

Can Trainee Early Years Teachers Implement Short Art-Based Intervention in Practice?

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Abstract

Students' pre-service teachers' placements in preschool settings are an integral part of the educational process within the educational institutions. During their placement students receive art education and are invited to implement art-related programs. The aim of the study was to perceive the anxieties students face when engaging in practice of an art-based program and to record the in-service teachers' experiences from the collaboration with the students. The study was based on a mixed methodology that included a pre-intervention questionnaire on students' attitudes, event recording during implementation, post-implementation questionnaire and in-service teachers' interviews after the end of the program. Ethical procedures ensured that participants have given informed consent and their identities have been protected with the right to withdraw. The pre-intervention findings showed that the pre-service teachers felt inadequate for the implementation of the program because of the limited knowledge on the use of art in the educational process. The post-intervention results expose that pre-service teachers had a more enhanced understanding of art-based programs in practice, and felt more confident and capable of having in-service teachers' support and knowledge. The high-quality teaching and learning opportunities, support structures, and trust building are critical factors in strengthening pre-service teachers' skills. Links between studies and the reality of practice are discussed.

Keywords

Pre-Service Teachers, Placement, Fine Arts Activities, In-Service Teachers, Art-Based Intervention, Early Years Settings

1. Introduction

The placement of students in early years' settings is an integral part of the educational process within the educational institutions (Farrell, 2008). Numerous

studies highlight the significance of placements in terms of all round education and a more complete professional development of future teachers (Caires et al., 2012; Kindall et al., 2017). Placement programs are beneficial towards inducting pre-service teachers to the school context and contribute towards their confidence, communicative skills, and ability to link theory and practice (Nallaya, 2016).

The placement aims at understanding all those conditions that are formed inside the classroom, with the parallel training of the teacher at the principal axes of the teaching process, such as planning, execution and evaluation (Antonioni, 2012). Throughout the placement the pre-service teachers embrace autonomy and responsibility, which are structural elements of their professional personality, necessary for the pedagogical role they will be called to undertake (Avgitidou, 2014).

When in placement, the students/pre-service teachers are in a position to put their knowledge and skills into practice. Moreover, they can expand their range of skills as well as have a first experience of the workplace in which they will be working in the future (Chen et al., 2018).

With placement, the pedagogical, teaching training and education students received formerly become applicable. At the same time, the transition from the theoretical part of the academic approach into the arena of school reality is ensured (Tüfekçi Can, 2019). In addition, the personal and professional identity of the students is fully developed, and personal views are formed, while the future teacher realizes his duty towards the society and the students (Harlin et al., 2002).

Through the placement, the students get feedback since the daily contact with the young children also provides them with the opportunity to acquire new ideas, in terms of didactic and curriculum implementation in practice. In this way they feel more confident in themselves and understand to a greater extent the subject matter, the relevant methodological approach as well as the multitude of supervisory means and tools (Nilsson, 2009; Wilson & Huynh, 2019).

At the same time, they are given the opportunity in terms of freedom and with the aid of the experienced mentor to get acquainted with the teaching methodology and their future work environment (Cohen et al., 2013). Concurrently, they have the chance to apply their theoretical training and have their skills evaluated (Altan & Saglamel, 2015).

Placement programs provide future teachers with the opportunity for a different teaching approach and alternative teaching strategies while expanding their teaching knowledge. They simultaneously develop personal cognitive skills and form their professional identity. However, they are not the only ones who develop under the supervision of a mentor, but their presence has a beneficial impact also on the students through the implementation of the educational program (Zehr & Korte, 2020). All the above entail contact with the preschool settings' environment as it is essential for students/pre-service teachers in understanding their role as teachers and the needs of the department syllabus (Cohen

et al., 2013).

1.1. In-Service Teachers' Mentoring to the Students

While teachers supervise the implementation of the curriculum in early years' settings, its impact on day-to-day teaching and learning is not always easily understood by students. Consequently, teachers must endorse collaboration with students in order for the latter to understand the purpose of the curriculum and its implementation in the preschool environment (Tapala et al., 2020).

From the very beginning, the mentor must instruct the pre-service teachers on how to perform the program while giving them the framework of rules that govern the operation of the school and its obligations to children. Detailed discussions and model teaching methods by the mentor himself aim at the educational, cognitive and professional progress of the pre-service teachers.

The role of the mentor is to embrace the innovative approach, to allow the student to take initiatives and, in general, to encourage and support the future colleague emotionally and practically, fostering a spirit of cooperation and of parity (Beck & Kosnik, 2002).

It is also important that pre-service teachers work collaboratively with their fellow students during their placement, seek solutions to problems that are common and, in general, exchange views and experiences about their training (Britton & Anderson, 2010).

