

Promoting critical reflection through teacher's education

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to study the teachers' education at the University, through the prism of critical reflection. Considering critical reflection as a necessary qualification for professional development, we focus on a curriculum that cultivate critical thinking not only during the theoretical part of the studies (lectures, workshops etc), but in practicum too. In this area the student has the opportunity to be tested, to think and to reflect upon educational practices. During an investigation that took place in a Greek University, the need to strengthen the reflective skills of future teachers, as well as the potential benefits for their better preparation emerged.

KEYWORDS

Critical reflection, teacher's education, practicum, teacher's preparation, reflective skills

RÉSUMÉ

L'objectif de cet article est d'étudier la formation des enseignants à l'Université, à travers le prisme de la réflexion critique. Compte tenu de la réflexion critique comme une qualification nécessaire pour le développement professionnel, nous nous concentrons sur un curriculum qui cultive l'esprit critique non seulement au cours de la partie théorique, des études (conférences, ateliers, etc.), mais aussi en stage. Dans ce domaine, l'étudiant a la possibilité à tester, à penser et à réfléchir sur les pratiques éducatives. Lors d'une enquête, qui a eu lieu dans une université grecque, la nécessité de renforcer les compétences de réflexion des futurs enseignants, ainsi que les avantages potentiels pour leur meilleure préparation a émergé.

MOTS-CLÉS

Réflexion critique, formation des enseignants, pratique, préparation des enseignants, compétences réfléchissants

INTRODUCTION

Moving from traditional to more contemporary forms of education (distance learning, web-based courses, etc.), the need of adaptation to new environments is emerging (Karalis & Koutsonikos, 2003). Common point on opinions expressed is that to achieve a change in the learning process, a prerequisite is the review and development of teachers' training (Raikou, 2012). As is evident

from current literature, the main pursuit in higher education, and especially in the training of teachers, is the cultivation of critical reflection (Brookfield, 2012; Eisner, 2002; Greene, 2000; Richert, 1991; Raikou, 2013). There is an attempt within universities to meet this objective, through the implementation of various programs, which offer ways of thinking, process and practice, adapted to each society (Raikou & Karalis, 2007, 2010). Therefore, the question that arises at this point relates to how we define critical reflection and, above all, how we think its cultivation is possible in the specific educational context.

HOW WE DEFINE CRITICAL REFLECTION?

Brookfield, by using his personal experiences as a starting point, develops his thoughts upon critical reflection as a learning experience (2012, p. 3-5). He identifies three sorts of assumptions which can undergo an examination through critical thinking: the causal, the prescriptive and the paradigmatic ones. The causal assumptions refer to the way the world functions and how this can change. They connect the cause with the result and therefore they are interpretative and prognostic. They elucidate the reason why something happened in the past, the causes of certain events, forecasting what the consequences are going to be and the results of specific decisions. The prescriptive assumptions relate to what we think that should happen in specific situation, that is, they define the wishful way of thinking and acting. They are connected with the idea we have for someone's role, for instance, the idea we have for a good teacher and he should act or think. The paradigmatic assumptions, construct the world into fundamental categories and they regard deeper perceptions which mould the individual reference framework and the way he conceives the world. Their existence is not usually conscientious whereas their realization is accompanied by a personal surprise. Mezirow himself, points out that causal assumptions are the easiest to identify, in contrast to paradigmatic which are the most difficult to be identified by individuals themselves (Mezirow & Ass., 2000).

