

PUTTING THEORY AND PRACTICE TOGETHER IN PRESERVICE TEACHER TRAINING COURSES. IS IT POSSIBLE?

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Abstract

Practical training is an integral part of pre-service professional development and plays an important role in promoting awareness amongst preservice teachers, there is a realization as to the importance that theory plays in their practice. In the academic school year of 2022-2023, the Early Childhood Department at Kaye Academic College of Education in Israel created two innovative courses based on Theory and Practice (T&P) together. The courses are theoretical, based on a specific disciplinary topic, and include pedagogy practices that accompany the theory. The framework of the courses is composed of three parts; The first was theory-based lectures by college staff members that took place in the college, as synchronous and asynchronous classes. The second was an experimental component that consisted of mandatory tasks that were implemented in the preschools where practical training was performed. The third was in-service support and guidance by the lecturers of the courses while they worked with the preschoolers. The first course was a dialogue-based one, resting on the concept that it is the educator's responsibility to create classroom environments that will allow optimal and meaningful communication with children to meet their various developmental needs. Truly a challenging task since kindergarten teachers hold a traditional perception that dialogue is used to manage behavior and performance (Lyle, 2008). The second course dealt with early childhood geometry and promoted game-based teaching in length measurements, symmetry transformations, and bodies. The focus is on playing through experimentation, where meaningful learning is achieved while maximally adapting to the cognitive, social, and emotional developmental stages of the children including geometrical thinking (Van Hiele, 1986). We will present results from 12 thematic analyses done with second and third-year preservice teachers' when asked to describe their professional development during these courses. The preservice teachers' chosen were of different academic capabilities ranging from moderately low, moderately high, and very high. Our findings show that they all experienced significant learning and a sense of security knowing that they had close personal guidance by the lecturers while interacting with the children. The importance of this study is to demonstrate that the combination of theoretical knowledge with practical pedagogy led to meaningful pre-service teacher training. In addition, the T&P courses proved to enhance a deeper sense of understanding that play and dialogue open opportunities to learn about the way children think and act.

Keywords: *Training courses, theory and practice, game-based teaching, meaningful dialogue.*

1. Introduction

In the academic school year of 2022-2023, the Early Childhood Department at Kaye Academic College of Education in Israel created two innovative courses based on Theory and Practice (T&P) together. The courses are theoretical, based on specific disciplinary topics, and include pedagogy practices that accompany the theory. The main goal was to study and demonstrate the importance of training pre-service teachers to combine their theoretical knowledge with practical pedagogy.

2. Theoretical review

2.1. What is a course based on Theory and Practice (T&P) together?

A course based on Theory and Practice (T&P) originated as a theoretical one. Its main goal is to bridge the gap between theory and practice to improve the relevance of the training program and develop a pedagogy adapted to the course. The practical knowledge acquired will provide a strong base for quality

training and the theoretical knowledge will develop as a response to the reflective thoughts of the participants (Korthagen, 2017).

In the T&P courses, *Dialogical Discourse Interactions with Children* and *Development of Geometric Thinking in Early Childhood*, there was an explicit connection between the field of knowledge, the syllabus, and the actual teaching of the course at the academy.

One of the main objectives of this research was devoted to understanding the experiences of the teachers while analyzing the assignments given that connect theory to practice, enabling them to be proactive learners.

In the courses, there was ongoing interaction with the lecturer aimed at learning the theoretical material and processing the experience. The interactions were synchronous or asynchronous and were unrelated to the day they were in the preschool. The lecturers arrived regularly throughout the academic semester at the preschools to observe the teacher's interaction with the children, making them mediators of theory into practice.

2.2. Professional development

Professional development for teachers starts upon their enrollment into training programs. After 4 years, they receive their bachelor's degree in education as well as their teacher's license. This is just the beginning of their professional development as they need to constantly continue learning and developing their teaching skills to meet the dynamic changes of time.

Professional teacher development is a combination of preservice and in-service education. The pre-service training programs vary in the length of their training. It has been shown that the best result is in four-year programs that specialize in the age group the teacher will teach in the school system. The number of years a teacher is enrolled in professional development training before being accredited leads them to establish a more positive classroom climate, where the teacher is more understanding and caring of the child's needs (Lee, 2018).

Early childhood educational programs that are geared towards understanding children's developmental stages, as well as developmentally appropriate practices, create quality child care (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Lepida & Veniopoulou (2015) claim that successful professional development in teachers is often seen as their ability to reflect on their work to assess their interactions and improve their pedagogy.

