Preschool teachers' self-reflection issues

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the empirical data of a study concerning the views of 47 Greek preschool teachers in regard to which issues are reflected in school and the frequency of occurrence of self-reflection per week. Data coding and descriptive statistics were mainly used. The results provide clear conclusions on the issues that Greek preschool teachers reflect on and the frequency with which they do so. The preschool teachers reflected on 5 main categories of issues (Students' development & behavior, Preschool teachers' relationships & collaborations, School unit operation, Issues related to teaching, Role & professional development of the preschool teachers), which were identified in the self-reflection diaries, completed by the participants during four weeks.

KEYWORDS

Preschool teachers' relationships and collaborations, self-reflection, self-reflection diary, students' development and behavior, self-reflection issues

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine les données empiriques d'une étude concernant les points de vue des 47 enseignants grecs du préscolaire en ce qui concerne les problèmes reflétés à l'école et la fréquence d'occurrence de l'autoréflexion par semaine. Le codage des données et les statistiques descriptives ont été principalement utilisés. Les résultats fournissent des conclusions claires sur les problèmes que les enseignants grecs du préscolaire réfléchissent et sur la fréquence à laquelle ils le font. Les enseignants du préscolaire ont réfléchi sur 5 grandes catégories de problèmes (Développement et comportement des élèves, Relations et collaborations des enseignants, Fonctionnement de l'unité scolaire, Problèmes liés à l'enseignement, Rôle et développement professionnel des enseignants du préscolaire), qui ont été identifiés dans les agendas d'auto-réflexion, remplies par le participants pendant quatre semaines.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Self-reflection represents a conscious process of thinking about what is done and why (Farrell, 2014). It is considered to be a procedure of recognizing, examining, studying the impact and the consequences of beliefs, experiences, attitudes, knowledge, and values on classroom practices. It encourages individuals not to make decisions and guide their work based on impulse or routine but examine a subject in detail (Farrell & Jacobs, 2016; Valli, 1997). The initiation of self- reflection usually derives from a problem, when the individual deals with a state of doubt and tries to find a solution (Dewey, 1933; Mann & Walsh, 2013; Spalding, & Wilson 2002). Dewey refers to the act of reflection as the application of all possible solutions that have arisen as a result of reflective thinking, with the aim of solving a problem that has been triggered (Noffke & Brennan, 1988). Reflective practice should be an integral part of the skills required in order to become a good teacher (Korthagen, 2004; Tateo, 2012).

Reflection takes place at all stages of the educational process. Namely, it is involved in planning, implementation-practice and assessment-evaluation (Ibrahim et al., 2012). Teachers should not only reflect on how to solve a problem but also evaluate the context that contributed to the creation of that problem. If teachers are never questioned about the purposes and values that dominate their work, the context in which they teach or never examine their claims then they are not engaged in reflective teaching (Zeichner & Liston, 2013).

Reflecting on the various important aspects of teaching and learning can be demanding. Therefore, teachers are advised to reflect on critical episodes that occurred during the implementation of the educational process. Critical episodes are events, problems or issues that hinder the smooth and effective implementation of the teaching and learning process. Critical episode choices rely heavily on teachers' ability to define the priorities of their teaching (Ibrahim et al., 2012; Zembal-Saul, Blumenfeld, & Krajcik, 2000).

Reflection is a key component in understanding the complexity of the nature of classrooms and teaching procedures (Artzt & al., 2015; Gelfuso, 2016; Margolis, 2002; Mayes, 2001). Through reflection, teachers reshape, reinterpret, review, and understand their practice from a variety of perspectives, based on data generated by their self-assessment (Loughran, 2002; Munby & Russell, 1990; Postholm, 2008; Schön, 1983, 1987). Teachers' experiences play an important role in their professional development (Kalk et al., 2014; Korthagen, 2001; Liston & Zeichner, 1990; Schön, 1983, 1987) and reflection supports their utilization, helping teachers gain more control over their experiences (Seikkula-Leino et al., 2010; Spalding et al., 2002; Zeichner & Liston, 1987).

Reflective teachers act with consciousness by organizing teaching and its content according to democratic principles (Brookfield, 1995), developing a better level of interpersonal relationships with students and their colleagues, a higher level of professional satisfaction and a sense of self-esteem, discussing their experiences without inhibitions and using exploratory methods (Rocco, 2010). Reflection allows teachers to observe what is happening in the classroom. Additionally, teachers will be able to critically analyze their actions in order to improve their professional practice and improve students' learning behavior and performance (Ibrahim et al., 2012; Rose, 2007 as cited in Fatemipour, 2013; Zembal-Saul et al., 2000).