According to a recent text, Brookfield (2012, p. 11-17) argues that critical reflection includes four points:

a) *Hunting assumptions.*

As the writer mentions: «*Critical thinking happens first when we try to discover the assumptions that influence the way we think and act. Pretty much every action we take is based on assumptions that we have accepted, sometimes unthinkingly, as accurate. Critical thinking involves deliberately trying to find out what these assumptions are*» (Brookfield, 2012, p. 11).

b) *Checking assumptions.*

After realizing the assumptions which lead to actions and the way of thinking, the individual initiates a checking of correctness upon these assumptions. This means that it is attempted a determination of validity and credibility of these assumptions or their lack in them, in order to work as guidelines for action. In this way, the individual is committed to an evaluation process, «*trying to see when assumptions make sense, and when they don't, what assumptions cover lots of situations and what assumptions are specific to very particular events. Key to this process is identifying and assessing what we regard as convincing evidence for our assumptions. Sometimes this evidence is experiential (the things that have happened to us), sometimes it's authoritative (what people we trust have told us is the truth), and sometimes it's derived from disciplined research and inquiry we've conducted*» (Brookfield, 2012, p. 12).

c) *Seeing things from different viewpoints.*

The checking of correctness is facilitated while the individual attempts to see his assumptions through multiple and different aspects. Due to multiple and different roles which each individual undertakes throughout her life (as a parent, companion, teacher, student etc.), he usually acts with the supposition that all people can conceive through his actions the same meanings that he intends to convey. However there lies the possibility for a failure, as others might conceive the words and actions of a particular person in a totally different way from the one that this person intended to make them be conceived. Therefore, as Brookfield points out, «*one way to find out how accurate our assumptions are, is to try and see ourselves as others see us*» (Brookfield, 2012, p. 12).

d) *Taking informed action.*

The objective of critical reflection is taking informed action. The reason of the existence of the three previous steps is that of giving the ability to the individual to undertake and accomplish informed actions. Brookfield explains that, «*we think critically not just to survive, but also to live and love well. And a life in which our actions are based on what we feel are accurate understandings of our situations is likely to be experienced as much more satisfactory than a life in which our actions are haphazard and arbitrary*» (Brookfield, 2012, p. 13).

Informed action is based on thinking and analyzing, which means that there is evidence which we evaluate as important so that we can support such an action. To make his thinking clear, Brookfield (2012) describes the following example: «*To use a trite example, as a bandleader I sequence the sets our band plays based on the evidence of previous audience's reactions. The more I do this, the more I realize that audiences are different. Songs and jokes that go down well when we play the last set at a dive bar may bomb when we play a bowling alley full of families*» (Brookfield, 2012, p. 13).

An informed action is the one which is based on arguments and can explain the choices and decisions of an individual. However the arguments on which we base our actions may not be rational. For example, as Brookfield says “*plenty of people act on evidence solely because of the source of that evidence*” (2012, p. 13). We often choose to listen to a musical part or read a literary text just because someone whose taste or opinion we trust says that they are good. In this way team thinking, *automaton conformity* according to Fromm, or the *hegemony* according to Gramsci, is developed. Brookfield claims: «*these three concepts all describe the easy way we fall unthinkingly into assuming that certain things are obviously true, a matter of common sense*» (2012, p. 13). Finally, the action which is based on arguments does not comprise a guaranty itself, for achieving critical reflection. We must also know that our actions have the results that we wish for. In this sense, an informed action is the one which is unfolded as we want and has the desirable results. Consequently, based on the writer's previous example, the orchestra conductor, having taken into consideration his former experiences on which of the musical parts are pleasantly acceptable by the audience, will choose his repertoire so as to have the desirable result. However, in some cases, the actions which we consider to be beneficial for us, are in fact harmful, even when we do not realize it. Brookfield connects in this way the idea of *hegemony* (which comes from the critical theory) with critical reflection. «*Hegemony is in place when people behave in ways that they think are good for them, not realizing that they are being harmed and colluding in their own misery... So part of critical thinking is making sure that the actions that flow from our assumptions are justifiable according to some notion of goodness or desirability*» (Brookfield, 2012, p. 15).

A critical question which arises at this point is how we can evaluate “good” and “advisable” on which the theorist refers to. He explains that: «*Each of us can cite evidence, scan*

experience, and produce credible, authoritative individuals who support our respective point of view. But ultimately, each of us has arrived at our position from a mixture of analyzing our experiences, thinking in the most critical way we can about them, and then allying our analysis with our vision of what the world looks like when it's working properly» (Brookfield, 2012, p. 16).

