

Emerging as early childhood teacher: critical challenges

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the experiences of beginning early childhood teachers as they transition roles from student to first-year teacher. Research has shown that are major areas of concern for novice teachers: relationships, knowledge of the curriculum, evaluation and grading, issues in autonomy and control, and workload and time management. Research also has identified a troubling support gap for new teachers during their first critical years in the job. Fifteen early childhood teachers in their first year of teaching were interviewed for this case study research. Interviews' data were submitted to content analyse process which allowed identifying major themes, namely: initial expectations and feelings; problems and difficulties; types of support; achievements; critical moments; perceived changes. The data highlight the need to reflect on early childhood teacher education. The emphasis should be on how to help teachers to construct professional understanding from field-based experiences.

Keywords: beginning early childhood teachers; teacher education; professional development.

Context of the research

The transition from pre-service teacher education to teaching has frequently been understood as a challenging experience for novice early childhood teachers (Alberto 2012; Ambroseti, Almeida, and Calil 2012; Mesquita-Pires 2007; Teixeira 2009). Our study explores, through a case study research, the first year professional experience reported by a group of 15 beginning early childhood teachers, working in day care and preschool settings. The research questions aim to understand the experiences of beginning early childhood teachers as they transition roles from student to first-year teacher, and their immediate areas of concern. Data reveals beginning early childhood teacher's views of pre-service teaching, and the impact that this had on their transition from student to teacher. They found that real working experience did not always match the pre-service teaching experience. The main differences identified are: the student teaching experiences did not provide them with the practical knowledge they need when start teaching; a gap between the quality of centers they are working and the centers where they did their practice at college; a different teaching philosophy from the settings and people that they work with, and feelings of dissatisfaction when they tried to establish ideal practices in their jobs; getting sufficient resources and materials.

Research aim

The research aim is to understand the experiences of beginning early childhood teachers as they change their roles, from students to first-year teachers, and their immediate areas of concern.

Theoretical framework

Beginning early childhood teachers: the first critical year in the job

New entrants, upon accepting a teaching position in a school, are often left on their own to succeed or fail, confined to their own classrooms and experiences, and described by some authors as being “lost at sea” (Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, and Peske 2002). Research on beginning teachers (Fuller and Brown 1975; Flores 1997; Veenman 1984; Vonk 1983) suggest the existence of various concerns and problems in the first years of teaching such as difficulties to motivate

students, to manage inappropriate behaviors occurring at classroom, and to teach and assess the individual student. The feeling of isolation and lack of support can intensify those problems.

Brouwer and Korthagen (2005) suggest the existence of a “latency period”, a time when workload and school-related practices override practices and ideals developed during pre-service teaching education. It is clear that this period of early distress is not good for individuals, schools, or community at large.

As for teachers in general the beginning of the career for early childhood teachers is experienced as a period of challenges, difficulties, resulting from the need to manage the diversity and complexity of tasks and duties of the profession.

Studies on the career of beginning early childhood teachers (Alberto 2012; Ambroseti, Almeida, and Calil 2012; Mesquita-Pires 2007; Teixeira 2009) identify various constrains that affect the professional experience, namely: interactions and relationships; curriculum development (organization of the physical space, materials and resources, management of time and groups of children, planning and evaluation, bureaucracy); discrepancy between personal and organizational conceptions and practices; lack of support from experienced colleagues. These conditions are intensified by feelings of insecurity and unpreparedness common of initial professional development.

Katz (1972) describes four stages of early childhood teachers’ development, namely: survival, consolidation, renewal, and maturity. The first two stages correspond to the first three years of the teaching career, and can help to understand the process beginning teachers go through as they transition from student teaching to the profession.

The survival stage is characterized by self-interest and self-concern. The teachers’ main concern is surviving the daily challenges of carrying responsibility for a whole group of young children, and for their learning and development. The discrepancies between success expectations and the contact with the reality of work provoke some anxieties, feelings of inadequacy and unpreparedness. During this period teachers need support, understanding, encouragement, comfort and guidance, and on-site training.