A research of La Paro et al. (2018) shows that the most important benefit of the pre-service teacher's experience when working with the in-service teacher, is the thorough study and understanding of a number of empirical and practical events that will help the future teachers in their career. The future teachers have the opportunity to be introduced to a range of skills and daily practices that their mentor applies in class; thus, they can achieve long term results. The enhancement of knowledge and learning, the easier adaptation, the discovery of new communication channels and the acquaintance with new and different beliefs are additional elements of the placement experience.

1.2. Art-Based Intervention Programs

In an intervention teaching programmed called "Art in Children's Life" (AinCL), students participated in order to explore children's eating habits (Tympa et al., 2019) and social relationships between peers in preschool education and to have a positive influence on them through art (Charissi et al., 2019).

The aim of this research study was to investigate and record the eating habits of preschool children, along with the potential room for improvement of these habits by implementing the "Art in Children's Life Program" (AinCL). A basic hypothesis was that systematic use of art for educational reasons could raise critical reflection skills through early years, aiming to an increased well-being and healthy lifestyle. More specifically, the goal of this study was to examine whether the introduction of systematic use of art in children's life during the

implementation of an educational program could: 1) facilitate the development of critical thinking through early years on these issues, 2) enrich children's acquisition of healthy nutrition habits, 3) strengthen positive attitudes in physical activities 4) contribute to children's perception of a healthy and clean environment (Tympana et al., 2019; Charissi et al., 2019).

The intervention was based on previous theory and research which supports that arts inclusion in education, starting from early childhood may foster cognitive and affective dimensions of thinking, promote growth and imagination, and provide a meaningful and educative experience (D'Olimpio & Peterson, 2018; Mages, 2018). Given this, expression and creation are included in pedagogical design programs, through the development of analogous activities related to dramatic art, visual arts and physical education. The aim of these programs is to stimulate the imagination of preschool students while developing children's physical abilities and encouraging their expression. An essential prerequisite for the integrated development of interdisciplinary activities and the achievement of the objectives pursued is the thorough understanding of each program on behalf of the teacher. Thus, art evolves into a medium of communication and a means of expression for the students and future citizens (Sotiropoulou-Zormpala et al., 2015).

The conducted research established the contribution and the importance of art in shaping healthy eating habits. Developing a healthy and cultivated character contributes to the adoption of good practices in the daily dietary routine of the child. The young children's proper nutrition is a guarantee for health and exercise.

2. Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to explore the views and perceptions of the pre-service early years teachers in relevant to their placement, by implementing an art-based intervention to preschool children. In addition, the aim of the study was to record the experiences of the in-service teachers from their cooperation with the pre-service teachers during the implementation of the program above.

2.1. Research Questions

This study demonstrates the questions below:

Q1: Can pre-service teachers implement an art-based program in an early year's classroom during their placement?

Q2: Can in-service teachers collaborate with pre-service teachers in an art-based program and give them feedback on their implementation?

2.2. Methodology

At a preliminary phase, 30 pre-service teachers of the Department of Early Years Learning and Care, who volunteered to participate in the implementation of the educational intervention to preschool children were trained. The training lasted

over a month and it consisted of workshops for the art-based intervention. The pre-service teachers subsequently visited the preschool settings who would conduct the program and had a first contact with the children.

During the next phase they implemented an art-based intervention by displaying to children's classrooms paintings of well-known artists in an attempt to change their eating habits according to Health Education of the early years curriculum as well as make them more environmentally aware.

The young children of the participated early years settings answered a questionnaire with pictures. The pre-service teachers asked them the question and the children responded by pointing to the corresponding picture. Then, for about three months an educational program was implemented (twice a week) with activities including visual arts, literature, pretend play, physical education activities, pre-writing and math activities. The subject of the activities was always based on a painting from whom they started and based on the program of the entire day. At the end of the period the children answered again in the same way to the same questionnaire with the pictures in order to see if there were any differences in their knowledge or attitudes towards eating habits or any differences in their social relationships among peers at school (Tympana et al., 2019; Charissi et al., 2019).

Before and after the implementation of the specific program the pre-service teachers were asked to fill in a questionnaire related to their placement.

The in-service teachers who agreed to participate were interviewed about their experience with the placement students overall during the implementation of the Art in Children's Life (AinCL) program.

2.3. Sample

Thirty pre-service teachers (25 females, 5 males) of the Department of Early Years Learning and Care participated in the research. Ten in-service teachers (all women) also participated who accepted the students in their classes and expressed their views about this collaboration through an interview.

