
The Early Childhood Educator in a Critical Learning Community: towards sustainable change

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ABSTRACT The action research project Sustainable Change in a Critical Learning Community was conducted in the Netherlands (2007-08) to improve quality in early childhood by enhancement of critical reflection at all levels in early childhood organisations: educators individually and collectively, pedagogical leaders and coaches, and (middle) management. The complex reality in which professionals in early childhood organisations operate demands a reflective attitude to knowledge and practice, but in order to achieve this, participants at every level in the institution have to be involved. Bureau MUTANT conducted this action research project in cooperation with four childcare-providing organisations. MUTANT is a small independent agency that supports professionals and institutions in early childhood, welfare and health care with innovative methods, training and consultation. Respect for diversity – with regard to ethnicity, social background and gender – is a key issue in all actions. With the results of this action research, MUTANT wishes to answer questions and worries in childcare organisations in the Netherlands and to fill a gap in the professionalisation of individuals and teams. The final target is to enhance the quality of educators and thus the quality of childcare organisations, a quality based on democratic principles such as furtherance of social change, social justice and democratic values.

The Changing Early Childhood Educator

How can we bring about sustainable change to guarantee quality in early childhood organisations? This question is raised in many childcare-providing organisations in the Netherlands. The question is: Which definition of quality do childcare providers subscribe to? Is it about the quality of technocratic manageability and measurability or about a quality based on democratic principles such as furtherance of social change? Urban (2008) indicates that the concept of quality itself is highly problematic and questionable. It has been widely challenged for its implicit relation with notions of universality, technocratic manageability and measurability. We prefer to use quality as a relative concept because quality has not been laid down once and for all – nor is quality a universal truth (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training, 2007).

Childcare for children from birth to four years of age and after-school care in the Netherlands are provided by private childcare organisations in a semi-private system. The childcare organisations operate within the framework of the National Law on Childcare. The law regulates quality in terms of physical environment, safety, child-educator ratio and training of the early childhood educators, labour conditions and parental advice/influence. In the Netherlands, in many sectors, government and the private sector cooperate, and such is the case in childcare. Government, parents and corporations are responsible for the financing of this system; parents pay according to their income. Government subsidises parents directly in order to complete the parental contribution (Marangos & Plantenga, 2005; Plantenga & Remery, 2008). In addition to this semi-private childcare system, there are publicly funded *peuterspeelzalen* (playgroups) for two- to four-year-olds and *peuterspeelzalen* with special programmes for disadvantaged children, both led by

qualified staff. Although compulsory education in the Netherlands begins at five years, almost all four-year-olds attend kindergarten, which is included in the primary school system and thus publicly funded.

For educators in early childhood in the Netherlands, a minimum of three years of professional training is required; a senior function demands four years of professional training; and executives and middle managers generally have a Bachelor diploma.

A lack of workforce in early childhood services and critical parents force the childcare organisations to guarantee good quality, in which we include pedagogical quality, which depends strongly on the educators' training and competences. Childcare organisations have concluded that further professionalising is required to comply with the current innovations within the sector. The current qualification level of the early childhood educator is not sufficient for good implementation of the more complex primary work processes (Fontys Hogescholen, 2008). Furtherance of expertise alone will not compensate for this shortfall. Short-term training only has short-term effects; it does not further the workers' competences on a permanent basis. Research has shown that the implementation of new pedagogical methods and training programmes does not automatically lead to sustainable change (Fukkink & Lont, 2005). Training programmes only add quality under certain conditions, such as the whole team taking a training course together, the training consisting of an all-round programme instead of separate modules, and the training consisting of theory as well as practice.

The international developments in the field of professionalisation in early childhood also indicate the need for new requirements for early childhood educators. According to Urban (2008) and others (MacNaughton, 2005; Dahlberg et al, 2007; Paige-Smith, 2008), the process of professionalisation can be considered a social practice brought about by interaction between social developments, policy measures and new scientific insights on the one hand, and researchers, workers in early childhood and end-users – i.e. parents and children – on the other. The professional is not a consumer of the knowledge he/she is presented with. The new professional should be someone who develops knowledge along with a process of professionalisation – he/she is a 'co-author' or a 'co-constructor' of that evolving professionalism (Urban, 2008; Peeters, 2008a, b).

