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WHEN THEORY AND PRACTICE “CONVERSE”: TEACHING LANGUAGE IN KINDERGARTEN BY 4TH YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Introduction

All the evidence indicates that “*the quality of the interaction between the child and the kindergarten teacher is the most critical aspect to determine the quality of Preschool Education and Care*” (UNESCO, 2007: 192). For this reason, the initial education of the kindergarten teachers should not include only theoretical studies, but also practical training for a sufficient amount of time and with specific educational goals, which will be supported with the guidance and feedback of expert personnel (ILO, 2013). The higher the standards of the students’ preparation is, the more possible it is for them to create a higher quality pedagogical environment, which will provide better results for the children that will be under their supervision (OECD, 2011). This is why

a very good initial education of the personnel is very crucial and the need of consistent and cohesive programs of professional preparation will assure the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care - ECEC (Elliot, 2006). However, the practical training cannot focus only at the habituation of the future kindergarten teacher with the educational methods and the management of a classroom, but should also aim for the professionalism and the capability to function as a researcher and modulator, through the deliberative analysis of the educational process (Matsagouras, 1998).

Program of Funded Practical Training

Based on the direction of the research of the students, the Program of Funded Practical Training was designed. It began in the spring semester of the academic year of 2011. The planning of this Program foresees the participation of twenty five 4th year University students per year. These students are chosen based on the number of lessons they have succeeded at and on their grade point average. The participants work for four months (February to May) in public kindergarten schools of Patras, which have expressed their interest in accepting the students. The student's educational work is monitored by a scientific group which is consisted of four people and the supporting guidance of the classroom teacher. In the end, the evaluations of the supervisors, the kindergarten teachers and the students themselves, are collected, as well as, the daily school programs and the documentation of the thematic units (projects), which were completed by the students during the period of their practical training.

The Program of Funded Practical Training of the Department of Educational Science and Early Childhood Education of the University of Patras appears to be the longest and most demanding, in comparison to equivalent programs of other departments of Preschool Education. However, as it has been already claimed, the already existing practical training does not provide many opportunities for the student to become part of the school life (Table 1). Also, the coordination, from the students'

side, of projects or thematic units was almost impossible. Due to the above, the most constructive solution, that was promoted, is that the number of students that participate in the program lessens. In this way, those that do participate can maximize the time they spend in a kindergarten school.

For the preparation of the students, before the beginning of the Program, five 3-hour labs were organized. Their topic was the organization of the educational program at the kindergarten school, the development of a thematic unit, the ways of managing a classroom and also, the cooperation with the kindergarten teachers and the parents. For informing the teachers, meetings were organized with the presence of education consultants of preschool education of the area. The topics of the meetings were to analyze the role of the classroom teachers, as mentors, and the ways the work of the students can be supported by them.

Table 1: The Practical Training and the Funded Practical Training

Practical Training			
5 th Semester	6 th Semester	7 th Semester	8 th Semester
4 days: 1 activity 1 daily program workshops	4 days: 2 daily programs workshops	4 days: 1 activity 1 daily program workshops	4 days: 2 daily programs workshops
In Total: 8 days of observation, 2 activities, 4 daily programs and preparation workshops			
The Funded Practical Training			
5 th Semester	6 th Semester	7 th Semester	8 th Semester
As previous	a.p.	a.p.	>organization & participation in the attainment of 75 daily programs >coordination of 4 thematic units

The Evaluation of the Program, by the students

As it has already been mentioned, after the completion of the Funded Practical Training, the students were asked to evaluate the program by filling in a questionnaire. The questionnaire was consisted of both close and open questions. According to the results, the majority of the students did not face any specific difficulties. Three students mentioned some problems that had to do with the way of managing the classroom (disobedience of the children, refusal of the children to participate in activities) and two students referred to difficulties during the time of adjustment, which gradually were eliminated. Also, all the students stated that they would recommend the Program of Funded Practical Training at their classmates and that the help that they gained by the kindergarten teacher of the class was very important.