Teacher's perceptions, beliefs, and expectations of a child will determine the role they play upon entering the classroom (Chen et al., 2021). When a preschool teacher understands that their support and their ability to cultivate the children's social and emotional needs as well as their academic development will aid the transition into elementary school culture, they will have the desire to be the best they can (Rakap, Balıkcı, Kalkan, & Aydın, 2018)

When referring to a teacher's professional development, the knowledge they acquire will improve their teaching skills and their own personal social and emotional skills. These provide a foundation for ongoing learning and a strong sense of well-being which in turn will assist them in developing quality relationships with children. The social learning climate that the teacher provides will determine the quality of their interactions with children and their success in school. Therefore, they need to implement this knowledge into lesson planning, teaching pedagogy as well and social and emotional responsiveness to children (McNally & Slutsky, 2018).

2.3. Problem statement

Previous research in teacher education and internship has shown a wide gap between theory and practice. Faced with everyday challenges and multiple preservice teachers' needs, the theoretical knowledge acquired in colleges and universities seems insufficient for the demands a teacher is faced with in the classroom and the school system (Zeichner, 2010).

This discrepancy has been consistently described in teacher educational literature as the theory-practice gap (Korthagen, 2010; Shavelson, 2020). To successfully tackle this issue, higher educational institutions need to create strong connections between theoretical courses and internship experiences (Grossman et al., 2009).

3. Purpose of the study

To describe and demonstrate the importance of training pre-service teachers in the ability to combine their theoretical knowledge with practical pedagogy.

4. Research questions

How do preservice teachers describe their professional development acquired during T&P courses; *Dialogic Discourse Interactions with Children* and *Development of Geometric Thinking in Early Childhood*?

5. Research methods

The research methodology used is qualitative research. It is a research methodology that concentrates on understanding human beliefs, practices and values. This type of methodology is often used to enable a researcher to reach a deep understanding of a given phenomenon. The analysis of the detailed descriptions of a given problem of practice offers insight regarding professional practices within a given context (Lester, Cho, & Lochmiller, 2020).

6. Participants

The participants consisted of 12 Israeli preservice teachers in their second and third years of training in the Early Childhood Department at Kaye Academic College of Education. The academic capabilities of the preservice teachers ranged from moderately low to very high.

7. Research tools and data processing

The study is based on students' reflective writing and diaries kept throughout the courses. These were written descriptions of their experience and their thoughts on their professional development. The results presented are from 12 thematic analyses done with second and third-year preservice teachers' when asked to describe their professional development during the courses.

8. Findings

The analysis revealed three main themes in the teacher's reflective thoughts on professional development as they appeared in their reflective diaries.

1. The ability to reflect on their work to assess their interactions and improve their pedagogy;
2. The understanding that children's developmental stages and development-appropriate practices create quality childcare;
3. The importance of responding to children's social and emotional needs.

8.1. An example of the first theme: The ability to reflect on their work to assess interactions and improve their pedagogy

E.: "During the conversation with the girl, I felt that I needed to pause before responding and not directly ask another question or reinforce what she says. At the beginning of the conversation, I said to her: *tell me something about yourself and I will tell you something about myself*, but at the end of the conversation I noticed that I didn't tell her anything about myself. In my opinion, that created a lack of trust and perhaps disappointment on her part because she wanted to hear something about me. It is important to pay attention to this in future conversations and prevent it." In this quote, E. begins to understand that to create meaningful dialogue and improve her classroom interactions, it is essential to create symmetrical discourse, as it has a positive effect on the sense of security and well-being of both herself and the child (Strickland & Marinak, 2016).

L.: "When the children in the kindergarten began measuring in different ways the length of the pipes, they had to create a gas station stand in the yard, I noticed that they had the ability to work on their own without my intervention as to possible solutions to their problem. Just being there, mediating, when necessary, gave them confidence to continue on their own. I am slowly realizing that they can solve their problems in creative ways if they are just given the opportunity. Teachers need to be there to mediate but not make the decisions." The reflections of L. help understand that she came to the realization, as Van Hiele (1999) claims that to achieve optimal progress, mediation by the adult is important which helps the child better understand what is required of him and the actions he performs concerning length measurements.

