

Networking and professional development among teachers of Early Childhood Education

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Abstract: This paper evaluates the professional development of 24 teachers involved in the Early Childhood Education-CPD Centre for Teachers-University Network ([blind review]). Collaborative research-action is carried out with teachers and pupils of Early Childhood Education, an adviser from the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Centre for Teachers, researchers, and teacher training undergraduates from the University of [blind review] ([blind review]). Taking a qualitative approach, through interviews, focus groups, and research journals, the benefits obtained by the teachers through their involvement in the [blind review] network are identified: (1) Their colleagues offer them emotional support and provide examples of good practices; (2) The teacher training undergraduates provide technological resources and the possibility of calmly observing what goes on in the classroom; (3) The researchers foster processes of reflection about practice and endorse the validity of the Project Approach; (4) The adviser provides continuing professional development.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education Professional Network; communities of practice; project approach; knowledge development; teacher collaboration; teaching practice.

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1. Introduction

Collaborative research-action is considered to be a fundamental tool for the professional development of the teaching profession, facilitating critical reflection on

educational practice (Elliott, 1993; Liston and Zeichner, 1993). On the basis of this understanding, the Early Childhood Education-CPD Centre for Teachers-University Network (hereinafter, [blind review]) was constructed. In this network, teachers and pupils of Early Childhood Education work with an adviser from the Continuing Professional Development Centre for Teachers (CEP), researchers and teacher training undergraduates from the University of [blind review] ([blind review]). The aim is to reflect collaboratively on the application of the Project Approach (hereinafter, PA) in Early Childhood Education classrooms with children aged three to six years old. The teachers and teacher training undergraduates develop the PA in the classroom. The research team (teacher, teacher training undergraduates, researcher and adviser) analyses and provides critical feedback.

The [blind review] network focuses on the questions and problems raised by the teachers, researching and enriching the frameworks they use to interpret and improve their professional performance, as well as the ways of defining and understanding their work (Korthagen, 2004; Schön, 2002; Zeichner, 2005). The intention is not to reproduce the traditional hierarchical relationship between those who consider themselves to be experts in educational matters (university researchers) and those who take on the role of implementing educational innovations in schools (teachers). The aim is to overcome this duality of roles and move towards dialogical learning (Aubert, García and Racionero, 2009), based on shared reflection and joint participation in practical experiences.

The PA is chosen as a focus for analysis because it responds to the shared interest of those involved in the network, and because it offers the possibility of applying a model of education centred on pupil activity (Rivière, 1999; Rodríguez-Mena, 2007), and grounded in socio-constructivist theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1988). Educational scenarios are understood as ecological contexts (Brofenbrenner, 1979) as well as settings for social interaction (Coll and Onrubia, 1996; Edwards and Mercer, 1994).

This paper explores the professional development achieved by teachers involved in the [blind review] network, according to the opinion of the teachers themselves, the adviser, the researchers, and the university undergraduates.

2. Method

Collaborative research-action (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Velasco and Díaz de Rada, 2009) is developed as a qualitative approach method to observe and understand educational practice. Teacher training undergraduates collect data as they develop the PA in the classroom, and eight meetings are held (one per week) to reflect, together with the teacher and a researcher, on the educational action developed.

2.1. *Participants and context*

During the 2012/13 academic year, 24 teacher training undergraduates, three university researchers, 24 teachers of Early Childhood Education, an adviser from the CPD Centre for Teachers, and 485 children aged three to six took part in the [blind review] network. The total number of people involved in the [blind review] network is 538.

2.2. Exploratory hypothesis

What are the benefits obtained by the teachers of Early Childhood Education involved in the [blind review] network through working with the PA as part of their professional development, according to the opinions of the agents who make up this network?

2.3. Instruments and information analysis

In order to triangulate the information and improve the credibility of this research, various instruments were used (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Davies and Dodd, 2002): (1) semi-structured interviews with three teachers; (2) focus group (Harding, 2013) involving 17 teachers, one adviser, and two university researchers; and (3) 24 research journals kept by the university undergraduates.

The participants' discourse was analysed using a mixed procedure. Following the guidelines proposed by Thomas (2003), two types of units of analysis were identified: (1) Dimensions, which are more general in their nature and scope; and (2) Categories, which are specifications of the dimensions and are more micro in their scope. Inter-rater agreement was applied to construct the definitive hermeneutical matrix, which includes the dimensions and categories that were encoded and agreed by the researchers. Finally, they were encoded, assigning to each collective a set of initials and the corresponding order number (TE, teachers; S, students; R, university researchers; and A, adviser). For example, TE4 would indicate the teacher identified with the number four.

