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Understanding Pre-Service Teachers' Approaches to Preschool Education. Findings in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to answer two broad questions: (1) How do pre-service teachers at the beginning of their pre-graduate university programme conceptualise the purposes and aims of preschool? (2) How do they view the essence of a teacher's work with children in preschool? In-depth interviews were conducted to gather data about the participants' conceptualisations. Open coding and thematic analysis were performed to process the interview data. The participants were 34 students in the first semester of the bachelor of preschool pedagogy programme at a university in the Czech Republic, and had no direct teaching experience in preschool education. The participants indicated that the primary function of preschool is to provide space for a child's socialisation into the peer group and preparation for entry into primary school. The core task of the preschool teacher was conceptualised as the establishing safe environment, the exercising of (mild) authority, the expression of emotions to children, and the development of professionalism. These findings offer challenges for university educators to elaborate the students' professional knowledge and skills.

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1. Introduction

Teacher's conceptualisations of teaching and learning are important professional characteristics because they affect teacher practices. Conceptualisations are not only filters through which experience is screened for meanings, but they also influence teachers' classroom decisions and practices (Vartuli,

1999; Smith & Croom, 2000). Teachers' conceptualisations are important because they help us understand their practices.

Pre-service teachers develop their conceptualisations of teaching and learning through different sources of experience. In addition to lectures and seminars and learning from literature, they visit schools and observe teaching of experienced teachers. Later they teach children themselves and develop their teaching expertise. Through all these sources they gradually develop their pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986, 1987) and construct conceptualisations of teaching, school, and pupils. These conceptualisations become more personalized and richer as their classroom experiences expand.

Students in bachelor of preschool pedagogy programmes constitute a specific student group because they are prepared to teach in an institution that differs considerably from primary school in aims, curriculum, and instructional processes. It is of utmost interest of early childhood university educators to identify pre-service teachers' conceptualisations so that they understand them and suggest instructional strategies for promoting their development.

1.1 Preschool in the Czech Republic

In order to understand the context of preschool in the Czech Republic an outline is provided of its role. In the Czech Republic, preschools are offered to children between 3 and 6 years. Occasionally, two-year old children are accepted to preschools, especially in rural areas. Attendance in preschool is voluntary (i.e., not prescribed by a law). However, an overwhelming majority of 3-5 years old children attend this institution. It should be noted that preschool and primary school are separate institutions with clear division of responsibilities. To be a preschool teacher, one needs graduation from vocational upper secondary school that, in most cases, is a secondary pedagogical school. It provides four year long theoretical and practical training that is completed by a final examination. Higher level preschool teacher qualification is provided by the bachelor of preschool pedagogy programme. The students attend lectures and seminars which are theoretically more advanced than those in a secondary vocational school. They also have practice in preschools on regular basis. Several universities in the Czech Republic offer also the two-year master of preschool pedagogy programme for those who want to increase their professional qualification. In this study, participants were recruited from students of the three -year bachelor of preschool pedagogy programme.

2. Problem statement

Conceptualizations of preschool by pre-service teachers at the beginning of their university programme are important characteristics that indicate the students' potential strength and weaknesses. Despite the crucial importance of conceptualizations at the beginning of pre-graduate studies there is scarce research on this topic published in the literature. This study is a partial attempt to fill in the gap in this field.

3. Purpose of the study

The aim of this paper is to explore how pre-service teachers conceptualise the functions of preschool and work of a preschool teacher. The study focused to seek answers to two research questions: 1) How do pre-service teachers at the beginning of their pre-graduate university programme conceptualise the purposes and aims of preschool? (2) How do they view the essence of a teacher's work with children in preschool?

4. Research method

To elicit the participants' conceptualisations we used in-depth interviews. The participants were asked open-ended questions which focused at eliciting their responses on research aims. Interviews were conducted that resembled dialogues between interviewers and students and not examinations of the participants' knowledge and skills.

Interviews were performed by research assistants who were only a few years older than the study participants. This contributed to favourable attitudes of the participants to interviewers. Interviews took place in an office at a university building. To protect anonymity, the participants were asked to use a pseudonym. Interviews were audio-recorded and recordings were transcribed verbatim. In the data analysis we followed the iterative steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the beginning, we read and re-read the transcripts and made notes on data. Then we segmented data to identify thematically coherent „chunks“ of meanings, which were then open coded. The codes were assigned first individually by two researchers, and then they were discussed in duo to harmonize the analytic perspective. Codes were collated to identify themes which created the thematic skeleton of the analysis.

5. Sample

Participants of the study were 34 full-time students of the bachelor of preschool pedagogy programme at a university in the eastern part of the Czech Republic. They all were females, aged 18-21. At the time of data gathering the students were in the end of their first semester of a three-year programme. During the semester they attended foundation courses in pedagogy, psychology, and sociology. They visited preschool and had discussions with a preschool head. However, they were not obliged to observe the classroom instruction in preschool.