The consolidation stage emerges by the end of the first year. The teacher comes to see her/him-self as capable of dealing with daily challenges. She/him is likely ready to consolidate the gains made during the first stage, begin to focus on individual children, and specific pedagogical issues. During this stage it is import to continue with on-site training, which can lead to explore and solve problems in a collaborative way. Other important resources are the contributions of specialist such as psychologists and health-workers. The opportunities to share ideas, problems with more experienced colleagues and other teachers at the same stage of professional development can reduce teacher’s sense of frustration and inadequacy.

The renewal stage occurs by the four year of teaching, and is characterized by the need of doing new things and knowing different approaches, ideas, technics and materials. The need for renewal and refreshment can reveal a personal commitment to the quality of educational experiences. During this stage collaborative learning has an important role, which occurs through contact with other educational realities, participation in learning communities, to share and discuss new educational visions, insights, and experiences.

At the maturity stage that can be reached within three or five years of teaching, teachers begin to ask deeper and more abstract questions about her professional path, beliefs, values, and the role of education for societal change. These are not knew questions although they represent a more meaningful search for insight, perspective and realism (Katz 1972). The training should be focus on more wide and introspective discussions on themes and questions related with the profession.

The early childhood teacher professional development is a journey that involves changes at personal, theoretical, and pedagogical level. The diverse nature of those changes is associated with the characteristics of work contexts, the permanent reflection and questioning of teachers, and the growing awareness of the inherent complexity of their roles and functions.

Research methodology

This case study research (Stake 2007) allowed to explore beginning teachers’ understanding about their roles, responsibilities, constraints and supports of their work contexts.

Participants and contexts

The participants of the study are 15 early childhood teachers in their first year of profession, graduated from one Portuguese University and one Portuguese College. The group was composed as follows: seven early childhood teachers working at infants and toddlers classrooms; and eight early childhood teachers working at preschool classrooms.

The 15 participants are women aged between 22 and 27. The institutions where they work are IPSS (Private Institutions of Social Solidarity, non-profit), and private for profit. They were invited to take part in the study on a voluntary basis.

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data resulted from semi-structured interviews was collected over a 2-month period. All the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed in full by researchers, and checked for accuracy by the participants.

The data collection was done in two phases. The first was the development of a preliminary interview script that was used with two beginning early childhood teachers in order to identify limitations of questions. The second phase was the development of the final script, and interviewing process. Early childhood teachers were interviewed by the researchers.

Participants were assured that would be made all efforts to respect the privacy of data from interviews, and they couldn’t be identified as participants in the research.

Content analysis of the interview’ transcripts have been conducted, compared and agreed by the three researchers in order to ensure the strength and accuracy or credibility of interpretations (Bardin 1995). Once all the data were collected and organized, the researches revisited the data to pull out the anecdotes and pieces of dialogue that reflected the most salient themes in each participant interview. An inductive approach allowed the identification of themes connected with the first year experiences and challenges of early childhood teachers.

Through data content analysis five major themes were identified: Initial expectations and feelings; Problems and difficulties; Types of support; Achievements; Perceived changes.

In order to make the process of content analysis as transparent as possible teacher’s codes have been included in the presentation of the findings.

Findings

Initial expectations and feelings

One of the themes emerged from teachers narratives are related with emotions and concerns around their new roles and duties.

Participants reveal an apprehension of not being accepted and able to establish a positive and trust relationships with children and parents. “I was afraid of not being able to establish a trust relationship with children and parents. Was my first time working alone with a group of children without the support of someone more experienced.” (E).

The teachers’ comments show concerns focused on creating appropriate conditions to ensure children’s well-being, and to know what they need to learn.

“The initial insecurity was decreasing with time. The concerns have changed. My main concern was to do a pedagogical work with quality, to assure that children’s well-being and needs were met, to provide opportunities and experiences for learning and development.” (M).

