative key, the narrative form is the most appropriate to understand other people actions. Many of contemporary thinkers argue that the narrative way is a supreme means to transform the otherwise chaotic and shapeless events into a coherent, meaningful corpus. Bruner considers that human brain "operates" with stories, sets in motion stories. As instrument of reflection on educational practice, the narratives embodies a significant range of dual couples, e.g.:

- history-contemporaneity: in a certain way, educators are auto-biographers and biographers. The narrative form can be used both as a mirror (when we learn about ourselves transforming daily experience into something more profound), and as a window (when we use narrative to examine believes, behaviours and perspectives of our former, present and future colleagues);
- individual-group: the stories illuminate a person's life experience and thus they evoke other people's stories and accounts, highlighting relationships between them;
- reasoning - feeling: narratives argue against the dichotomies rooted in the Western thinking, relating what we know with what we feel and connecting thinking and acting. The educator reacts more and more against an «antiseptic», absolutely neutral, «purely rational» perspective on teaching and learning. The narratives connect thinking with feeling and acting, combining our personal and professional selves; Professionals working within the early education field have more emotional involvement than professionals from other levels (Osgood 2006, Stevenson 2014);
- simplicity-complexity: narratives shade the difference between theory and practice, being simultaneously concrete and abstract. Professional development of educators or children's genuine learning do not follow an orderly and hierarchical progression. Both professional development and learning are rather incorporated in contexts marked by private persons, places, things, cultures specific to schools (Ulrich, 2009, p. 47).

We invited RODACIE teachers to generate written and spoken narratives and to share with the researchers and own colleagues' stories about experiences and critical incidents occurred in their daily activities. Narratives are connected to a set of professional standards, which are relevant to early education and also to the focus and mission of RODACIE (social inclusion for disadvantaged children). First published in 2002, the "ISSA Pedagogical Standards" consist of 7 standards with several indicators under each Standard: Individualization, Learning Environment, Family Participation, Teaching Strategies for Meaningful Learning, Planning and Assessment and Professional Development. In 2005 a standard on social inclusion was added, in order to emphasize the need to build quality practice on respect for diversity.

Third type of reflective materials consists in taking photos from daily activities with children. Knoblauch, Baer, Laurier, Petschke & Schnettler (2008) underline the fact that being accepted as a subjective and reflexive form of qualitative data production, methods based on photography and video are now entrenched in major fields of inquiry, including educational research. Grady (2008) considers that photographic data provide the direct record of the actual events being investigated than any of the other major forms of data collection used by social researchers, by also capturing the immediacy of the moment as it appears to the picture taken. Fasoli (2003) underlines that recent sociocultural perspectives in early childhood education emphasize the relationship of the images of childhood held by practitioners to their practice in early childhood education. Thus, their suggestive nature moves us beyond the moment photographed, evoking past memories, feelings and experiences (Berger & Mohr, 1982; Holland, 1992; Wells, 1997; Prosser, 2000, cited in Fasoli, 2003).

Taking all these views in consideration we can consider that watching photographs of experiences helps practitioners in early childhood education to re-collect, re-experience, and interpret their professional practices. Thus, the immediate nature of the photograph captures emotional aspects, embodied perceptions, relational understandings, contextual factors of the practice of early childhood educators in addition to verbalized comments.

Within the early childhood education context, relatively little empirical research has focused on the influence of teachers' thinking and reflection on their pedagogical interactions with young children (Cherrington & Loveridge, 2014). Even though, Moyles et al. (2002) report that practitioners encounter difficulties in articulating the

connections between their “underlying beliefs, their reflection, knowledge and thinking within their practice” (2002, p. 467).

3. Methodology

We used a qualitative research methodology. Since June 2012 when the project started, we made use of multiple methods and instruments to frame the institutional and professional development. We stimulated the educators to generate written and spoken materials (stories about critical incidents) and visual materials (drawings and photos). Within such a working framework the participants generated new realities of meaning and knowledge, by in-depth analysis and reflection. Interconnected narratives and visual materials represent a rich opportunity for professional development of early education practitioners. We challenged weekly discussions on a regular basis and in-depth analysis about the understanding of what participants experienced during their professional activities. The analysis of multiple texts has the purpose to assist researchers in learning and understanding the impact of participants' experiences, but also invites participants to learn about their own professional development and it gives voice to practitioners. The use of such tools represented a challenge per se, as long as none of the participants have had similar experience.