6. Findings

Findings will be concentrated around themes that were extracted from interviews. We shall start with the participants' conceptualisations of functions of preschool, and then continue to description of the teachers' work.

Socialisation into the child's group. When the participants were asked if they consider important for children to attend preschool, they answered far beyond “yes” and described benefits a child acquires when attending this facility. They stated, almost unanimously, that the core benefit is socialisation into the child's group. The participants described that the main reason for attending preschool is learning to interact with peers. Though parental influence was acknowledged as the primary source of bringing up the child (Sroufe, Egeland & Carlson, 1999; Vandell, 2000), they claimed it does not suffice to support a child's complex development. In preschool they experience intense child-child interaction through which they lay foundations for functioning in peer groups, in making friends and establishing behaviour acceptable by other children. They will learn repertoires of behaviour that they are unable to acquire while interacting with the family members only. In the participants' view, preschools' core aim is provision of interactions with children. In preschool, a child encounters many more children than she has ever seen and interacted with in the home setting (Corsaro, 2001). This interactional socialisation is very important especially for children who have poor social contacts before attending preschool:

“(There) they will meet with other children because until that time they did not go anywhere, probably not before the age of three” (P1)¹.

The function of preschool is to extend the social environment of a child by incorporating her to the children's collective. Thus other children in preschool are considered social partners with whom they share the time, space and activities. By this attitude the participants acknowledged that socialisation is based on provision of social models (Bandura, 1969) and that these models are supplied by individuals and groups of peers. The peer group requires “collaboration in the collective” (P7), so the child learns the groups' behavioural rules. As rules are a part of the culture, in fact, children acquire and produce “shared peer culture” (Corsaro, 2001). In his ethnographic studies Corsaro found that recognition of community among children normally occurs during their first months in preschool. It gradually evolves from recognition of this community by children (*we're peers*) to their creative use of this recognition to produce and share a peer culture (*being peers*).

It must be appreciated that the participants acknowledged social interaction as the central function of preschool. However, they viewed this function not so much as socialisation into the institutional norms and rules (Giddens, 2013) as socialisation into the child's group. This stance clearly shows a narrow view of preschool the students possessed at the end of the first semester of their programme. In the following phases of their university training their knowledge of preschool's functions and educational potentials will be deepened and extended to reach a full-scale view of functions of preschool.

A bridge to the primary school. Another theme that was conceptualised extensively by the participants was importance of preschool learning for transition of children into primary school. In preschool, children learn knowledge and skills that are important not so much for their current life as for the future – for entry into the primary school. The knowledge and skills they learn will ensure the smooth adaptation into the primary schools' institutional environment.

¹ „P“ stands for participant. The numeral is used instead of a name in order to anonymise the participant.

The participants were explicit in describing the preschool instructional programme, guided activities and other elements of institutionalized practises that are tailored to adapt a child to primary schools requirements. They described the target of preschool as academic learning rather than care for children. This is in harmony with programmes of Czech preschools. Rather than considering preschool as a care facility solely, they portrayed it as an educational institution providing basic academic training, in addition to caring for children.

Another important goal of preschool was conceptualised as elimination or reduction of children's deficiencies. While they advocated a proactive character of preschool teaching, they also admitted its compensational responsibilities. The task is to support the child's development so that the deficiencies and disparities will be reduced:

"In the last year of preschool the task is to prepare a child to be ready for entry into (primary) school, (the task is to) teach those fundamental things that she needs for the school entry. So the teacher paints with the child, signs with her, so (she teaches) those basic things in order to prevent a child to lag behind or was deprived" (P6).

Safe environment. As preschool teacher is responsible for a class as large as 20-25 children and conduct both indoors and outdoors activities, it was no surprise that the participants emphasized the responsibility of a teacher to take care of every-day safety and prevent a child from harmful influences or actions. A strong component in the participants' conceptualisations was the task of a teacher to create a safe learning environment for children. The requirement is to supervise children effectively, provide help if needed in critical situations, resolve peer-peer conflicts, prevent accidents in children's play both indoors and outdoors, and the like.

"So (a teacher's) role is to care for a child and ensure her safety in preschool because, in fact, a child does not know anybody (there), so it may be hard for her to stay there. (P3)

"It is very hard for me to guard all children and prevent accidents. Some plays are at the edge of injury. Children like to climb up a tree or climb over a ladder. I am simply scared that they will get injured. On the other hand, I am disappointed that I must forbid such plays that are quite natural for them, and they promote a child's development. However, the fear of their injuries... It is really very hard for me." (P19; this student have had some experience with preschool)

The participants indicated that harm originates both from child's physical problems and from her emotional insecurity and instability. So a teacher must establish emotional environment in which children can express their feelings safely, knowing that teachers are nearby to help them if they feel overwhelmed by problems.