8.2. An Example of the Second Theme: The Understanding that Children's Developmental Stages and Development-Appropriate Practices Create Quality Childcare

D.: "I felt that M., was interested in talking to me and was open to asking me questions about *my* personal life. I found that she reached a stage where her language is developed enough to carry on a symmetrical conversation. She was also able to take an interest in others as she was not in the egocentric stage anymore. She told me that she likes to go on trips with her aunts and then turned to me and asked: *"Do you have any aunts?"* I enjoyed talking to her, getting to know her better, and having a pleasant and respectful conversation with her. It is important for me as a future kindergarten teacher to create quality relationships that are based on friendly and emotional dialogue with children. To improve the conversation, I think it is important to always give the child the option to lead the conversation and the teacher needs to know when she should ask follow-up questions or wait to hear what the child wants to reveal. I am glad that I was able to see how her developmental abilities enabled her to be a meaningful part of the dialogue" The reflective thoughts of D. show that she believes that to promote personal discourse, the teacher should foster a supportive environment, and follow the children's interests and developmental needs. This requires providing dialogical spaces that will allow children to make their voices heard and express their thoughts and experiences (Strickland& Marinak, 2016).

Li.: "My lesson plan included a walking tour in the yard to find geometrical bodies, I noticed that during the planning phase, I had difficulties coming up with riddles and activities that would suit the children's age and developmental stage. I realized that it is important to take into account the children's prior knowledge and personal interests. During the tour, I encouraged the children to share their thoughts and ideas about the various bodies and structures they found. This allowed them to process their learning and make connections between the current tour and their prior knowledge of the topic. This enabled me to adjust my teaching accordingly." Li's reflections on the planning stage as well as the actual activity is directly related to the term, "experimental learning" as Alexander (2015) describes. This is an educational approach that incorporates children's experiences through active play and their ability to understand concepts and generalize principles from past experiences. This is an ability related to developmental stages of thinking and the student here, understood that and designed her lesson plan accordingly.

8.3. An example of the third theme: The importance of responding to children's social and emotional needs

A.: "After the conversation with S, I had a few insights. First, I feel that I managed to create a safe open space for him to lead the conversation. The more I kept quiet, the more S. filled that space with personal stories of his experiences. Secondly, as the dialogue continued, I became aware of the child's imagination, and his desire to share his thoughts and feelings. An example of this can be seen in the following quote. S: *"When the butterfly's wing broke, I gave him another one instead so that he can fly"*. When I heard that, I realized what compassion S. had for the butterfly and through his imagination, found a solution that will enable the butterfly to fly again. Thirdly, I need to keep learning on how to improve my ability to let children speak as they wish, without being judgmental. I need to practice holding back my immediate desire to respond and teach him what happens when a butterfly loses a wing. This will only damage my dialogic interaction with the child" In A.'s reflection she realizes that a positive dialogic environment can be created through providing an open space for the child to lead the conversation. She emphasizes the need to continue developing professionally to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Korthagen, 2010).

N.: "At the beginning of the activity I read the book "Anat" to the children, enabled the children a mediated experience as each child had their own mirror to practice symmetry as well as observe their peers performing similar actions. As the stages continued, the tasks became more challenging for them. To my surprise, I began seeing friendships being created as children started feeling a sense of security in the group and showed a desire to help each other. They discussed things they already knew and tried to incorporate new knowledge to problem solve. Through mutual play, they improved their social and emotional skills such as; cooperation, active listening, making concessions to each other, tolerance to other's needs, and self-restraint. It is important to note that through N.'s reflections, she understands as Rasmussen et al. (2020) claim that collaborative learning and being part of a group of peers, advances high-order thinking such as problem-solving and the construction of new knowledge. In addition, through play, they are developing their social skills, enabling them to take on these challenges together. (Schwarz et al., 2015).

9. Conclusion

Referring to the question of "How do preservice teachers describe their professional development acquired during two courses based on T&P together? Three main conclusions were attained as to promoting pre-service teachers' professional development:

a. Peer and lecturer feedback improves student's ability to reflect on their work with children with regard to assessing their interactions and improving their pedagogy for meaningful dialogue;

b. The more a pre-service teacher practices dialogic skills, there is a possibility to bridge the gap between theory and practice to create meaningful dialogue

c. Teachers need to foster a supportive environment, expressing sensitively while addressing children's interests, personal and developmental needs. This requires providing open discourse spaces that will allow children to make their voices heard and express their thoughts. This may help them respond better to children's social and emotional needs.

The significance of this study is to demonstrate the importance of training pre-service teachers in the ability to combine their theoretical knowledge with practical pedagogy. In addition, both T&P courses proved to enhance a deeper sense of understanding that through play and dialogue, opportunities to learn about the way children think and act are necessary to help them continue to develop to their fullest potential.

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