However, he clarifies that critical reflection is unbreakably connected with the object of the analysis, with what exactly this is about which we think critically: *«If critical thinking is understood only as a process of analyzing information so we can take actions that produce desired results, then some of the most vicious acts of human behavior could be defined as critical thinking... It can't be considered separately from values and commitments, whether they be moral or political»* (Brookfield, 2012, p. 16-17).

THE ROLE OF CRITICAL THINKING DURING THE TEACHER EDUCATION

Taking into account the significance of the critical reflection cultivation, we realize the determinative role that it can play in the educational field. The educational aim of reflective process, concerns the trainees but mainly the educators themselves. Besides, the process of education includes all the participants. As for the educators, participating reflectively and learning from their work, presupposes the existence of some kind of support, not only during their professional career but even before that, namely during their training (Richert, 1991, p. 114).

Focusing on the teacher education, we ascertain that according to bibliography, the preparation of educators presents some significant deficiencies (Papaioannou, 2011). These deficiencies concern not only the pedagogical aims they pursue, but the clarity of the aims from the knowledge they provide. Its result is to discern an intellectual restriction among students as a consequence of the “imperious teaching method” which is followed (Mackenzie, 1991).

There arises the need to put emphasis on the development of rational abilities, on the recognition of arguments and on the development of inclining thinking beyond everything they have been taught. In other words, on the development of critical thinking (Massey, 1981). This however, presupposes a curriculum which will include certain courses but mainly practice, on the whole focused on the development and cultivation of critical reflection. The ulterior aim of such a venture is that through an educationally sufficient method, to develop a reflective process in the framework of the training of future educators, in order to be achievable to incorporate and convey through daily practice at schools any knowledge will be acquired.

PRACTICUM AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

Although one of the objectives of higher education is the creation of the presuppositions for the development of energetic and reflective attitude of students towards learning, a difficulty is ascertained in order this aim to be achieved (Chatzopoulou & Kakana, 2013, p. 127). Even though students are trained on modern research, studies have shown that when entering professional field they choose traditional methods of teaching (Chatzopoulou & Kakana, 2013). The interpretation that is given in this finding is connected to several causes. One of these is the view that young teachers shape their perceptions for teaching influenced by their personal experiences, that is by the way they were trained as students (Karalis, Sotiropoulos, Kampeza,

2007). At the same time, we must point out the fact that the students' training is a mass one. This means that future educators are taught the modern pedagogic approaches mainly in the form of a lecture (Chatzopoulou & Kakana, 2013, p. 128). Moreover, in the framework of practicum, students attend educators, whose majority implement traditional practice and as a result they are more receptive and they adopt these approaches in teaching.

Based on everything above, there rises the intense need to renew and improve the training of educators at the university. There is a particular mention on the bibliography about the necessity of modernization of practicum through which is argued how the model of the reflective educator can be approached (Avgitidou & Hatzoglou, 2013; Androusou & Tsafos, 2013; Chatzopoulou & Kakana, 2013).

In the framework of training future educators, practicum consists a very important part of their studies. Through that training phase, students are offered the opportunity to combine theory with practice and for the first time come into contact with their professional environment and community (Karalis, Sotiropoulos & Kampeza, 2007). Practicum constitutes a learning experience which contributes in an essential way in forming teaching skills. Through that process they are offered the opportunity to use various approaches and reflection. In this way the perceptive and critical ability of new educators is increased.

Studying Brookfield's stages, we claim that through appropriately designed teaching interventions, it is possible that the three first stages of critical reflection will be materialized, during the studies of new educators, whereas the last stage of informed action could be practicum. The field of practical appliance consists a good chance for action provided that the process of locating, examining and requesting alternatives in relation to the acknowledgements on a specific training issue we negotiate, are preceded. The part of self-reflection and self-assessment which follows practicum of educators, is essential. Thus, the training of educators at university could fully cover all the phases of reflective process whereas the last one could form the basic keystone which will penetrate the whole curriculum.