A special interest appears in the answers of the students at the open question “*Do you believe that your participation in the Program of the Funded Practical Training helped you?*” where all the students responded positively with pronounced enthusiasm. Four representative answers follow:

“I believe that it helped me because it gave me the opportunity to see how the kindergarten teachers work in a daily base. I worked with the children of the class for a longer time and thereafter, I am more confident in the way I will approach and help each child individually, and also which of the children can help me to evaluate the activities I do. Moreover, I enhance my educational material and I see the way a classroom is organized, the weaknesses and the improvements that can be done, so I can create a better organized class, in the future, which will be more functional for the children, as also for me.” [24].

“My participation in the Program of the Practical Training, without exaggeration, I believe was the best experience that I had during my studies at the University.” [4].

“With the previous practical training, we went four days, during the semester, (2 days of observing, 2 daily programs) and we could not picture what a kindergarten is. With the Program, I came into contact with the real function of a

kindergarten school, I became acquainted with the profession of a kindergarten teacher and I learned if I wanted to follow it for the rest of my life.” [7].

“... it contributed to my personal feedback about how to react in different kinds of situations, what are my limits and my capabilities.” [17].

Regarding the possibility of improvement of the Program of Funded Practical Training, the students proposed simplifying the bureaucratic part of the Program, the creation of a website, from which they will be able to take ideas and proposals for activities and, lastly, the better connection of the context of the lessons with the educational process.

Furthermore, in the 6th edition of the journal “*i–dasta*” of the University of Patras (http://career.duth.gr/cms/files/i-dasta_6_28022012.pdf), the below text of a student was published:

“During the last year of my studies, I decided to participate in the 4 month Program of Practical Training, which is sponsored by the Ministry of Education. I believed I needed training in the classroom of a kindergarten, of a longer length, in comparison to the one that the Department already provided, and with more challenges. By participating in the Program, I learned many things and I owe this to the supervisor of the program and also to the head of the kindergarten and the teacher of the class. The daily, multilateral and creative communication with the children and with the teachers of the kindergarten, lead to a growth, in the personal level, of the teaching methods, the permeation in the children’s psychology and the gaining of a valuable experience. One of the most important gains was the opportunity to interact and with the parents in the briefing about the thematic units. As my final evaluation, I believe that the Program gives the ability to the participants of a “complete” practice, which contributes to the fundamentals of the future educators. For these reasons, I recommend without a doubt this Program to the students of Preschool Education and I truly believe that its’ continuance is essential.”

Evaluation of the Program by the kindergarten teachers

The evaluation of the kindergarten teachers, who accepted the students in their classes, was also positive. In the closed questions of the evaluation sheets, regarding the punctuality of the working hours, the preparation, the cooperation spirit and the readiness of the students, all the answers were positive. Very interesting was the answer to the question “*if the presence of the students was helpful in the classroom*”. Taking into account the number of students in each kindergarten class, most teachers declared that the presence of a second person in the classroom facilitated their work. In addition, there were other teachers that pointed out other kind of benefits from the presence of the students.

For example, one kindergarten teacher writes:

“I had next to me an excellent and responsible collaborator with unique ideas and activities, enhancing the daily program and facilitating its completion.” [4] and another one notes down “... *I learned new things.*” [12].

The dialogue that seems to have developed, in at least some cases, was interactive and the cooperation was substantial and useful for both sides. It seems that in some occasions they brought new knowledge and gave the opportunity to the teachers to enhance their methods. This aspect opens new potentials to the Program of Funded Practical Training and it would be important to investigate it further in the future.