Finally, reflective practice assists the improvement of self-efficacy in the classroom, as the teachers monitor the positive effects of their own solutions, improving the understanding of

their own forms of teaching (Calderhead, 1989 as cited in Killeavy, & Moloney, 2010; Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993 as cited in Braun & Crumpler, 2004; Noormohammadi, 2014; Runhaar, Sanders, & Yang, 2010). Without reflection, the experience gained can be forgotten and the learning potential lost (Gibbs, 1988 as cited in Kalk et al., 2014). Through reflection, teachers are transformed into autonomous professionals, who are responsible, self-aware and confident (Brookfield, 1995; Loughran, 2002). Reflection is considered to be a particularly important characteristic of an effective teacher (Kalk et al., 2014; Perryman et al., 2017; Schön, 1983).

Research questions

The purpose of this article is to study what issues Greek preschool teachers reflect on and how often. In this context, two research questions were formulated

1. What issues do preschool teachers reflect on?
2. How often do they reflect on each issue?

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Context and Participants

The research questions and the purpose of this study are part of a larger study that lasted four weeks. The research involved 47 preschool teachers of public kindergartens in the Prefecture of Achaia. Their average age was 38.8 years old. From the 47 participants, 17 hold a master's degree and two hold a doctorate. They comprise a convenience sample of preschool teachers who volunteered to facilitate our research (Creswell, 2012).

Research tools- Self-reflection diary

This particular thesis was created to purposefully present the issues reported by preschool teachers that are reflected in the school unit and the frequency with which they deal with them weekly. For this purpose, a self- reflection diary with closed and open-ended questions was created. In the literature the structure of the diaries that are found in various studies is different. Those can be diaries with complete lack of structure, organized around a specific event but also with specific questions, which participants are asked to answer (Robson, 2010), just as in our study. Specific questions were selected, as in unstructured diaries the interpretive work depends on the participants, leaving them much of the responsibility (Robson, 2010). In addition, literature suggests the use of specific questions, which examine the activities of the respondent in specific time periods (Bourque & Back, 1982, as cited in Robson, 2010), as in the present work, which was completed on a weekly basis.

More specifically, in order to research and record the reflection issues that mostly concern teachers, we addressed the following question: "On which issues did you reflect during the school week?" We deliberately chose an open-ended question as more appropriate for smaller scale surveys. Respondents had the opportunity to express freely their opinion and their point of view without any guidance. We consider that it gave us the opportunity to record unexpected answers which a researcher could not have predict and include in a standardized reflection diary. Open-ended questions are able to capture the authenticity, sincerity, truth and depth of the answers, which are the characteristics of qualitative data (Bryman, 2017; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2008).

As far as the frequency of their self-reflection on weekly basis is concerned, we chose a closed-ended question in which teachers answered by completing a five-point Likert scale. The hierarchical scale created in order to cover the possible answers that could be given by the participants (they circled 1 if they reflected once a week on the specific issue, number 2 if they reflected twice, 3 for three times, 4 for four times and 5 if they reflected five times a week). In

addition, closed-ended questions are effective in comparing answers, are more accessible in terms of completion, and there is no question of ascertaining whether the answers given are comparable (Bryman, 2017; Cohen et al., 2008).

The analytic procedure

Teachers' responses to the items of the self- reflection diary were transcribed and prepared for coding in NVivo and their responses of the questionnaire were analyzed in SPSS.

To answer the research question on which issues the participants are reflecting on, the empirical data collected during the four weeks were coded. Data coding is the beginning of most forms of qualitative analysis (Bryman, 2017), being one of the most important stages of analysis. By encoding meaning is given to the data that has been collected by providing the possibility of connecting different parts of the data through the rendering of the code. The code contributes to the consideration of the parts to which it has been assigned as a whole in the process of analysis as they relate to the same idea (Iosifidis, 2017). Through the process of first coding the data and then grouping them we lead to the development of conceptual, theoretical and interpretive categories. The codification results in the theorization, interpretation and analysis of the data (Iosifidis, 2017).

Initially, codes were assigned to the empirical data collected and then the pieces that had been assigned the respective code were taken as a group and the corresponding category was created. Through this process we came up with the issues that the preschool teachers reflect on for the period of four weeks. The main categories of reflection issues of preschool teachers which were 5 in number, were created. The categories are not based on the literature but were highlighted by the answers of the participants. It was observed that in all four weeks of the investigation the accusations remained the same without the need for a week to add a new one or to remove one due to lack of data (table 1).