2.4. Research Tool

Thirty questionnaires of 24 variables were distributed for the needs of the research to the pre-service teachers before and after the workshops and the implementation of the art program in the preschool settings. The questions were related to the adequacy of the training with regards to the implementation of the art-based program, the adequacy of the training material, the ability to set targets and present a plan, the need for cooperation with the in-service teachers and the effectiveness of a comprehensive art-based program. The answers to the questions were either open or closed and a Likert scale (McLeod, 2019) was used, where 1 corresponded to strongly disagree and 5 to strongly agree.

In the current study, a participatory research approach was employed with focus groups, which allowed the participants to create a shared understanding of

the benefits of an art implementation program as a way of teaching a healthy life style and a positive peer relationship. The involvement of the two focus groups (pre- and in-service teachers) was important in order to promote this shared understanding.

2.5. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with in-service teachers to gain insight into the contextual elements surrounding the aim of the study. The interviews were aimed to gather in-service teachers' views and experiences on pre-service teachers' capability to implement an art-based program in the pre-school classroom. The questions were developed in accordance with three main themes: 1) views of in-service teachers in coexistence and cooperation with pre-service teachers in the same classroom, 2) in-service teachers' experience on pre-service teachers' participation in the Art program, and 3) their reviews about the impact of the Art program on children's habits.

Interviews provided the researcher with the opportunity to understand the experiences the in-service had with pre-service teachers and their implementation, as well as their understandings and views relating to the activity (Nathan et al., 2019).

The data was analysed using the statistical data processing package SPSS 23.

2.6. Ethical Issues

Ethical procedures ensured that pre-service teachers have given written consent and their identities have been protected with the right to withdraw. The in-service teachers were contacted by the university researchers and asked them to participate through semi-structured interviews. Their anonymity was guaranteed with the right to withdraw at any time.

3. Results

Table 1 displays the most important questions and their average as well as the standard deviation. In most questions the average is above 3 in the questionnaire that was filled in before the implementation of the program and above 4 in the questionnaire filled in after the implementation of the program (**Table 1**).

The non-parametric Wilcoxon test showed that there is a statistically significant variation in the views of pre-service teachers before and after the implementation of the program. Most students believe that their additional training in the design and implementation of the program contributed considerably to its accomplishment ($p = 0.000$). Also, after the implementation of the program the students realized that they had a better understanding of the design of a comprehensive program by setting goals first ($p = 0.000$). A statistical variation was also noted in the confidence they gained in themselves and the impact of the feedback and the good cooperation they had with the class teachers ($p = 0.000$) (**Table 2**).

Table 1. Pre and post questionnaire to pre-service teachers.

QUESTIONNAIRE	PRE			POST	
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Training for the design and implementation of an Art oriented Educational program (EP) (AEP)	30	3.03	0.928	4.43	0.504
Theoretical training and skills acquisition	30	3.60	0.563	4.53	0.507
Adequacy of educational material	30	3.70	0.952	4.53	0.507
Training and enthusiasm stimulation	30	2.93	1.015	4.37	0.556
Clear targeting	30	3.07	1.081	4.37	0.490
Clear methodology instructions	30	3.10	1.062	4.30	0.466
Need of supervision	30	2.30	1.022	4.13	0.346
Impact of in-service teachers' feedback	30	3.10	1.062	4.60	0.498
Search for further sources	30	3.20	0.847	4.72	0.455
Need for cooperation with fellows during the program implementation	30	3.23	0.935	4.69	0.471
Self confidence	30	3.43	0.728	4.83	0.384
Views in the impact of the program on children's skills acquisition	30	3.17	1.147	4.79	0.412

Table 2. Views of pre-service teachers before and after the implementation.

	Z	P
Training for the design and implementation of an Art oriented Educational program (EP) (AEP)	-4.463 ^b	0.000
Theoretical training and skills acquisition	-4.315 ^b	0.000
Adequacy of educational material	-3.729 ^b	0.000
Training and enthusiasm stimulation	-4.364 ^b	0.000
Clear targeting	-4.073 ^b	0.000
Clear methodology instructions	-4.110 ^b	0.000
Need of supervision	-4.602 ^b	0.000
Impact of in-service teachers' feedback	-4.443 ^b	0.000
Search for further sources	-4.651 ^b	0.000
Need for cooperation with fellows during the program implementation	-4.242 ^b	0.000
Self confidence	-4.785 ^b	0.000
Views in the impact of the program on children's skills acquisition	-4.535 ^b	0.000

With regards to the in-service teachers' interviews, data showed that most of them were skeptical before the implementation of the program and slightly annoyed because their own schedule was disturbed. This is evident from the comments below two of the teachers made:

Anna: "I was very skeptical and slightly annoyed because every time students

walked into my classroom, they caused commotion and I couldn't restore order. From my experience, few to none of the students were effective in implementing the program".

Maria: "I believed that due to the young age of the children, it would be difficult to implement an art program in a pre-school class".