In order to comply with these new requirements for professionalisation, many authors believe that a reflective attitude towards knowledge and practice is needed (MacNaughton, 2006; Urban, 2008). MacNaughton even refers to reflection as a quality mark of practice and the need to bring about social justice by critical reflection.

The professional should not only be learning individually but in interaction with the team, the whole organisation and the other parties involved. This collective team learning takes place in professional learning communities (Whalley, 2001; Verbiest, 2008) and critical learning communities, in which professionals transform their practice through critical reflection. As the reality is complex, we must create a community of learners. A critical learning community needs 'all the stories' to be told: through their individual stories everybody (educators, students, managers, policy makers) produces a different version of the same story (Urban, 2007). The final objective of critical learning communities is the furtherance of social change, social justice and democratic values.

According to Korthagen & Lagerwerf (2008), it takes 'core reflection' to enhance the involvement of all the participants in the learning process: reflection about different personality factors, in which individual qualities play an important role. The focus is on people's inner force and their inner learning as a base for collective learning.

Creating a Sustainable Learning Process

Not only for childcare providers, but also for government and parents, the questions are: How can we create sustainable change within childcare-providing organisations and how can we build a learning process with early childhood educators? How can we create wide support for innovation and change at every level of childcare-providing organisations, and how can we realise collective team learning?

In order to explore these questions, Bureau MUTANT set up the action research project Sustainable Change in a Critical Learning Community, which was conducted in 2007-08. MUTANT is a small independent agency that supports professionals and institutions in early childhood, welfare and health care with innovative methods, with training and consulting. Respect for Diversity – as to ethnicity, social background, gender – is a key issue in all actions (van Keulen, 2004; Vandenbroeck, 2009). The project emphasised the educators' reflection process. Based on theory and research with regard to the reflective professional and the critical learning community, we distinguished three layers in the reflection process (van Keulen & del Barrio Saiz, 2010):

1. self-reflection: about personal identity and the role of the professional;
2. team reflection: about the team and cooperation with other parties involved (teams, parents, children); and
3. critical reflection: individually and as part of the team with the objective to create social change at the childcare centre.

The importance of this reflection was expressed by Trudie, the coordinator of 15 special *peuterspeelzalen* in Rotterdam, mainly for families of ethnic minorities and with 35 educators of many different sociocultural backgrounds. She commented: 'Cooperation with parents and the cooperation within the teams have improved through this project. We have deepened our scope now that the educators have learned to reflect on their work and themselves.'

During the action research project, eight learning methods were developed and co-constructed based on the theories of reflective learning and the critical learning community: (1) naming your colleagues' qualities; (2) asking critical questions; (3) a professional learning process diary; (4) reflection on thinking, feeling and acting; (5) awareness raising of the context of the childcare centre; (6) personal challenges; (7) cooperation with a colleague as a critical friend; and (8) commitment in a learning community by co-constructing a contract.

As the learning methods only have an optimal motivating effect when they are applied to something considered important and (an obvious) part of the job, we applied these with the cooperation of parents, with special attention to the diversity among parents (de Graaff & van Keulen, 2008).

Method: action–training–research

In the action–training–research project, the model for sustainable learning in the professional learning community was co-constructed with four childcare-providing organisations (Skar in Arnhem, Kanteel in Den Bosch, the Dordrecht branch of Partou and Knooppunt Kralingen in Rotterdam). In the project, 60 educators and 10 managers were trained for a period of 10 months.

In order to anchor and to secure sustainable learning and the cooperation of parents in the project, MUTANT organised interventions in every section of the organisations. We trained the educators and middle managers in these organisations as well as one or more members of staff. During the 10 months, the following interventions took place:

- The teams of educators, including their team managers, followed a training course of six sessions. The participants co-constructed several learning methods that were useful for sustainable learning.
- The team managers and coaches received feedback while exploring and co-constructing the new learning methods with their teams.
- The higher management and staff at central level received support to develop plans for sustainable change and implementation in their organisation.