In reference to the second research question on how often teachers reflect on each issue, descriptive statistics were used and specifically the mode were utilized. The reason the specific indicators were chosen is due to the hierarchical scale. The answers of the participants are categorized in the following categories: once a week (corresponds to 1), twice a week (corresponds to 2), three times a week (equals 3), four times a week (equals 4), five times a week (equals 5). The table below indicates the frequency (f) that the issues were selected by the participants as their reflection question and the mode of how many times a week they reported reflecting on this question, with their answers being range from 1 (once a week) to 5 (five times a week). However, for instance, the issue of their relationship with the students may not have a high incidence of the reflection issues they reported (they only reported 15 times that they reflected on it) during the four weeks but those who reported it revealed that they reflected every day for this (Mode 5).

RESULTS

The coding process of preschool teachers' answers created five main categories of reflection issues and nine subcategories. The table below presents the issues that the preschool teachers reflected on and some examples of their answers.

TABLE 1
Examples of answers

Categories of issues	Examples
1.Students' development and behavior	
1a) Students with special and learning difficulties	*«The creation of a curriculum for a student with special difficulties, To address and prevent toddler behavior with autism, to join the group and to monitor the educational program, For the integration of a student with a disability in the classroom as well as its smooth adaptation, To assess the overall image of a toddler, For student support with learning difficulties»*
1b) Socio-emotional development of students	*«How to cope with issues related to emotional and social development of students. For example: How did they feel?, What were their feelings?, If there is any progress in students 'emotional development, identification and improvement of their social skills, To cope with various fears of the students (e.g. phobias of various sounds) that prevent them from participating in a planned school trip?»*
1c) Relationships among students	*«How to manage an effective interaction and cooperation among the students, To cope with the conflicts, the competition, the tensions and the difficulties of smooth cooperation among students both in organized and leisure activities and the complaints they express, The efforts to maintain a calm and balanced atmosphere in the group and to facilitate the development of friendship among them, The care of student acceptance from the rest of the class and to address student's systematic difficulty in joining the group»*
1d) Students' behaviors that create difficulties & problems in the classroom	*«How to deal with students' aggressive behavior (violent outbursts- anger outbursts), Manage both the disobedience of a large number of students and the behavior of some students who find it difficult to follow the rules of the group, How to better deal with students behaviors that make the educational process difficult, Find a solution to a student distraction and the difficulties that this behavior creates in the classroom, Reflect on how the conflicts have been overcome within the team and whether the way chosen to do so, was the most effective»*
1e) Cognitive-academic development and progress of students	*«How to encounter the difficulties of students in understanding simple instructions, To find a solution for effective communication with a student who face speech problems, Reflection about the correspondence of the educational process about students' cognitive level, How effective is the learning process for the students (the way the lesson was organized by the teacher)?, What is the performance of students who face difficulties after the completion of the educational process, What did the students learn this week? What made it difficult for them cognitively? There was also concern about the academic progress of the groups that have been created in the classroom, The reason of the existence of low performance of the students despite the teacher's efforts, The search for the causes of the decline in the learning process of some students, The treatment of the students' cognitive difficulties, and the difficulty of starting a conversation due to students' low cognitive level, To think about possible toddler re-education, Constructive use of students interests for further development regarding specific cognitive objects»*
2. Preschool teachers' relationships and collaborations	
2a) Preschool teachers' relationships with superiors	*«How to improve my relationship with the director of primary education, the head of the kindergarten and the coordinator of the educational project?*