Teacher's authority. The concept of authority was considered important by the participants. This is not surprising because authority is invariable quality of teachers' practises. Teacher's authority is present in every classroom activity, either explicitly or implicitly. Teacher's authority rests not only on the use of the teacher's power but also on her pedagogical expertise. As Elliott (2009) claims, professional authority of a teacher largely arises from the demonstration of high-level expertise, which is, in turn, the key to establishment and maintenance of a sound classroom climate.

In the participants' accounts several types of teacher authority were described. First, *the weak authority* was conceptualised. Rather than being professionals who are entitled to educate children,

preschool teachers were depicted as “nice aunts” who make the children’s day in preschool cheerful and interesting. This, of course, does not require the exercising of large authority on the part of the teacher and, consequently, not high-level professional expertise. Rather it requires good interpersonal skills and empathy, the characteristics that are, by the way, difficult to train. Such “nice aunts” organize children’s activities on free play rather than on well structured, curriculum-based processes.

“In preschool there is much more freedom than in primary school. There is no bell ringing, children are not required to sit at desks, and the approach of teachers to children is not so strict. In preschool, teachers are like aunts and friends, while in primary schools they are authorities.” (P13)

When describing *the strong authority*, the participants referred to a parent rather than to a preschool teacher. Parents’ authority was described as strong because they use power to dominate over children:

“Mother may exercise more power (than a teacher). She can slap a child or shout on her. The preschool teacher’s power is limited, she must not beat anyone. Never. The mother, she is simply the parent, the authority.”

Interviewer: “So a teacher has no authority?”

“She has but I think that the mother has a stronger authority because if she orders ‘Don’t do it’, the child knows that she must obey. But if a teacher orders this once, twice, or three times, nothing happens because the child knows that the mother or the father whom she should obey are not there, are they?” (P3)

In addition to the authority exercised by a teacher and parents the participants advocated the *authority of children as a group*. This is a surprising conceptualisation if considered the young age and classroom roles of children. However, their authority is exercised not for themselves but in favour of a teacher who controls the actions children are expected to perform. A child acts as a member of a group, she understands her position in it, and she respects the strengths of group’s cohesion and acts accordingly. A child does not share powers with a teacher, she occupies a subordinate role and complies with the teacher’s order. She acts in harmony with other members of the group.

“In preschool, children respect the authority of a teacher only because they see that all children go and do what she wants and a child doesn’t want to be the only one who refused.” (P13)

Teacher’s emotionality. Participants acknowledged the role of using positive emotions in children’s education and rearing, however they were aware of differing positions of a teacher and a parent in the provision of emotional support. Both teachers and parents express their emotions towards children but parents express more intense and more frequent feelings. The attachment to children is the basic emotional bond that connects a mother and a child and is supposed to be reciprocal (Benoit, 2004; McLeod, 2009).

“Mother has a closer relationship, an emotional relationship to the child ... which a preschool teacher cannot have, for sure. So this is probably the chief difference because it is the mother’s child and she behaves towards her accordingly.” (P1)

A mother and a teacher have uneven distribution of emotions. A teacher must distribute it to the whole class whereas a mother concentrates on her children only.

“A teacher should not be so much captivated as the mother is because she has more children in her class. They are not her children so she should approach them accordingly. Of course, she must be

caring and dutiful but she should not invest so much feeling to them as she does to her own children.” (P17)

It should be noted that teachers’ provision of emotionality towards children is not included in the Czech preschool programme, rather, it is biologically necessary and socially needed. Teachers know they have to be emotional towards children, and thus exercise their social competence (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998).

Teacher’s emotionality is closely related to her empathy. Empathy enables a teacher to understand others’ feeling, and behaviour of children and make predictions about their future behaviour, and then respond in appropriate ways (Allison et al., 2011). The need of empathy was nicely expressed by a participant when responded to the question whether she will be a good teacher:

“I hope so (laughs). I will attempt to express empathy because I think that nowadays teachers do not have good relations to children, they are not kind to them, they scream: ‘Eat it up’. The teachers lack empathy...” (P5)

Helping students to cultivate empathy in the pre-service years could improve their attitudes to children and parents, and presumably may be one way they increase job satisfaction and potentially to remain in the teaching profession longer (Peck et al, 2015).

7. Conclusions

Participants provided conceptualisations which are attributable to their narrow experiences with the preschool environment and the teachers’ work. In particular, they failed to view more elaborated preschool aims, the structure of the day activities and competences of the teacher. Their technical language was inaccurate and descriptions were rather superficial. Hesitation was frequent in their responses. This was not surprising due to their lack of professional knowledge and preschool experience in the beginning of their pre-graduate programme.

On the other hand, the participants demonstrated fresh views on several components of preschool. They indicated that the primary function of preschool is to provide space for the child’s socialisation into the peer group and preparation for entry into primary school. The core task of the preschool teacher was conceptualised as the establishing safe environment, the exercising of (mild) authority, and the expression of emotions to children. These findings offer challenges for university educators to elaborate the students’ professional knowledge and skills.

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