Table 1. Hermeneutical matrix. Authors' own

Dimensions	Categories
1. Benefits obtained from the team of teachers involved in the [blind review] network	1.1. Professional teaching development
	1.2. Relationships with families
	1.3. Ideas for new activities
	1.4. Sharing the analysis of weaknesses
	1.5. Emotional support
2. Benefits obtained from the teacher training undergraduates	2.1. Support and «renewed energy» in the classroom
	2.2. Existence of an «outside perspective»
	2.3. Additional resources
	2.4. Teaching documentation
3. Benefits obtained from the university researchers	3.1. Guidelines to develop the PA
	3.2. Contact with the university
	3.3. Sharing professional interests
4. Benefits obtained from the adviser	4.1. Contact with the CPD Centre for Teachers
	4.2. Training about specific subjects
	4.3. Sharing experiences of innovation

3. Results

According to the opinions expressed by the teachers themselves, participating in the [blind review] network has enabled them to maintain contact with fellow colleagues who are also using the PA in their classrooms. The various meetings promoted by this network have given them a professional context in which to describe, share, and learn different from experiences with regard to organising the PA. Because it is a very open and flexible methodology, there is no single way of approaching learning; rather, within each classroom, the projects are organised differently. Having the opportunity to share experiences fosters a very important environment for professional development. It enables them to learn from the experiences of others, whilst at the same time working alongside their colleagues to subject their own decisions made within each context to critical revision.

TE4: «I find it very rewarding working with colleagues in the [blind review] network. You always, always learn something...».

TE12: «Because the PA is so broad, so different, I love talking to my colleagues about what they are doing, how they organise things... You always find new ideas that help you to analyse your practice».

Another of the benefits is the possibility of learning strategies to foster the participation of families. They are all aware, on the basis of their accumulated experience, that the role of families in developing the PA is fundamental. They explain that there are actions they would not have thought of and that, when listening to their colleagues, they have found very positive for increasing family collaboration.

TE2: «Obviously, we already know that involving all families is not an easy task. Talking about how to improve their collaboration, particularly among more apathetic families, always gives me lots of ideas».

TE5: «Colleagues always give you an interesting perspective. It made me think about our attitudes as teachers...».

The team of colleagues also provides them with ideas about the different creative activities they develop in their classrooms. Because it is an open, unpredictable and global methodology, creativity and the activities carried out are very varied. They create surprise and are a source of inspiration.

TE6: «I loved the idea M^a Cruz explained the other day about building pyramids... I wouldn't have thought of it...».

TE11: «I paid close attention to the explanation of the project about «My body»; it gave me lots of ideas and helped me to evaluate our own project».

Meeting with other professionals who are involved in developing the same methodology also provides a suitable environment to analyse weaknesses, doubts, and uncertainties. Compiling opinions, ideas and analyses of classroom situations that pose dilemmas offers them the opportunity for collaborative reflection, which is more enriching than a single personal perspective.

TE17: «It really helped me the day that I was so worried about Antonio (name of a pupil)... You helped me to make the decision to talk to the family and explain to them what was going on».

TE4: «I still remember when the project on experiments was collapsing. I thought the problem was with me, and your perspectives on the situation helped me a lot».

The teachers also expressed that the professional circumstances in their respective schools are not the most favourable at times. They explained that working with the PA in schools that are used to working with the more traditional commercial method can give rise to a kind of «culture shock». There is a fair amount of resistance from other colleagues and the school administration because they do not understand, for example, the relationship established with the families and the active learning dynamic undertaken by the pupils. Some of the teachers stated that they have felt rejected and professionally isolated. They claimed that if they had not been firmly convinced that it was the best thing for the children, they would have given up. It is a methodology that requires a great deal of effort, self-confidence and the capacity to overcome adversity rooted in the culture and educational practices of some schools.

TE3: «I actually felt much more confident... I had arguments to defend what I was doing and why I was doing it».

TE1: «When I went to school and I closed the door to my classroom I felt alone, completely alone... I felt tremendous hostility. I felt like they were saying: Who does she think she is? She thinks she knows more than we do?».

TE6: «It's a good job that in the [blind review] network we support one another and we can get things off our chest... It's like a therapy session (laughs)...».

This next section refers to the learning achieved by the teachers through sharing the classroom with the teacher training undergraduates during their development and reflection on the PA. Firstly, they allude to the personal support they received and the renewed energy they felt in the classroom. The students' lack of experience is compensated by their motivation, interest and desire to act as teachers. A positive synergy is created between the experience of the teachers and the enthusiasm of the university students. However, the teacher training undergraduates at times also feel like they are giving the teachers extra work through their questions, doubts and insecurities. This perception, however, is not expressed by the teachers.

TE3: «Marta (teacher training undergraduate) has given me a lot, certainly, because you see her excitement, her enthusiasm to take it all in, practise everything, learn everything... which is a real motivation...».