Materials we collected include:

1) **visual materials**: photographs taken by participants. All participants took photographs with their own cameras. The photographs were an important means of recording experiences, as well as a means of persuading the viewer of particular aspects of the experience and a focus on the immediacy or reality depicted in the photographs

2) **spoken materials**: discussions between researchers and group in order to reflect upon photos

3) **written materials**: texts generated as reflection assignments, self-assessment of professional practices

More specifically, in this study we focused on materials gathered from June 2013- February 2014 (Table 1).

Table 1: Data collection approach

<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Time Frame</i>	<i>Data collection methods</i>
Reflect on own experience and highlight critical incidents, connected to children, colleagues, parents or other actors involved in daily practice	January 2013 - ongoing	Narratives (practice-generated stories and critical incidents)
Reflect on their professional practices in relation to everyday interactions with children, by focusing on learning and development of children	June 2013 - December 2013	Photo analysis
Focus on their own practices in relation to different formal indicators of professional development in early childhood education (ISSA, 2009)	February 2014	Self-assessment of professional practice

4. Results: reflection on professional practices

4.1. Reflection on own practice: ways to stimulate it

In the beginning of 2012, educators have shown a low interest in expressing through stories or sharing critical incidents. Most of the stories focus on problems with parents, conflicts with non-educational staff and difficulties related to overwhelming daily duties. We investigated different ways of stimulating the sharing process and telling stories from the beginning of the project, but educational staff remained rather reluctant to this way of expressing personal insight related to own practice. In order to counterbalance this attitude, we invited teachers to express in other ways. We stimulated them to draw important incidents, situations, interactions, feelings, children or colleagues reactions and so on. Even if the weekly discussions gravitated around their activities, success and difficulties they faced, teachers showed a bit more interest, but still low involvement in critical analysis of the ideas shared amongst the staff.

Third attempt to stimulate reflective practice was represented by photo taking. This activity was embraced with more enthusiasm by the pedagogical staff due to three reasons. First, we directly connected the photo taking with the focus highlighted for each week. Every week or every two weeks, educators have a special focus in planning the activities with children (e.g. interactions, movements, expressions, lights and shadows, musical activities etc.). Second, we made the agreement with the Danish experts that we all use photos as evidence of RODACIE activity, and also as base for deep professional reflection. Third reason was a pragmatic one: teachers used photos for individual portfolios to provide examples for indicators specific to children progress; therefore teachers found photos as an aid for children observation and progress assessment and also an effective tool for communication with parents.

4.2. Photo analysis

Researchers used taking photo and photo analysis as a group reflection exercise. The process of reflection on photos from June 2013 to December 2013 carried out in few stages.

In the beginning (June 2013) researchers invited educators to take pictures on a specific topic for two weeks. From all the photos taken they had to choose only three that they believed to be the most significant. The themes were agreed with the educators and changed every two weeks. Themes included: interactions between children, interactions level of analysis, teachers became aware about the power games and power imbalance that many times adults nurture within children groups. Educators realized that sometimes they reinforce voluntary and many times unconsciously imbalance in relationships and some children are closer to adults while others are more distant. Discussion went deeper into inclusion and exclusion, sympathy, empathy and rejection, situations that can increase positive or negative emotions in social interactions. Thus, we can observe that even if in photographs are captured primarily positive elements and successful practices, and in oral comments are frequently mentioned events, negative reactions, conflicts and problematic behaviors. In order to analyze educators' reflections in the photo analysis sessions we used Larrivee's levels of reflection.

