

# LEARNING WITH A PROJECT APPROACH: AN EXPERIENCE OF A PEDAGOGICAL SUPPORT FOR SUPERVISION AND TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

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## ABSTRACT

In this chapter we will present and evaluate an in-service training program provided by the University of Évora department of Pedagogy and Education for pre-school and primary teachers involved in supervising student teachers in their practicum during the initial teacher education program – “Learning through a Project Approach in pre-school and primary school” (LPA). The methodology used is based on the concept of pedagogic isomorphism (Niza, 2009) structuring the course in a Project Approach (PA).

Teachers started to identify their knowledge and also their needs and questions about the PA and they designed the course in collaboration, aiming to answer the questions they identified. All teachers were involved in bibliographic research about PA, they shared and discussed individual PA experiences and they carried out synthesis about the new knowledge and answers to the problems they identified that were then discussed in the group.

The analysis of the teachers’ voices expressed in the course assessments, demonstrate the way they designed and accomplished their projects of learning and provided evidence of the significance of this learning experience, which they were able to transfer to their practices like teachers and trainers.

Key words: Teacher Education; Professional Development; Pedagogical Isomorphism; Project Approach.

## **Síntesis**

En este capítulo presentamos y evaluamos un programa de formación, todavía activo, impartido en la Universidad de Évora (Departamento de Pedagogía y Educación), dirigido a docentes de infantil y primaria. El programa implica la supervisión de los docentes noveles durante el período de prácticas, inserido en el programa de formación inicial “Aprendiendo a través del Trabajo por Proyectos en la escuela infantil y primaria”. La metodología usada se basa en el concepto de ‘isomorfismo pedagógico’ (Niza, 2009), que estructura el curso en un enfoque por Proyectos.

Los/las docentes comenzaron por identificar sus conocimientos, necesidades y preguntas sobre los Proyectos de Trabajo (PT), y diseñaron el curso en colaboración, con el fin de responder a las cuestiones que identificaron. Todas las docentes estuvieron implicadas en la búsqueda bibliográfica sobre los PT, compartiendo y discutiendo sus experiencias individuales, finalizando en una síntesis sobre el nuevo saber y las respuestas a los problemas que habían identificado y discutido en grupo.

El análisis de las voces de las docentes expresadas en el acompañamiento del curso, demuestran el modo en como diseñaron y cumplieron sus proyectos de aprendizaje, proporcionando evidencias de la significación de su experiencia de aprendizaje, siendo capaces de transferir en sus prácticas, como docentes y formadoras.

Palabras clave: formación del profesorado; desarrollo profesional: Isomorfismo pedagógico; Proyectos de Trabajo.

## **INTRODUCTION**

We will first introduce the work developed over the last two years in the Pedagogy and Education Department at the University of Évora with two groups of cooperating teachers. Next, the causes of this project will be presented. Considering that the education of the most of us throughout life influence our behaviors and ways of learning, this accumulated experience also, foment the reproduction of traditional teaching practices (Kelchtermans a Vandenberghe, 1994). As University supervisors of teaching practice we started with empirical evidence of attitudes and beliefs that the cooperating teachers in pre-school and primary schools, seems to hamper and many

times prevent dialogical visions and teaching practices with children in the classroom, namely the adoption of the Project Approach by the students. So, we intended that by a program of teacher development, to incorporate this teaching/learning practice in the classroom and help supervision of the pre-service teacher's education project. With a broad-based view of teacher professional development, we tried to find with them the pathways for change their practices and, simultaneously, enabling to improve this pedagogical approach in their participation on supervisory process.

Experience in this teacher professional development program, suggests that it is possible to use a model that pursue the same principles and practices which they use with their children in classrooms. Although it is a difficult undertaking this principle is what Niza (2009) named as pedagogical isomorphism. The author argues that the *pedagogical isomorphism* should be implemented and used in order to develop a successful teacher learning and development. Using the same practices in a professional development program, can lead teachers to apply the same learning models in their workplace with children in a formal context of learning for childhood.

Drawing upon work carried out in the context of "Learning through a Project Approach in pre-school and primary school" (LPA), this program started with an emphasis placed on behaviors, doubts and professional experiences. How do the experienced cooperating teachers, understood and valued the effectiveness of the strategies they use to promote teaching and learning through a project approach, were important to design the line of inquiry proceed in the course. Finally, we will highlight some aspects that might be developed further in the context of pedagogy of teacher education and professional development.

## **METHOD**

### *Design and Participants*

The new teacher profile in Portugal derives from the adaptation of teacher education programs to the *Bologna Process*. Its novelty in relation to traditional programs requires the implementation of formative strategies intended to foster the development of an autonomous educational competence considered to be a key issue in this profile. The pre-school (3-6 years old) and primary (6-10 years old) teachers in Portugal are generalists able to perform in-depth processes of teaching and learning focusing on the

globalization of knowledge and integrated teaching. These teacher educator competences assume and imply the need for professional development and training of teacher education staff and cooperating teachers (Korthagen, 2010).