TE7: «When you get to class and you see her there, so eager, with lots of good initiatives... it's like an energy that spreads to you...».

S3: «I think M^a Cruz has felt comfortable with me. We have really connected and we just have to look at one another to know what we want from one another».

S4: «Sometimes I felt like the poor teacher was a bit overwhelmed with the children and me asking her questions all the time...».

S24: «The teacher treated me like a colleague... She gave me all the attention I needed».

The teachers and the adviser stated that sharing the classroom with someone who is not normally part of the class (university student) fosters the existence of an external perspective. It offers the possibility of gaining a little distance from the classroom dynamic and observing behaviours and situations more calmly. When a teacher is right in the middle of the action, the demands of the children and the activities can prevent them from seeing what is happening in detail.

A1: «I think that having a teacher training undergraduate in the classroom enables the teacher to be at a remove from the action and get a better view of what is happening in class».

TE5: «When my student began to integrate and could take the class, I could observe what was happening more, how each child participated, which activities went well...».

Most of the undergraduates expressed the conviction that they had mainly contributed technological resources. They stated that the search for resources on the internet was a constant factor. They felt useful at being able to offer this help and indicated that the teachers valued this function highly.

S22: «I looked up countless things on the internet... When I got to class and I would show them to my supervisor, she always thought they were really good».

S12: «I was always thinking about what resources I could bring. Most of them I found on the internet. The children were delighted because they love computers...».

TE8: «Yes, they helped, especially with the materials and resources they brought. They are very creative and I was surprised at their ability to find things with the computer. They are really good with it...».

Another positive contribution for the teachers involved in the [blind review] network is the pedagogical documentation created by the teacher training undergraduates. The university students recorded and compiled different kinds of evidence (drawings, work, assembly registers, photographs, videos...) in relation to the development of the PA. This material was used to analyse and reflect on educational action in the weekly sessions held between the teacher training undergraduate, the teacher and the researcher.

TE14: «The fact that the students compile and record the most important things happening in the classroom is a great opportunity. Normally you don't have time to take that many photos or to analyse the children's work».

TE17: «When we had the weekly reflection session, it was very useful to have the documentation, because it really refreshes your memory and enables you to analyse what has happened a lot better».

S19: «One of the things the teacher was really pleased with was the pedagogical documentation. When I gave her the material she loved the fact that there was a record of what we had done».

The teachers also analyse the contributions made by the university researchers. They focus their attention on three aspects: (1) The clarification of guidelines when developing the PA; (2) Contact with the University; and (3) The importance of sharing the same professional interests. The teachers indicate that the PA methodology, because it is so open, is at times a little complex as it is largely unstructured. Although the flexibility and contextual nature of this method must be respected, offering guidelines as a means of orientation can be useful.

TE9: «This year, I think we have been better organised. The students clearly understood what they had to do, each stage of a project...».

TE3: «The guidance is always useful... Not to be taken as law, but to guide you a little on your path».

R1: «The guidance provided on the PA has been very useful, giving a common framework of action for teachers and students».

The teachers feel that being in contact with the University is favourable to their professional development. They understand that a great deal needs to be changed with regard to initial training, and that interest in this methodology emanating from the university is a sign that approaches are being updated and good practices developed in schools are being recognised.

TE15: «I think it's great that the University is setting up these initiatives... I think that, finally, they are getting closer to schools to evaluate and understand what is happening in practice».

TE18: «I'm glad to see that they know about the PA... A few years ago, we had no idea what it was. I had to find my own way after I left university».

TE1: «Collaborating with the University benefits all of us. I also feel enriched by being in contact with you (researchers)».

Finally, sharing the same professional interest in the PA generates group awareness, a stimulating professional reference that supports and encourages them to continue along these same lines. Experiencing a method supported and valued by the University helps them to become more confident in what they are doing.

TE7: «When I found out that the University was also working on the PA I was really pleased... I thought...Well, we're on the right track then...!».

TE5: «Of course it's an advantage to work with the University... You realise that it's not just another fad in teaching ... It gives it a serious foundation the fact that there are lots of people interested in it...».

As for the advantages derived from being in contact with the adviser from the CPD Centre for Teachers, the teachers point to three fundamental benefits: (1) Contact with the training centre; (2) Training about specific subjects; and (3) Sharing good practices. They state that maintaining contact with the institution responsible for continuing professional development is always an incentive to continue improving and updating their knowledge, both in general areas and with regard to the specific interests raised by colleagues. They perceive one of the greatest benefits to be the chance to share classroom practices. These are good practices that provide examples to guide and improve their performance as teachers.

TE13: «Being in contact with the CEP (CPD Centre for Teachers) is always useful. It helps you not to feel disconnected».