After the implementation of the program the teachers' views ranged on a completely different level.

Katerina: "I was excited with the new ideas that came into the classroom and the material the students had gathered".

Eleni: "I believed that paintings, even of distinguished artists, could not affect children's eating habits ... yet, due to this playful way students implemented the activities, it became not only easy, but also effective".

Dimitra: "At the beginning of the program, I thought that I had the role of the mentor, but I soon realized that students can also train us in their own way".

Sofia: "It all comes down to mutual trust so that both sides can successfully cooperate and accept criticism".

Vasiliki: "I noticed that male students more easily accept mentoring and are more receptive to the criticism and the suggestions made by the experienced teacher".

4. Limitations

Only the pre-service teachers who did their placement in the city where the university is located, participated in the study. Also, the participation of pre-service teachers was voluntary, as there was additional training for the needs of the art-based implementation program.

5. Discussion

Young people, like students, are carriers of reinvigoration and social reformation. The progress of society and all fields of economic activity lie in the educational reflection, the development of scientific autonomy and the introduction of an innovative approach to teaching methodology (Theodorou et al., 2013). The same was observed in the present study as, according to the in-service teachers, the young convey new ideas to the preschool settings.

When the pre-service teachers are confronted with the range of problems and the solutions they are to seek, they realize at first sight to what extent the theoretical knowledge they have received can be applied. Also they realize to what extent their expectations, as regards their future profession and their hitherto perspective, correspond to the opportunities that are presented during the performance of the specific practice (Farrell, 2012).

We observe in the present study the significance ($p = 0.000$) of feedback and the need pre-service teachers have for a strong cooperation with the in-service teachers. A relationship based on cooperation and honesty can be particularly beneficial to the learner. A very important parameter for the considerable im-

provement of the future teachers, with regards to their performance, is the feedback by the mentor, the in-service teachers, in order not to assess them, but to make them a more effective recipient of knowledge. High degree of skill and experience of the mentor teacher are essential prerequisites (Ong'ondo & Jwan, 2009). In order to ensure the successful outcome of the placement and the student to acquire as much knowledge and experience as possible, it is essential pre-service and in-service teachers to have a good relationship (Ellis et al., 2020).

Entrenched attitudes and views already formed by the pre-service teacher may be an inhibitor factor. This makes the in-service teacher skeptical and negative towards the cooperation. The in-service teacher, as a mentor, with the appropriate training and encouragement, can create that protected environment that will allow for the development of the pre-service teacher and a smooth cooperation (Paula & Grinfelde, 2018).

The mentor's priority is to consolidate a climate of serenity, as, in his effort to substantially support the future colleague, he undertakes a consulting role, imparting knowledge and a multitude of methods in such a way that students will ultimately have the best possible presence in the classroom and will minimize failure (Wilson & Huynh, 2019).

Gaining self-confidence on the part of students requires constant friction in the classroom and taking initiatives by implementing programs without the fear of failure and receiving criticism by in-service teachers (Kindall et al., 2017). According to the results, the students who were tested in a demanding program found out themselves that they gained self-confidence ($p = 0.000$), which was also noted by the in-service teachers.

An art-based program is considered difficult to implement not only by pre-school children but also by the pre-service teachers themselves. It requires educational material and specialized training that is not provided to them during their studies, which makes them skeptical about the effects of the program on the eating and social habits of children (Bautista et al., 2018). Also, the tools that can be used during the implementation of the program should be sought by the students themselves, which makes them avoid it. In the present study, the pre-service teachers discover the effectiveness of the program ($p = 0.000$) before and after its implementation, something that is also discovered by in-service teachers.

The issue of male teachers has been discussed many times in terms of their relationship with both children and colleagues (Yang & McNair, 2019).

According to teachers, the male students were more receptive to any criticism and recommendations they received.

6. Conclusion

The basic conclusion from the research is that, during placements, the students acquire even more knowledge and skills, which will help them in their forthcoming career. They feel more ready and more capable of designing and imple-

menting a complete educational program, which is attributed to the fact that their interest and personal involvement increases as well as their in-depth understanding of the theoretical knowledge they received throughout their studies. It has also been deduced that pre-service teachers consider the presence of the supervising teacher throughout their placement essential, which highlights the need for full implementation of mentoring both in the pedagogical departments of the country and in preschool settings. Additionally, it is concluded from the research that through placement, pre-service teachers are given the opportunity to come in contact with the real object of their studies in real conditions.

7. Implementations

The high-quality teaching and learning opportunities, support structures, and trust building are critical factors in strengthening pre-service teachers' skills. Links between studies and the reality of practice are discussed. Pedagogical Departments must invest in placement and provide the best possible conditions so as to help not only pre-service teachers but also all the students from the beginning of their studies.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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