Based on the theories of reflective learning and the critical learning community, the eight learning methods were developed and co-constructed.

The central question of the project was applied to the cooperation with parents. The participants in the project applied already known instruments and methods that support the cooperation of parents: for example, documentation of families (Doeleman, 2006), learning from conflicts (de Graaff, 2006b), and questionnaires to assess the diversity of parental participation (de Graaff, 2006a; de Graaff & van Keulen, 2008).

Results

The first results of the project are visible in the experiences in the four childcare organisations, which reveal that success is not guaranteed without challenging certain key factors.

Practice Experiences

Reflection, critical reflection and constructive feedback were key concepts in the learning process towards sustainable change. Birgül, an educator in a special *peuterspeelzaal* in Rotterdam with families from many different backgrounds said in her interview: 'I believe we have a more adult way of interacting now. And, for example, the teams do not indulge in gossip.' And Loes, the manager and pedagogical coach in a childcare centre with families from many ethnic backgrounds, remarked: 'I have noticed that educators on the team share their experiences, they provide each other with constructive feedback and don't perceive this as aggressive (as opposed to some time ago), but as positive'.

Experiences with the eight learning methods in practice indicate that by keeping their learning process diary, educators dealt with their working experiences at great length. It gave them the opportunity to reflect on their learning process both as an individual and as part of a team. The learning method 'cooperation with a colleague as a critical friend' provided educators with the possibility to reflect on their work together with a colleague, and to carry out assignments; thus, they supported each other and learned from each other. As Trudie, one of the participating managers, observed: 'This is what I want to hold on to. I notice an upward line here: first you learn individually, then together with a colleague, and then with the whole group.'

The learning method 'personal challenges' worked out well in connection with the learning process diary. The objective of this learning method is to gear individual targets to professional and organisational objectives. The educators learned to formulate their own learning targets based on their questions and dilemmas and, consequently, to document their actions and results. The 'personal challenges' learning method strengthened their motivation and commitment and was used by managers during job evaluation conversations. Eline, an educator in a special *peuterspeelzaal* with children from many different backgrounds, wrote:

I very much appreciate 'the professional learning process diary' in combination with the 'personal challenges'. It is a way to set targets for myself. I write down what I want to achieve, which makes me realise where I stand or want to stand.

And Selma, educator in a child care centre, commented:

My personal learning target since the last meeting has been to start to talk to parents more, instead of nursing prejudices. As a result of talking to them more, I have learned more about them, whereas before, I had a very different view of them. Instead of hiding away from the problem, I addressed it.

The instrument that really appealed to managers and educators was called 'Naming your colleagues' capacities'. With this instrument the educators strengthened both their personal and the team's learning process. Bundling the qualities provided the team with added value. Early childhood managers indicated they used this exercise successfully in team meetings. The learning method 'Asking Critical Questions' supposes every member on the team to have a questioning attitude. Questions that kept on coming up were: 'why do I think', 'what do I think', 'why do I act the way I do', 'who benefits?' Instead of having these questions relate to 'I', they could also relate to 'the team' or to 'the organization': 'how does the team deal with parents that do not live up to our ideals?' Or: 'With which parents has the organization had insufficient or no contact over the past period, and how come?' This questioning attitude turned out to be productive, both at personal and at team level.

Bert, the manager of a childcare centre in a commuter town with wealthy inhabitants, stated: 'More and more the educators began to critically wonder: Why do we do this, and why do we do it this way? This question was extensively discussed during progress discussions. Asking critical questions definitely makes sense.' Eline added:

In the first place, the course has produced a positive yield in the way of better cooperation with parents. I notice that I give the parents more opportunities to talk. I hardly used to talk to parents who were 'difficult', but now I do. I invite them to actually come in and then, for example, I talk about their situation at home. Because I know more about the parents, I view the children differently as well.