TE17: «I always sign up to any activity at the CEP (CPD Centre for Teachers)... You always get to mix with other people, see other things...».

TE12: «You have to get out of your school... see what other colleagues are doing...».

TE2: «The CEP (CPD Centre for Teachers) organises some really good things... like workshops, courses... I think it helps you to continue learning and to see other realities».

4. Discussion and conclusions

The study shows, first and foremost, the benefits obtained by the teachers when they are involved in a professional network with colleagues from the same educational stage and who share the same professional interests. These results are congruent with the findings of different research projects conducted nationally and

internationally (Hoyuelos, 2007; Katz and Chard, 2000; Malaguzzi, 2001; Mérida, González and Olivares, 2011; Pozuelos, 2007; Rojas, Haya and Lázaro-Visa, 2012).

As described in previous papers (Mérida, González and Olivares, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c), a very high level of professional development is achieved by participating in a network, sharing and analysing education practices focused on research into Early Childhood Education pupils. By participating in a network, the model of expert knowledge is surpassed, facilitating the empowerment of all the participants: teachers, adviser, researchers, and teacher training undergraduates. Hence, bringing together educational agents from the two institutions enables a learning network or community of practice to be created (Hildreth and Kimble, 2004; Kimble, Hildreth, and Bourdon, 2008; Wells, 2001).

This network is bound together by the symmetrical interaction of its participants. It is founded on processes of evenly-distributed power and egalitarian positioning, constructed through collaborative dialogue. It is a social practice close to what Fielding (2011, p. 38) refers to as a «*democratic community*». It is conceived as a space in which the identity of each person is respected and the development of their full potential is fostered. The distribution of power is not governed by hierarchical criteria, but rather by criteria of professional excellence. The credibility of each agent is endorsed by their teaching knowledge, analytical capacity, educational argumentation and potential to positively lead educational practice in Early Childhood Education settings. It is a form of recognition that derives not from the power attributed to the institution to which each person belongs, but rather it is built gradually through the professional interactions that take place on a daily basis. Transparency and communication are two characteristics of the network that place the values by which it is governed in a central, mutually agreed, and explicit position (Susinos, 2009; Susinos and Rodríguez-Hoyos, 2011).

This network allows for the exchange of ideas, proposals and educational experiences among teachers, favouring a culture of collaboration (Alvestad and Røthle, 2007). As a result of teaching interactions, mediated through the participation of other agents such as the undergraduate students and university researchers, group cohesion is gradually strengthened. The professional group is created because there is a subject –the PA– that encapsulates the concept of education shared by the teachers. But the [blind review] network becomes consolidated because it promotes collaboration that goes beyond simply applying the same methodology. It is a working framework that, over time, helps to construct a shared professional identity. A conception is gradually outlined that is taken on board by the group in relation to Early Childhood Education, the teaching profession, the children, their families, and educational research. It is not a single pedagogical thought, but rather ideas that are agreed on through the contributions, experiences, reflections and discrepancies of the members of the [blind review] network. These findings are congruent with those of other studies that detail the benefits obtained from participating in a community of practice (Brown, Knoche, Edwards and Sheridan, 2009; Fleeer, 2003; Giudici, Rinaldi, and Krechevsky, 2001; Watson, 2006).

The study shows how teachers feel that they receive emotional support by participating in the [blind review] network. In some schools, they experience difficulties when applying the PA. The rejection of colleagues who do not take a socio-

constructivist approach (Richardson, 1997) causes feelings of loneliness, conflicts and, at times, a certain professional segregation. This situation generates emotional instability, which is countered by the support and bonds of affection provided by the [blind review] network. This network provides the necessary balance and socio-emotional stability an educator must possess in this stage (Fleming and Bay, 2003; Greenberg *et al.*, 2003; Vesely, Saklofske and Leschied, 2013).

The findings reported here regarding the professional enrichment of teachers through contributions made by university students reinforce the findings of other research, for example, by Stipek and Byler (1997), Carlson and McKennan (2000), Onchwari (2010), Gialamas and Nikolopoulou (2010), Jensen and Shepston (1997), and Cohan and Honigsfeld (2011), among others.

Finally, the teachers state that collaborating with the university enhances the credibility of the work they are doing. The academic context provides them with the confidence and assurance to apply a methodology that is coherent with the contribution of educational research offered by the international scientific community (Alvestad and Röthle, 2007; De Roos, Van Der Heijden and Gorter, 2010; Guardarrama, Ramsey and Nath, 2008; Perry, Dockett, Kember and Kuschert, 1999).

In conclusion, the [blind review] network provides an ideal framework for the professional development of teachers of Early Childhood Education. Interaction with fellow colleagues, with teacher training undergraduates, university researchers, and the adviser offers them a stimulating context to reflect on and improve their educational practice.

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