Designing language activities

Attempting to study the kind of language activities the students chose to complete, with the guidance of the teacher, we focused on the first ten each one noted down in the daily programs through the second month (March) of the Funded Practical Training. We chose the second month because we assumed that the students would be fully active in the class program and the cooperation with the kindergarten teacher would be established. The purpose of the above documentation was to examine the methods of literacy that occur in kindergarten schools and the ways that the proposals of the curriculum for

the language education in kindergarten are utilized. The specification of these issues would be used for the better preparation of the students throughout the next years of continuation of the Program of Funded Practical Training. The activities were divided in three categories that were defined by Curriculum for the development of language activities: a) Oral Communication (speaking and listening), b) Reading, and c) Writing and written expression.

The results of the documentation are recorded on Table 2.

Table 2: Documentation of language activities

Oral Communication	Written language/speech/text	
Speaking - Listening	Reading: text processing	Writing and written expression
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •<u>Conversations</u> > introduction of a subject & expansion of knowledge: 22 •<u>Enhancement of vocabulary</u> > compound words: 12 > family words: 14 > specific vocabulary: 15 •<u>Phonetic/Phonological awareness</u> > syllable segmentation: 1 >phonetic awareness: 11 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •<u>Acquaintance with different kind of printed language - texts:</u> > Narrative: 63 > Explanatory: 22 > Descriptive: 3 > Guiding >>recipes: 6 >Multimodal texts: >> maps: 4 •<u>Gathering information from different sources (internet):</u> 6 •<u>Lending Library:</u> 4 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dictated texts – group activity > Narrative: 5 > Letter: 1 > Album: 2 > Poster: 1 •<u>Production (individually) narrative texts:</u> 4 •<u>Alphabetic code – Teaching of letters and letter –sound correspondence:</u> 54 [in many occasions with worksheets]
In total: 75 (30 %)	In total: 108 (43,2 %)	In total: 67 (26,8 %)

Although someone might expect that priority was given to the activities that had to do with oral communication, the reading activities

surpass them. More specifically, in the oral communication, except of the conversations that introduce a new topic or explore the existing knowledge on one (N=22), more than half of the language activities (N=41) have to do with the enrichment of the vocabulary than the phonetic awareness. Usually, the communication activities took place immediately after the morning circle in the conversation corner, by all the students. For reading, the majority of the activities (N=63) are related to, as it is expected, narrative texts. What is difficult to determine, is if the narration was accompanied by questions for the understanding of the text or of other activities (pictorial process, dramatization, writing a story etc.). Secondly come the explanatory texts (N=22), where informational books were usually read. The texts provided further knowledge on the topics the children were already dealing with in the class. For writing, nine texts were written in teams, five of which were narrative. The remaining four had to do with a letter to a cooperating class, a poster/invitation towards the parents and two albums with the material of the thematic unit. Lastly, four, individually made, narrative texts were included. One of them was a comic and the rest were stories written in small handmade booklets. What is amazing, though, is the large number of activities that aim for the realization, by the children, of the technique of writing, learning the letter-sound correspondence (N=54), which in many cases came with work sheets. In the work sheets the children were asked to spot the letter they were learning, to circle pictures in which the name of the drawn subject started from the specific letter and to write the letter in capitals and small.

The length of the specific practical training, which surpasses all others, apart from the reading of narrative texts, forces us to examine the reasons that make it the most popular, at least to the educators. The ability of learning written language is connected to two abilities: The ability to decode and the ability to understand oral language (Wren, 2000; Porpodas, 2003). Although in the Curriculum for kindergarten school an intended goal is that “*the children realize gradually that the phonemes, of the spoken language, correspond to letters*” (p. 596). This goal refers to the reading ability and nowhere the systematic teaching