Meeting coordination and direction requirements and expectations is understood as a considerable demand. As teacher professional development research has shown (Karge, Sandlin, and Young 1993; Katz 1972) new professionals seem to have concerns about themselves and their

own survival, about tasks and actual teaching duties, and about their impact on students learning - a concern related with their ability to be successful within teaching-learning process and students. To be committed to the well-being of children and the desire to be autonomous and free from external control or constraints can be understood as an indicator of becoming professional (Carr and Kemmis 1983).

Problems and difficulties

The main problems and difficulties of beginning teachers seem to be particularly related with pedagogical dimensions, such as: organization of space and materials; time structure and routines; adult-child interaction; group organization and management; planning to meet children’s interests and diversity.

In which concerns space and materials organization teachers refer not having enough space and lack of didactic materials in their classrooms. This was particularly reported by infants and toddlers’ teachers that complain not having books, and arts and craft materials to support educational activities.

Another problem faced by teachers was lack of time and routines’ structure. They realized the need to organize a daily routine that gives children a sense of security, decreases stress and anxiety, and allows coordinating children’s interests with teacher’s pedagogical intentions. “One of my first tasks was to establish a daily routine. Can you believe that when I started to work there, middle October, there wasn’t a daily routine? Everything was so confused, for children and for adults.” (E).

Feelings of frustration were generated by adult-child ratio and the group size. They experience difficulties working with large groups of children which affect the quality of pedagogical interaction. Working with large groups of children is a demanding task that requires teachers’ ability to deal with disruptive behavior and conflicts.

“It was a chock! I was not used to work with such a large group of children. When I did my internship, I had a group of 17 children, now I had to work with a group of 25 children. It was a big difference. I felt that I was not prepared...was very difficult.”

“My group was large, I had 25 children. They were frequently involved in conflicts. I’ve tried to support them to solve the conflicts, but some days the strategies that I used didn’t work out. I had to go back to the theory, to revisit what we’ve learned at the university, to ask the support of my colleagues. This was a long process until I felt that I was able to manage disruptive behaviors that occurred at my classroom.”

The work with other adults, colleagues, principles, and auxiliaries, represents another problem encountered by beginning teachers. They report lack of supports, sense of isolation, and control (explicit and implicit) of coordination and direction of centers where they work. Some teachers talk about feelings of dissatisfaction when tried to establish “ideal” practices. Initial enthusiasm and ideas of beginning teachers were blocked by the real work conditions, and result in feelings of insecurity and professional inadequacy.

“When we finish our course, we are full of new ideas, full of enthusiasm to start working and put all that we have learned in practice. I’ve learned so much at the university, the pedagogical models, working with parents...and then, we have a classroom, an institution that is totally different from everything that we have learned and we believe. I felt lost, I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to deal with such pedagogical differences. I’ve started to do some small, very small changes in my classroom, but I realized that they were no very welcome. But, I didn’t give up. It was very difficult and still is.” (E).

In fact, like teachers of other levels of education (Flores 1997; Karge et al. 1993; Veenman 1984) these beginning early childhood teachers are confronted with problems related to classroom management and discipline, students’ individual differences, motivation and problems, students’ assessment, relations with parents, organization of class work, insufficient materials and supplies, and heavy teaching load resulting in insufficient preparation time.

Support

As noted above there are several problems and difficulties experienced by the participants of this study. Data analysis reveals that beginners, when facing problems and difficulties they look for

support to overtake the challenges. This support is sometimes found in former classmates group from initial training with whom beginning early childhood teachers continue to share anxieties, problems, dilemmas, feelings and achievements. Sharing professional experiences is seen as an important source of emotional support.

“When I’m very anxious, when I have a problem, I call D and F (former classmates). We do this a lot; call each other to share the good moments and the bad ones. We share ideas, experiences, and we help each other to solve problems and difficulties. To know that they are there, no matter what happen, make me feels secure.” (C).