The Project Approach (PA) is a core strategy for learning in the initial teachers' training courses at the University of Évora. In order to build coherence in teaching practices both in schools and at the University, we decided to extend this strategy to the in-service courses offered to cooperating teachers. The PA is a strategy considered to fulfill the needs as well as to promote the achievement of the educational aims of the 21st century. We use the concept of pedagogical isomorphism (Niza, 2009) to stress that in order to carry on innovative practices teachers need to experience them in their training.

We argue that the use of teaching and learning based on the PA, working on meaningful activities, can also benefit teacher learning as it assumes that life is action and it is through interaction between action and thought that the individual learns and develops (Andrade, Alarcão e Santos, 2008). So, in order to contribute for professional development of the cooperating teachers, the implementation of training activities was a priority for encouraging the development of educational skills considered a key issue in the teacher professional profile for a quality work.

Throughout the supervision process in the pre-service teacher education at the University of Évora, we identified the teachers desire of a structured course in order to promote their work by projects in schools and pre-schools. Believing that professional development never stops and is embedded in teacher's daily lives (Little, 1993; Zeichner e Conklin, 2005), the learning as a process encompassed creating a common language towards a common agenda to academic staff and for the 30 participants in LPA: experienced teachers and cooperators from pre-school and primary schools.

The purpose and the challenge for all will develop the taste and pleasure of learning to build knowledge together!

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESSES IN LPA**

The importance of improving schools, increasing teacher quality, and improving the quality of student learning has led to a concentrated concern with professional

development of teachers as one important way of achieving these goals (Opfer e Pedder, 2011). For a long time, the literature fails to explain how teachers learn and what makes professional development effective (Borko, 2004; Clarke e Hollingsworth, 2002), but otherwise, the acceptance that teacher learning as interactive and social and that “formal and informal communities among teachers can act as powerful mechanisms for their growth and development” (Desimone, 2009, p.29). Opfer e Pedder (2011) argues that “the extant literature suggests that the majority of writings on the topic continue to focus on specific activities, processes, or programs in isolation from the complex teaching and learning environments in which teachers live” (p.377).

In LPA the substantives features were to enhance teacher’s knowledge, skills and classroom practice. So, we advocate an understanding of teacher professional learning centrally based on *pedagogical isomorphism*, the conceptual purpose by Niza (2009):

“The isomorphism is teaching the methodological strategy which consists of experience through the whole process of training, involvement and attitudes, methods and procedures, technical resources and modes of organization that you want will be performed in professional practices of effective teachers” (p. 352).

So, after decided the conceptual solution we designed the first session. Getting started (Katz e Chard, 1989) included: schedule the plan of action starting from the initial problems identified in the teachers knowledge:

- Presentation and expectations of participants;
- Proposal for work on project: between the desire to learn and overcome the inertia;
- Sharing curiosities, interests and questions; Topics related to the everyday life with children in classroom
- Sharing resources and plan the tasks and schedule an work plan.

Next, in phase 2 or field work, teachers and the “university staff” shared bibliographic resources and they read theoretical texts individually chosen (or in pairs or small groups). Digital platforms, like moodle, were very important sharing and communicating resources.

Culminating and dissemination events, was the phase 3. That includes preparing presentation reports in the form of talks and “guided tours” of their constructions with power point support. After each group or individual displayed and reported its findings

to the others, the class discuss about that. Following these events, all of us were engaged in evaluation and reflection about project approach, based on practical examples, and feedback.

### **CONCLUSIONS: learning processes by teachers voices**

Teacher's voices in their final and writing assessment, tell us that if effective professional development will result in improve teacher practices, teacher professional activities need to be experienced in the program design and development. They revealed their desire to improve teaching, linking theory and practice in cooperation with trainee teachers and children. The need to cultivate communities of practice in school was also mentioned.

One of the components of communities of practice and PA, is that learners are involved in a wide variety of tasks. In this professional development program, teachers were involved in drawing, comparing, reading, listening or discussing. These learning processes where rich opportunities for learning with peers in a community of learners.

We think now, that this is what has led researchers like Borko (2004), Desimone (2009) or Opfer e Pedder (2011) to consider the crucial role of the teacher's training processes on their practice: the types of materials teachers use while learning, the coherence of the learning activity to their daily work, and the pedagogical processes those teachers engage in while learning effectively (Niza, 2009). Teachers learn most effectively when activities require them to engage "with materials of practice, when activity is school based and integrated into the daily work of teachers and when the pedagogy of professional development is active and requires teachers to learn in ways that reflect how they should teach pupils" (Opfer e Pedder, 2011, p.385).

Cooperating teachers, as a whole, said that these elements come together in this LPA professional development program. A learning community emerged, involving different types of teachers where they were more likely to discuss problems, strategies, and solutions together. That is our strong belief too!

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