Table 2: Types of reflections on photo analysis

Larrivee's levels	Educators' reflections
Pre-reflection	Educators describe events that took place, without any considerations upon pedagogical objectives <i>"Sabina and Dani took a seat together to arrange it for activities"</i> (June) <i>"Sophy consistently show interest in various aspects around it, especially in nature"</i> (June) <i>"Iulia smells the cucumber"</i> (July) <i>"Ema known the routines and can anticipate what is going to happen"</i> (July) <i>"Children enjoy movement activities. Children participate with pleasure if it is a rhythmic song"</i> (November)
Surface reflection	Educators reflect upon events and practices used to reach predetermined goals. - educators reflect upon children involvement in an activity <i>"Some children initiate activity, others are just observers. And even as an observer, the children learn"</i> (July) - educators reflect upon ways to shape routines <i>"The game proposed by the educators becomes the child's free play and through practice become routine elements".</i> <i>"Going down stairs to play outside became a routine for children because we have a melody and children act like it is a game"</i> (July) - educators reflect upon the changes that took place due to strategies used to reach predetermined goals <i>"Mateia used to bit children. When she had the tendency to do this, we intervened. Not roughly, because we could amplify them, but firm and clear. Now she hugs everybody. I believe that the environment created helped in modifying this behaviour"</i> (September)
Pedagogical reflection	Educators reflect upon events and formulate reflective questions about alternative ways to address situations - educators try to identify alternative ways to approach different types of behavior or conflicts among children <i>"Dani always wants to play with the new toys. Initially children argues upon a toy car. How can we approach challenging behaviors?"</i> (July) - educators reflect upon influence of resources used in modifying behaviour <i>"Children preferred to cultivate seeds in the hotbed than play with a toy. I consider that the resources you offer the child help a lot in modifying behaviours"</i> (September) - educators reflect upon the balance between planned and spontaneous activities and upon the relationship between the

	model educators create and spontaneous use of resources by children <i>“Children use musical instruments creatively, but only after the adult initiates an activity.”</i> (November) <i>“Musical activities can take place anywhere and they don’t have to be all the time planned because children also improvise with other objects if they want “to make” music ”</i> (November) educators try to identify different pedagogical goals that can be achieved through an activity <i>“Making a bonfire is a social activity. Staying around a bonfire can develop a lot of skills. What other skills or behaviours can this activity stimulate?”</i> (September)
Critical reflection	Educators reflect upon events and consequences of their practice on children development - educators reflect upon the consequences of educators’ behavior upon children behavior <i>“Some children follow Ema and invest her as a leader. She takes over the adult’s role. How important is the capacity of children to learn from adults, both in situations in which adults are aware of this behaviour or in situations where they are not?”</i> (July) - educators reflect upon consequences that other factors might have upon children behaviour and formulate reflective questions about pedagogical approaches they can take <i>“How can we stimulate all children taking in consideration that in their families they don’t receive the same types of cognitive, sensory, emotional stimulation?”</i> (October) <i>“How can we ensure the wellbeing of the children taking in consideration the fact that frequency is fluctuating and children do not get to know each other better?”</i> (November)

4.3 Self-assessment of professional practice

In February 2014 researchers invited educators to reflect on own practice having as reference professional standards at the international level (ISSA 2009). The self-assessment instrument has seven indicators (Learning environment interactions, family and community, inclusion, diversity and democratic values, planning and assessment, teaching strategies for meaningful learning, personal and professional development). Educators filled in the form using three options: inappropriate, good start and good practice. Filling in the self-assessment form, teachers expressed a large range of appreciations. However, as an overall picture, they expressed their confidence of already being very well prepared for quality educational practices. Taking into account each of the indicators presented in the sheet, the self-assessment results are showed by the following chart (Chart1).

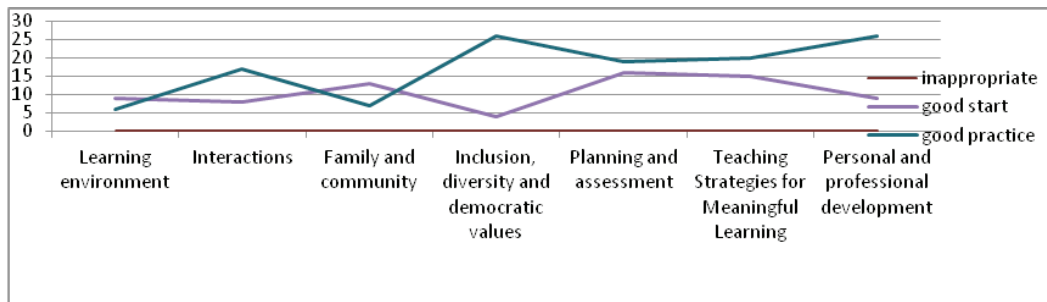


Chart 1: Self-assessment evaluations scores

Most teachers evaluate themselves as being on high ability level. According to self-evaluation data provided, we can observe that none of the teacher found any of her practice as being on an “inappropriate” level. Thus, educators expressed that there is little room for improvement, as long as they perceived their practice as very good. It is also noticeable that the main indicators which the educators considered already achieved as “good practices” are the following (see Chart 1):

- Inclusion, diversity and democratic values
- Personal and professional development
- Teaching strategies for meaningful learning

Teachers placed themselves on a very high level of professional competence based on ISSA instrument.