DEVELOPING CRITICAL REFLECTION SKILLS FOR FUTURE TEACHERS

In a research that was conducted at the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education of the University of Patras, the need for reflective processing accession in the training of educators as well as the importance of practicum during this process, arose. During the period between 2008-2012, a series of workshops was carried out at the same time with their curriculum were materialized, with the application of the «Transformative Learning through Aesthetic Experience» - TLAE method (Kokkos, 2011). The method which was used is based on using art in order to strengthen and promote the development of critical reflection. Its main objective is that trainees will proceed into close examination, analysis and reflection upon an issue that is taught, through a process of six stages (Kokkos, 2011, p. 97-100). The observation and elaboration of remarkable pieces of art which offer the priming for the development of the issue we negotiate are major points of that method. It is about the exploitation of the aesthetic experience in order to promote critical reflection.

Students of the the 1st year until the completion of their studies took part in these workshops (Raikou, 2013). The first year concerned the designing and piloting application of the method through a series of workshops which were carried out during the second and third year. The aim of the first workshop was the investigation of the need for critical reflection upon the acceptances of the trainees concerning the thematic field of learning process. At this stage the

first phase of the critical reflection process is activated as Brookfield describes it (*Hunting assumptions*). In accordance with Brookfield's views about this phase, it is a basic pursue to intentionally locate those assumptions which influence our thoughts and actions. The first workshop started with an introductory discussion about the main topic which means about learning process (aim and ways). During this discussion there was an effort to give emphasis on the assumptions that students have formed from their personal experiences in the typical frameworks so far.

Taking into account the students' views, the stands of learning process as well as the critical questions which would consist the elaboration object in the next workshops, were determined. The stands concerned issues like guidance, discipline and useful knowledge meanings as well as the formulation of behaviors and values.

Next, the pieces of art which would consist the priming for the elaboration of the critical questions, were determined. The criterion for selecting those pieces of art was the fact that they are primarily important pieces of art. At the same time they are easy to be elaborated, something which is necessary since they are referred to inexperienced public like the students. Furthermore and foremost they serve teaching purposes because they offer stimulation for reflection on the issues which interest us. The pieces of art which were used come from the field of poetry, painting, cinema and literature.

During the following workshops, a systematic process of observing these artworks was attempted, as well as a correlation between the drawn ideas and the critical questions in order to critically approach the under examination views of the students about the stands which had been defined. At this point the second phase of the critical reflection process is activated according to Brookfield (*Checking assumptions*). According to Brookfield, the assumptions we have located that guide our actions and thoughts are put into examination of their validity and credibility. We follow in each workshop the stages of the method MMAE; we posed initially the critical question we would elaborate. Afterwards, the initial students' points of view would be put forward and then the presentation and analysis of the works of art would follow in an order relating it gradually to the critical question. During the analysis of the artwork, all team members would be given the opportunity to express themselves free both about the analysis of the artwork and about their points of view on the topic. At this point, the third phase of the critical reflection process is activated, according to Brookfield (*Seeing things from different viewpoints*). The multiple and different points of view that were heard during the artwork elaboration worked in a strengthening way towards the critical reflection process and simplified the correctness checking or not by the participants' assumptions. In the last workshop there was a reassessment on their points of view and a comparison with those that had been expressed before the artwork elaboration.

The study on the effect of the workshops in relation to the students' practicum was a significant point of the application in order to ascertain possible influences and differentiations. The practicum was studied in combination with the application of the TLAE method. Here, the fourth phase of the critical reflection process is activated, according to Brookfield (*Taking informed action*). What we were interested in was to examine if the three first stages of the critical reflection process, which had been cultivated during the workshops through TLAE method, promoted and led to the fourth and final phase of informed action through practicum. The aim was to assess the existence of changes in the assumptions of the students, generally however the conscientious analytical thinking and assessment with evidence and arguments for every action.

PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Both during the workshops and after their completion, the effect from the application of the TLAE method was studied in relation to the students' practicum so as possible influences and differentiations could be ascertained.

As for the critical reflection process, they get great benefit from this process both personally and professionally as educators. They mention that it helps them to formulate their perceptions and generally it helps them with their way of thinking, while some of them point out that it strengthens both the preparation of the future educator and the improvement of an active one. It also helps with matters of practical application.

As for their role as educators, 10 out of 15 students mention that in the beginning of their studies, they had not realized the importance of this role. Moreover, 9 students state their opinion about the educator changed during their studies. Many of them initially had a generally different opinion about educators, especially about kindergarten teacher, whom they do not regard as an educator. During the procedure though, they realized the role of the kindergarten teacher as an educator, and the work he offers. As for the factors that influenced the formulation of their perceptions and the realization of their role, almost everyone mentions their participation in the workshops and at the same time the practicum, whereas only few mention some teaching lessons.

About practicum, some students mention that the workshops helped them greatly with both the preparation and during practice. As 11 out of 15 students mention, they were influenced by their experience from participating in the workshops due to the topics and process. In particular, they point out the issues of discipline, the educator's role, the designing and assessment, while as for the procedure, they mention the critical reflection process, which they experienced daily, so as to be self-assessed and improve the points which they found necessary. The points of view which some students expressed during the final interview were indicative:

Student A mentions that because she was influenced by the process of the workshops, she regularly reflects on the things she has done while she feels that she finds many connections with the topics which had been analyzed among the team members and how these can be implemented in reality. The same student mentions: *"After each practice, I put myself in the process of re-thinking what I did, since I thought very thoroughly what we had discussed"*. What, she really believes that was the influence from the workshops was the assessment issue, while more is mentioned: *"I thought about the issue of discipline, the relationship between an educator and a trainee, the framework effect"*.

Student B points out that during practicum, she refers that she remembered some of the topics which had been discussed during the workshops. *"What I mostly remembered was the discipline, the guidance and how I can handle things and also the relationship with the children. I thought about some of the things we had discussed, despite the fact that they were in a different framework each time"*.

Student E points out that one of the topics that she found very influential on practicum was the matter of discipline. *"The issue of discipline came into my mind. Surely, it is a situation which cannot be enforced only by shouting, it is a whole procedure because the character and the way of this enforcement in the classroom is very important, you must win the children in order to be able to do some things"*.

Student Z mentions that during practicum she was influenced by the discussions in the workshops on the issues of discipline and differentiation: *"I was mostly concerned with the issues of discipline and our attitude towards differentiation that is how important our role is there. When you are in this situation you think about these issues and how you can handle them"*.

Student H comments that during practicum she thought about many of the workshop topics while she entered the critical reflection procedure, in order to be able to improve her points of view: “Yes, but we had to think about them because during practicum we came into contact with what we learned at the workshops and we felt the need to continually improve any possibly wrong perceptions”.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the outcomes presented here, we can conclude that practicum can function as a vehicle for the development of critical reflection. At the same time, with their theoretical training, future educators have the ability, through appropriately designed steps of teaching interventions, to cover the stages of critical reflection, as Brookfield defines it. More specifically, by applying during the course of studies, specially designed methods like TLAE, which promote the cultivation of critical reflection, it is possible to cover the first stages which concern the localization and the control of assumptions as well as the examination of the issue through multiple aspects. The last stage of critical reflection, which concerns informed action, is achievable through students’ practicum. In this way, practicum is elevated onto a particularly important level since it is the testing area, the confirmation and consolidation of the critical reflection process of future educators who have the opportunity to enter professional fields well prepared in order to contribute to the improvement of the education that is currently provided.

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