Finally, the educators were pleased with the learning method 'awareness raising of the context of the childcare centre', which maps out the childcare centre and its surroundings. As a consequence, educators began to see a larger picture: the location and function of their own organisation in its neighbourhood. They were pleasantly surprised by the number of activities carried out in the vicinity, such as extra-curricular lessons for older children, activities for women and language lessons. To most of the educators this was new information; information which they could pass on to parents. The awareness of the context furthered cooperation with parents and the neighbourhood.

Factors to Success

Evidently, the co-construction of the theories and methods in the training and in practice contributed to strengthen the learning process and led to more pleasure and enthusiasm in the educators' work and to increasing commitment. The educators were more willing to contribute to cooperation and collective tasks. As Bert stated:

Educators have grown stronger and they now communicate their working methods to the parents, too. In our group of highly educated parents, this has worked very well; the parents have now grown more respectful of our work here. Put differently, in fact, the educators command respect for their work, more than they used to.

Also, a new learning process was established that led to the internalisation of the values of sustainable learning.

The synergy of working with innovative learning methods in combination with a concrete theme (cooperation with parents) was revealed to be empowering and motivating to educators as well as to managers. Focusing on one theme (cooperation with parents) connected directly to the educators' and managers' questions and concerns. By using the new learning methods in combination with this theme, changes were immediately noticeable.

Furthermore, the managers discovered during the project that they needed clear conditions in order to realise these successes. If the organisation had to face too many challenges or problems, there was not enough learning time and learning space available. Also, a secure team environment was necessary in order to show the new learning methods to their full advantage. Linking up with the questions and needs of the organisation and of the teams was a challenge.

One of the findings is that the capacities of the educators in the project were sufficient to realise self-reflection, critical reflection and to contribute to a critical learning community, although a key condition in order to realise the new learning methods was that the professionals needed intensive coaching. As Bert formulated: 'The role of the manager is and will remain essential to the educator's learning process. As a manager you have to hold on to the learning process, you must unrelentingly insist.'

Conclusion and Discussion

The educators in the action research project – qualified in the Netherlands at a vocational training level – were capable of self-reflection, reflection at team level and critical reflection. The learning process of critical reflection was challenging; it took them a long period of time to become adjusted to it. The educators needed intensive coaching in order to realise the new learning methods, in particular the method of critical reflection. Loes remarked: 'Asking critical questions is what appeals to me most, but I do notice that the educators find it difficult. It is something you really have to muster up your courage for.'

There was no clear description of the profile and function of the team coach in the four childcare organisations in the project, and the time allocated to support teams in the new learning methods was not sufficient.

The learning process touches every level in the organisation: thus, team coaches and managers have their own learning process and have to improve their capacities for the learning process of the teams of educators. A long period of learning is required: settled patterns, relations and organisational culture change very slowly.

The project has been selected as a success story in the early childhood education and care study of the global trade union federation Education International, executed by the University of Halle (Urban, 2009).

The experiences and the results of the project have been described in a publication that can be used with educators in extra courses in working practice, as well as with students in professional training institutes (van Keulen & del Barrio Saiz, 2010). The book forms the basis for a nationally accredited in-service training programme developed by MUTANT for educators and coaches.

Two important dilemmas were faced during the project. One is the necessity to invest time: time to get started and to get used to methods of sustainable learning, which is challenging in a semi-private system. Another dilemma is investing in team coaching, a neglected function in childcare organisations today: educators in the Netherlands need intensive coaching in order to realise the new reflective learning methods. As Loes stated in her evaluation:

The most important characteristics of the project to me are that you need to want to learn, and the fact that everyone is both teacher and learner. You ask each other questions, you encourage each other; the team gets joint awareness and development out of this. As a team coach I pay more conscious attention to my colleagues' personal circumstances; I started to create more space in order to enquire after their circumstances; my attention for them furthers their well-being, and thus their professional well-being, too.

The main conclusion of this action research project is that creating sustainable change within childcare-providing organisations and creating a sustainable learning process with professionals can be realised in Dutch childcare organisations provided that attention is paid to sufficient team coaching and sufficient time for reflection.

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