At pedagogical level the participants mention the relevance of support and advice of others classroom teachers of their work center. The support from peers allows responding with efficacy to professional tasks such as: guidance and collaboration on children’s observation and documentation of their learning, and construction of assessment portfolios; and curriculum planning. The sensibility and openness of colleagues/peers to their personal ideas and initiatives is also valued as opportunity to develop confidence in their own capacities and a sense of progressive autonomy.

“Working with more experienced colleagues, their advices, knowing that they were there listening and supporting, was very important. I would say that the whole pedagogical team, and above all the coordinator, was an important support to deal with difficulties and anxieties.” (J).

The relations developed in the workplace, are an important contribution not just to overcome the practical difficulties but also for the emotional support of professionals, who thus have the opportunity to build or consolidate a more positive image of the profession and of themselves, which is valued through the acceptance of their knowledge, ideas and energy (Day 2001). Children’s parents can also be a source of support for the novices when they appreciate their professional work and respond positively to their requests.

“At the beginning, one of my main concerns was to establish a secure relationship with children’s parents. Then, after some months working at the infants and toddlers’ center they were my big support. When they realized that they could trust on my work, and they start to understand how it was important for children’s learning, they were always willing to collaborate. They would collaborate in the development of different activities, bringing materials for classroom activities and projects, helping on the construction of a variety of resources. With their collaboration, and support, I’ve started to feel that I was doing a good job... that I was able to develop quality practices for the young children that I had under my responsibility.” (E).

Other support sought by novice teachers lies in the return to the theory, the knowledge built during the undergraduate and master’s degree, and current research data on early childhood education. This assumption may indicate the need to look for a practice better sustained on theory (more intentional), and simultaneously the recognition that professional knowledge must be grounded in theory and research (Carr and Kemmis 1983).

Context based training is another support mentioned by one of the teachers of this study. She highlighted the contributions of being involved in continuous training provided by the work institution. This kind of training is linked to curriculum development and addresses the needs identified by teachers in their daily work with children and adults.

“One of the most important things was the training on the curriculum model adopted by the institution. Of course that already had studied that curriculum model, but was just in theory; I had never an opportunity to put it into practice. Having training at the context of my institution which was related with the implementation of the curriculum model was very helpful to overcome difficulties and problems from daily practices.” (A).

The influence of work contexts can have a positive or negative impact on professional development of beginning teachers. In fact Alarcão and Roldão (2010) distinguish the diversity of possible contexts dividing them into unfavorable and favorable. They refer to the first as adverse, with difficult communication, “isolated islands”; and to the second as stimulant, dynamic, based on teamwork and the collaborative relationships that aim to “establish true communities of reflective practice”.

Achievements

One of the first achievements mentioned by novice teachers is their awareness of increase sensibility to children’s safety and well-being. In fact this was initial concern mentioned by teachers, which has driven to the development of a learning environment that assures the safety and welfare of the group with whom they work.

The ability to observe children, and focus on their skills, interests and potentialities is another achievement mentioned by participants. They realized that this professional competence is simultaneously a tool and a source to understand the process and the content of children’s learning. This competence is associated with the perception that the work they are doing has a positive impact on children’s learning.

“It was above all seeing that he was getting results. The introduction of a daily routine and realize that it was meaningful to children (they recognized that there were different times ...), the autonomy acquire by children (e.g. at wake up time they were able to dress themselves and help their classmates; at lunch time they were able to seat properly at the table, and feed themselves).” (A).

Another achievement mentioned by participants is related with the ability to share control with children, and to enhance their participation in classroom activities. From teachers’ perspective this accomplishment results from an increase capacity to interact and communicate effectively with children. This achievement is related to a sense of satisfaction with the opportunity to put into practice one of their personal beliefs about teaching and learning process.

“One of the “hits” of my work was when I realized that I have involved children in decision making of classroom daily activities. At the beginning of the academic year this was so difficult. They were so young, and I was afraid that something could happen... I know, of course that I know, we studied that they are competent, and able to make decisions, to make choices, to do things by themselves. But when we are the ones that are responsible for everything that can happen to them (children) when they are at the center, then we feel insecure, and the first thing is try to protect and even make decisions for them. Then, suddenly, I realized that I was giving them opportunities to make decisions, to try new things and do other things by themselves.... this was a great achievement.” (A).