Discussions on self-assessment generated debates around a realistic training needs assessment. As a consequence, educators suggested that for further development the trainers should focus on the practices on a lower level (“good start” level). More specifically, educators need support in improving their skills for following issues: learning environment, interactions, family and community and planning and assessment.

5. Discussions

Researchers have experienced challenging professional development contexts, generated by conflicting opinions expressed by RODACIE staff in different contexts and using different means. At one hand, pedagogical staff expressed high level of confidence in their professional skills, even if most of them lack experience in working with young children within an integrated educational paradigm. At the other hand, they complained about difficulties they face, about conflicts with parents or critical incidents with problematic behaviors of children. The tension between what was told and what was shared in various contexts generated by the researchers raised the issue of parallel discourses depending not only on circumstances, but also on the self-perceived level of exposure and personal vulnerability. Teachers were reluctant to tell stories about own practice, to share what they experience and over-scored their professional abilities in the field of early education.

Taking pictures generated the paradigm shift for reflective practice. Staff became more interested in details and gradually went from a descriptive approach to a reflective one. They started to back up comments on photos taken with stories and sharing about critical incidents. Thus, it is notable to stress that even if while describing photographs the educators focused on positive elements and successful practices, in oral comments they mostly discussed problems encountered, challenges faced. Overall, educators became more aware and able to understand better their boundaries and insights in approaching critical incidents.

We found out that taking pictures and analyzing pictures in group represented the most meaningful tool for generating reflective practice. Pictures taken in RODACIE and also photos taken in Danish creches (Børnehuset and Skovtrolden) made discussions flourishing, expressing thoughts and emotions on professional matters. Photos had an impact on group dynamic (people helped each other to take pictures, they interchange roles and became interested to share more), made them more focused and more aware on what is meaningful and, more important, stimulated second level analysis. Having a closer up on details, teachers became able to observe details of interactions, subtle role taking strategies and many types of children behaviors and strategies.

The results of overestimated self-perceived level of competency in self-assessment prove that by taking as a reference an external professional framework (ISSA 2009), educators are tempted to answer in a formal and even superficial manner. Filling in the indicators sheet is less meaningful than having the opportunity to analyze own work and photos (as evidence of children or adults behaviors) and to reflect upon them. Educators showed more availability to speak and improve their practices, more flexibility in identifying issues and situations and demonstrated a greater willingness to work on them. Even though we stressed that photo analysis had a much more impact on educators’ professional development, photo analysis could also help in reporting to formal professional standards.

6. Conclusions

The educators agreed that photos represent an excellent opportunity to reflect upon professional practices and children development, but also for having items for children’s portfolios; as a result of this experience educators suggested that every child should have a photo album in chronological order. Further photo analysis and discussion on details could help RODACIE staff in raising awareness about parallel discourses on similar realities. At one hand photos mainly capture positive elements and successful practices; at another hand the oral comments frequently focus on unpleasant events, undesirable behaviors, negative reactions and conflicts. After five months educators became able to reflect more on selected photos and to find together alternative solutions for the situations observed. We can conclude that photo analysis can be used in various activities and contexts (building relationship with parents, developing children’s portfolios, carrying on observations and evaluation of children, pre-service training and in-service professional development of educators). In addition to traditional tools for reflecting on professional

development (standard based self-assessment forms, critical incidents analysis), the use of visual materials (especially photos) represents an effective approach for enhancing professional development. Photos invites to reflection on different matters, are non-intrusive and easy to be taken. Photos make all social actors visible (both children and adults) and give everybody a place within the social and interactional arena; some photos have been selected and displayed on RODACIE walls (children recognize themselves and remember activities and contexts). The reluctant attitude from the beginning, connected to uncomfortable feelings and overwhelming tasks was gradually replaced by confidence in finding interesting experiences, by proudness of sharing insights, more structured and purposeful approach to different situations and better capacity to reflect on own professional practice on a regular basis.

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