	Which issues we must discuss in the meeting with the coordinator of the educational project in the next week?»
2b) Preschool teachers' relationships with students	*«The cooperation-communication with the students, My relationship with the students for the existence or not of a mutual interaction during the lesson, The climate prevailing in the classroom is pleasant for the students»*
2c) Preschool teachers' relationships with parents	*«The solution of issues regarding the cooperation and communication with parents, Some parental complaints about issues that take place at school, The solution of a schedule of reception-departure of students from school, Limitation of parents outside the classroom (they remain for a long time in school), Negative parental behavior towards teachers, Management of the parent's refusal to discuss difficulties in the overall development of the student, How I will approach and inform the parents whose child needs evaluation by the Educational and Counseling Centers?»*
2d) Preschool teachers' relationships with colleagues	*«How to deal with difficulties in cooperation with colleagues, which result in the dysfunction of the classroom, Problems in relationships between colleagues due their arrogant and selfish behavior and the way of dealing with them, How to settle internal disputes between teachers?, How to delimit relationships between colleagues to avoid potential problems?, How to deal with every day issues within the school unit?, How to maintain fair treatment of dealing with a teacher request and the fair distribution of teachers responsibilities?»*
3.School unit operation	*«To observe the classroom rules and regulations, The dysfunction of a group of pupils due to the inappropriate composition, The students school absence, The early departure of children from the optional all-day class, The organization and implementation of educational visits and school fests, The solution of issues concerning the building condition of kindergartens, The "demon" of school administration, The lack of technical infrastructure-heating, The change in working shifts, The implementation of a protection plan from earthquakes and natural disasters, The lack of money for school visits, The finding of a convenient time for the teachers' association, The vandalism by people who are out of school, The unsuitability of the outdoor space for children of this age with immediate danger to their safety and physical integrity»*
4. Issues related to teaching	*«To reflect: how to organize, to design and to implement effective educational programs and activities, The progress of the curriculum, and whether the teaching objectives were achieved, The effectiveness of the materials, supervisory tools and teaching strategies followed or if those need to be reformulated, If the feedback which I provide to my students is effective, If the completion of an activity was done in time, If the activities were interesting for the students, The trying to find ways to make the lesson more experiential and the educational process more interesting, to mobilize the creative mood of the students, If I can think of alternative ways to adjust the curriculum to suit the needs and interests of the students»*
5. Role and professional development of the preschool teachers	*«What the teachers themselves learn from their students?, How is their perception as a teacher perceived?, What is their role in the classroom and the wider context of the school?, What are their responsibilities according to their role and attending training seminars?»*

The table below presents the issues that the preschool teachers reflected on, the frequency (f) with which they reported them and the mode of how many times a week they reflected on the respective issue. Finally, if a teacher has reflected on two or three issues, these are presented separately in the table, which constitutes the reason for the existence of the large number in frequency.

TABLE 2
Frequency and Mode of issues

Categories of issues	1ˢᵗ week		2ⁿᵈ week		3ʳᵈ week		4ᵗʰ week	
	f	Mode	f	Mode	f	Mode	f	Mode
1. Students' development and behavior								
1a) Students' with special and learning difficulties	4	**1**	1	**5**	3	**4**	3	**3**
1b) Socio-emotional development of students	7	**3**	5	**4**	4	**3**	4	**2**
1c) Relationships among students	15	**5**	12	**3**	6	**4**	8	**5**
1d) Students' behaviors that create difficulties & problems in the classroom	14	**5**	11	**5**	10	**3**	8	**2**
1e) Cognitive-academic development and progress of students	12	**3**	12	**5**	12	**3**	8	**4**
2. Preschool Teachers' relationships and collaborations								
2a) Preschool teachers' relationships with superiors	2	**3**	3	**2**	3	**1**	4	**2**
2b) Preschool teachers' relationships with students	5	**5**	3	**5**	2	**5**	5	**5**
2c) Preschool teachers' relationships with parents	13	**1**	19	**3**	15	**3**	16	**3**
2d) Preschool teachers' relationships with colleagues	13	**3**	9	**5**	10	**2**	8	**5**
3. School unit operation	17	**2**	13	**3**	18	**5**	18	**5**
4. Issues related to teaching	30	**5**	25	**3**	23	**5**	20	**3**
5. Role and professional development of the preschool teachers	2	**1**	2	**2**	2	**1**	3	**5**

The main category of **Students' development and behavior** includes five subcategories. The first subcategory **Students with special and learning difficulties** show a low incidence (11 times) during four weeks while their frequency of reflection on a weekly basis was one and five times in the first two weeks and four and three times in the last two weeks (Mode: 1/ 5/ 4/ 3). The second subcategory **Socio-emotional development of students** was mentioned 20 times by the preschool teachers and was reflected on it three times in the first and third week, four times in the second week and two times in the fourth week (Mode: 3/ 4/ 3/ 2). The third subcategory **Relationships among students** indicates one of the highest selection frequencies (41 times) with preschool teachers reporting that they reflect almost every day. Five times in the first and fourth week, three and four times in the second and third week (Mode: 5/ 3/ 4/ 5). The fourth subcategory **Students' behaviors that create difficulties & problems in the classroom** show high display values (43 times) during four weeks. Participants reported that they were reflected five times in the first two weeks, three times in the third week and two times in the fourth week (Mode: 5/ 5/ 3/ 2). The last subcategory **Cognitive-academic development and progress of students** show a similar incidence of the previous subcategory (44 times). Preschool teachers reported that they were reflected three times in the first and third week, five and four times in the second and fourth week (Mode: 3/ 5/ 3/ 4).