The positive feedback of parents during formal and informal meetings was an important contribution to assure the quality of the work they were doing. As stated by one of the participants:

“The parents realized that there had been changes, they listen to children speaking about changes, they noticed changes in the classroom, and saw changes in the placard that was in the doorway ... This moment was a support for me. It was very important to see how they recognized my work.” (F)

Teachers understood how helpful could be to involve parents in curriculum development. They also discover that parents were a valuable resource to learn more about children, and to solve problems and difficulties experienced in daily practices.

Perceived changes

The participants of this study acknowledge that the choice of the profession was the right one. The experiences, difficulties, problems and achievements of the first year enhance their confidence in their own capacities, and expand the expectations of acting appropriately in the future. “This experience helped to become more confident because I realized that I could develop a coherent and consistent work; now I know that I can.” (C).

The pre-service path seems to have an important influence on preschool teachers’ confirmation that they have chosen the right profession. The most relevant issues developed at pre-service education identified by beginning teachers are: knowledge base; support of peer and pedagogical coordination; competence to reflect critically about their own practices (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, and Knoche 2009). Thus beginning teachers have identified central dimensions of early childhood profession (Oliveira-Formosinho 2000). For the majority of these beginning teachers, the first year experience was an opportunity to confirm their competence as preschool teachers.

Conclusions and implications for teacher education

The results of this study confirm the findings of other Portuguese researches on beginning early childhood teachers (Alberto 201; Mesquita-Pires 2007; Teixeira 2009), that show critical challenges of first year on the profession. Data highlighted mix of feelings and expectations ranging from enthusiasm, energy to fears and anxieties that are typical features of survival stage presented by Lilian Katz. As teachers in general, the participants mentioned problems and difficulties at different levels, namely: curriculum development; interaction and relations with professional of their work contexts; and institutional demands. Although this scenario data reveal that during the first year there are various supports which facilitate the perceived changes. These changes confirm the initial expectations of becoming competent and engaged early childhood teachers.

The data of this study allowed the identification of several implications for pre-service and in-service teacher education.

The first implication is the need of longer and diverse internships in early childhood education: infants and toddlers, and preschool. This will allow students to contact with diverse preschools, and infants and toddlers’ pedagogical contexts. Within Bologna Process the Preschool Education Master is developed during one academic year, which limits the time that students have to observe diverse contexts of practices, and reduces the duration of internships.

The second implication for teacher education is to create opportunities for student teachers to reflect on their own educational philosophy and the educational philosophy of their internships contexts. To create opportunities for students to reflect about those differences, and help them to identify strategies to manage them will better prepare them for the pedagogical diversity of work contexts.

The third implication is to reinforce the training on children’s observation, planning, assessment (learn how to follow children’s interests), manage the children’s behavior, plan and organize transitions, working in teams, and learn how to involve parents in their children’s learning.

From data analyses emerge other questions related with the support of early childhood professional development. From the questions arisen we emphasize the development of partnership programs between early childhood educational centers and universities toward supporting beginning teachers. These partnerships can assume different forms, such as: specialized training, mentoring, communities of practices or collegial study groups (Zaslow and Martinez-Beck, 2006), and research projects focus on practice.

The actions mentioned above aim at empowering beginning teachers to enhance professional competence, which requires to seek deep understandings of professional practice and its specificity, to develop decision making processes, to undertake control over daily experiences, and their own professional development, to develop skills of critical reflection on practice, to conduct action research projects, and therefore improve effectiveness of their own teaching.

The limitations of this study are related with limited number of participants, a single source of information and scarcity of specific literature or relevant studies on the problem under study, in particular, regarding beginning early childhood teachers. Therefore is important to develop further studies on early childhood beginning teachers aiming to deepen the results of this study, and seeking to know the singularity of their pathways of professional development.

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