of alphabetic code is recommended. To the contrary, in the Teachers book of Grade 1 of elementary school, it is clearly defined that “*one of the most important goals of the school, at Grade 1 level, is the access of the child at the systematic and inhibited use of the alphabetic system of our language*” (Karantzola, Kirdi, Spaneli & Tsiagkani, 2006:7). Although it is not clearly mentioned, the curriculum for language in kindergarten school is based on the theory of emerging literacy (Tafa, 2001; Giannikopoulou, 2001; Dafermou, Koulouri, & Mpasagianni, 2006; Tafa, 2008; Goti & Dinas, 2009). The term of emergent literacy is used to declare “*a developing extend of knowledge for the written language and a variety of behaviors which start before school and lead to the knowledge of reading, writing, talking ,listening ,watching and thinking*” (Zygouris – Coe, 2001:6) and as it is emphasized “*a broad theoretical state is entailed for the learning of reading and writing (developmental and structural), children from their birth up to 5 or 6 years old and focuses in the informal learning which occurs through the participation of the child in activities at home, at the day care or at kindergarten school*” (Yaden, Rowe & MacGillivray, 1999:2). This is why literacy emerges through the participation of the children in literacy events, which, according to the definition of Heath (1982:93) “*it is all those cases in which a document is a constituent part of the same nature of the interactions and the explanatory elaborations of the subjects that participate in these interactions*”. Therefore, as we have already mentioned (Kondyli & Stellakis, 2010:86) “*any method that falls out of the occasion of interaction and focuses at the traditional teaching of written code, basically cannot be considered as literacy event*” and cannot be considered as a method of improvement of emergent literacy.

Taking into account that the students were not taught neither at the language lessons nor during the practical training or during the preparation seminars for the Funded Practical Training, it is important that we consider if these took place after the advice of the kindergarten teachers. The documentation, which occurred at the beginning of the third semester of the school year, stands for it. At the attempt of the preparation, especially of the children who at the following year will attend Grade 1, it is possible that the kindergarten teachers encourage

the use of such methods. Of course, it is just a hypothesis which although it is promoted by informal observations and conversations, it is worth researching it further. These indications, though, should be utilized throughout the Funded Practical Training and that, in the future, the extent and type of methods that promote the emergent literacy is clarified. Additionally, the increase of preparation seminars for the participants of the Program of Funded Practical Training kindergarten teachers, so they can realize the role that they are called to accomplish as “intermediate” of the literacy (Kucer, 2009), involving the children in literacy incidents and “unfolding” for them these linguistic, cognitive, social and cultural processes that are involved with them. In kindergarten we do not focus on the teaching of individual metacognitive skills (independent model – Street, 1995), which is related to the technique of reading and writing, but firstly we pursue the development of motive to the children and especially those that come from under privileged environments. Even if we accept that the processing of the code is a part of the emergent literacy, we should not forget that it covers a specific part of the range of the various ways of gathering and producing a meaning that are included in it. In every case, working with the alphabetical code must be adapted in the communicational level that is understood by children and not with the adoption of traditional methods, as those that are described in the daily programs of the students.

Limitations

The mentioning of the goals and the brief description of each activity gave this research only a first impression of a part of the language education, and with a quantitative way. For example, the language that is used in free activities or in the activities of other educational field the quantitative characteristics of the activities (for example, if the teams were consisted of a small number of students, if during the readings questions of high cognitive demand occurred, if the activities aimed at fulfilling communication goals), the contribution of the classroom teacher for the creation of the activities is not determined. Of course,

this kind of research would require a ethnographic type of observation, which, if it took place, it would provide the ability of creating a more detailed picture of the language and literacy activities and would allow more considerable annotations for the dialogue and the interaction between the students with the teachers and the children they had under their supervision. In every case, though, it designates important matters which have to do with the preparation and the observation of the students of the Funded Practical Training, possibly not only for their language education, but also for the other educational subject. The goal of the Funded Practical Training is the enrichment of the knowledge the students received during their studies, through their application, as also the development of researching and contemplation abilities. The creation of a kindergarten teacher/mentor team, that would be properly qualified to support the work of the students, would offer towards this direction many benefits. They would not only encourage the gradual integration in the school life, but also by providing them the supplies to design, evaluate and negotiate constantly about what they are doing in the classroom and why, enhancing, in this way, their professional development and autonomy, which is what the Program of Funded Practical Training wants to achieve.

Note

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