The main category of **Preschool teachers' relationships and collaborations** includes four subcategories. The first subcategory **Preschool teachers' relationships with superiors** show a low incidence (12 times) while their frequency of reflection on a weekly basis was three times in the first week, two times the second and fourth week and ones time in the third week (Mode: 3/ 2/ 1/ 2). In the second subcategory **Preschool teachers' relationships with students,**

a total of 15 times was selected and reported being reflected daily (Mode: 5/ 5/ 5/ 5). Preschool teacher selected the third subcategory **Preschool teachers' relationships with parents** 63 times during the four weeks while they reflected on them ones time the first and fourth week and three times the second and third week (Mode: 1/ 3/ 3/ 1). The fourth subcategory **Preschool teachers' relationships with colleagues** indicates one of the highest selection frequencies (40 times) with teachers reporting that they reflect three times in the first week, five times the second and fourth week and two times in the third week (Mode: 3/ 5/ 2/ 5).

The category of **School unit operation** was selected 66 times during the four weeks, while the participants reported that they were reflected on these issues two times the first week, three times the second week, and five times the third and fourth week (Mode: 2/ 3/ 5/ 5). The category **Issues related to teaching** has the highest frequency of occurrence with twice the value of the next one (98 times). The value of the reflection frequency of these issues is also high, five times the first and third week and three times the second and fourth week (Mode: 5/ 3/ 5/ 3). The last category **Role and professional development of the preschool teachers**, indicates the lowest incidence (9 times) with teachers reporting that they were reflected ones time the first and third week, two times the second week and five times the fourth week respectively (Mode: 1/ 2/ 1/ 5).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From a review of the literature we found that the majority of research on the reflection of preschool teachers studies a specific issue for reflection. For example, they explore how reflective skills affect their teaching ability (Ahmed, & Al-Khalili, 2013), how teachers reflect (Durand, Hopf, & Nunnenmacher, 2016) and how they can improve their reflection (Cherrington, & Loveridge, 2014). No study has been identified that asks participants through open-ended questions, without directing them, to report the issues that are reflected in the school unit, as in our study. In particular few studies on teacher reflection have been conducted.

The study found that the teachers who participated in the research reflected on five main categories of issues Students development and behavior, Preschool teachers' relationships and collaborations, School unit operation, Issues related to teaching and the last Role and professional development of the preschool teachers. The category of Students' development and behavior consists of five subcategories Students with special and learning difficulties, Socio-emotional development of students, Relationships among students, Students' behaviors that create difficulties & problems in the classroom, Cognitive-academic development and progress of students. The category Preschool teachers' relationships and collaborations consists of four subcategories Preschool teachers' relationships with superiors, Preschool teachers' relationships with students, Preschool teachers' relationships with parents and Preschool teachers' relationships with colleagues. The same issues were identified in the self- reflection diaries, completed by the participants during the four weeks (the same coding pattern applies to the four weeks). It is important to mention that the basic categories of teachers' reflection issues remain constant during four weeks period.

In addition, to the issues on which the teachers reflected, the search for a solution is observed for something that concerns them. According to the literature self-reflection is connected with a state of doubt, mental difficulty, which one encounters in order to find material that will resolve the doubt and mental difficulty (Dewey, 1933; Mann et al., 2013; Semetsky, 2008; Spalding et al., 2002).

Specifically, from the four weeks of completing the reflection diary, we observe that the participants reflected more on issues related to teaching. Less high frequency observed in issues for School unit operation, Preschool teachers' relationships with parents, Cognitive-academic

development and progress of students, Relationships among students and Preschool teachers' relationships with colleagues. Issues related to Students' behaviors that create difficulties & problems in the classroom, Socio-emotional development of students, Students' with special and learning difficulties, Preschool teachers' relationships with students and superiors and Role and professional development of the preschool teachers were selected with even less frequency.

Regrades of how many times per week they reflected on each issue, we observe a differentiation of their answers during the completion of self- reflection diary. It can be concluded that issues directly related to the educational process and its effectiveness have a higher frequency of reflection compared to those that are indirectly related. In addition for issues that related to their relationships with the students, the preschool teachers stated that they were reflected every day. This reveals to us how important they consider their relationships with students are during the lesson. The frequency of teachers' self-reflection, reveals teachers' perceptions of the role of school.

In conclusion, the fact that its week the frequency of occurrence of issues varies as well as the different frequency of teachers' reflection during the week, confirms the multidimensional role of preschool teaches that we find in literature (Androusou, Cortesi-Dafermou, & Tsafos, 2016; Dafermou, Koulouris, & Bassanoyiannis, 2006; Gritzios, 2006; Day, 2002; Eacute, & Esteve, 2000; Matsaggouras, 2002; Stoll, Fink, & Earl, 2003). Teachers are code to fulfil many different roles on a daily basis, as a result of which they constantly face the many different situations in the school units.

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