

Reflexive Tools and Realising a Responsible and Ethical Educational Practice

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Abstract:

Critical reflection is an essential factor in the realisation of an emancipatory reflective practice. It can increase the learning capacity of the individual and of the entire collective and develop their ability to provide contextually grounded answers to issues they face in practice. These are highly personalised processes, i.e. they have to be harmonised with the collective's capacity in a given moment, that is, with the developmental levels of each individual in an institution. For the employees, critical reflection can serve as a test of their own limits, a tool for understanding various ethical dilemmas and a path for constructing new practices and ways of thinking. It helps them question the common and usual patterns of expectations and meanings they had assigned to their own experiences, relationships with others, themselves and practice as a whole. The transformational potential of critical reflection is also present in the sense of questioning the power dynamics within the institution, as a prerequisite for achieving social change.

Keywords : Critical reflection, emancipatory practice, professional integrity, autonomy

Introduction

The traditional way of working of a educational institution and its inherent curriculum, characterised by bureaucracy, universality and strict programming, does not meet contemporary criteria. On the contrary – an educational institution, due to the entropic characteristics of its practice, should in fact base its entire identity on “living the change”, i.e. it should achieve a state of permanent evolution (Slunjski, 2016). And in line with the idea of “living the change”, it should develop a curriculum that reflects this: one that is dynamic, developmental, open, i.e. in the process of continuous creation. Such a curriculum is shaped outside of preset, strictly defined frames (Slunjski, 2015). In other words, it represents a prognosis of possibilities in the arena of given opportunities (Rinaldi, according to Male, 2012).

In the process of qualitative change, i.e. the development of the educational practice and curriculum, it is important to take care of the systematic characteristics of an institution and its practice. Every attempt at improving the quality of the educational practice that is reduced to introducing one novelty or changing one structure, without any awareness of its link with everything else, is doomed to fail. It is necessary to ensure quality and continuous professional development of employees because, according to the conclusions of a recent European research (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014, according to Hostyn et al., 2018), continuous professional development is a crucial factor in increasing the competences of professionals working in the education system. The CoRe European research (according to Hostyn et al., 2018) emphasises that the pedagogical quality of an educational institution (an early and preschool education institution) is determined precisely by the reflective capacities and continuous professionalisation of staff and the connection and continuous cooperation between practitioners and the competent system (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, Lazzari, & Van Laere, 2011). In short, the strategic goal of European countries with regards to the quality of the educational practice of kindergartens is staff professionalisation using appropriate forms of professional development.

In an institution seen as a complex system, the course of practice development is as unpredictable as the final outcome of the process of change. This means that the bearers of change, i.e. the workers in an educational institution, initially cannot be sure what they will gain with the “new way of working.” However, as Fullan and German (2006) stress, workers in an educational institution cannot know what they will gain with the change until they delve into it, and this requires – time. In this process, the authors continue, a clear vision of development is of great help, but so are new experiences and continuous learning that will help the subjects involved in the process of change think and act in a new manner. It is precisely because of this that the process of developing an educational practice, actual development and not just “cosmetic improvements”, is very slow, and often filled with various frustrations and temporary failures. It takes three to five years to qualitatively change the educational practice and curriculum, even ten for real, i.e., “sustainable” changes, those that manage to capture the deepest levels of the culture of the educational institution, connected with the values and opinions of educators (Fullan, 1999). For many institutions, this period is too long to preserve enough patience, energy and motivation of the institution's employees, necessary for more

serious changes. However, those who persevere in this process, most often direct the process of change towards the realisation of reflective practice. Reflective practice, as well as the professional learning of employees that is necessary for its realisation, must be understood as a permanent, constructive spiral of development, learning and growth that never ends (Rushton and Sutter, 2012).

Professional learning aimed at developing emancipatory practice

As a starting point for considering reflective approaches in professional learning, the works of Argyris and Schön (1974) and Schön (1987, 2016) are often cited. Their work represents a kind of basis on which many later discussions about the possibilities of professional learning are founded. What these debates have in common is the idea that the actions that an individual takes in practice may or may not be in accordance with the ideas and beliefs they advocate. In other words, there can be a big discrepancy between the ideas, beliefs and theories that an individual advocates, and what they do and achieve in their practice. Therefore, the first step in the development of practice is an active search for ways in which an individual can discover, i.e. become aware of, the differences between the ideas and value determinations they advocate and their own practice, with the aim of achieving greater coherence in that practice. In this sense, the training of individuals, i.e. practitioners (educators/teachers) for critical reflection has an invaluable role. It, as explained by Mezirow et al. (according to Pockett et al., 2011), involves questioning and revising the assumptions on which practitioners' beliefs are built, contributes to challenging their established and usual patterns of expectations and the meaning they attached to their relationships with others and with themselves.

Rushton and Sutter (2012) list three various, but not mutually exclusive levels of reflection. The first one is technical and refers to the reflection that the practitioner carries out on a daily basis about their own practice in the educational group/classroom. The second one is organisational, where they reflect on the management and allocation of learning resources and activities and support for children/pupils. The third one is critical, where they think about the wider social, political and economic context within which they work. An efficient reflective practice always contains a critical component. In the process of improving educational practice, it is necessary for practitioners to question and problematise themselves, their roles and the roles of their superiors, but also their political, social and professional situations, stresses Bolton (2010). The point is not in uncritical acceptance of the existing situation in educational practice, the author adds, nor in constant unproductive complaining about it. Such an approach to the improvement of educational practice coincides with the theory and practice of action research, which was founded by Carr and Kemmis (1986). Action research is a form of self-reflective research undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and fairness of their own practices, improve their own understanding of these practices, i.e. the conditions in which these practices are carried out (ibid.). Barnett (1997) describes critical self-reflection as a person's effort to discover a way in which they could think differently, instead of striving to legitimize what is already known. It is a historical-practical test of our own limits that we can (or cannot) cross, which represents a kind of critical ontology of ourselves (Foucault, according to Barnett, 1997). Critical reflective practice enables practitioners to see problems from different perspectives, to develop different ways of

understanding situations, to gain more confidence in facing challenges in their work, to develop a deeper understanding of ethical dilemmas in their practice and to build new ways of thinking (Pockett et al., 2011). Practising critical reflectivity directs an individual's conscious attention to their 'whole self', which includes his thoughts, feelings, beliefs and actions (Pockett et al., 2011). Furthermore, it enables practitioners to better understand the assumptions on which their actions are based, which can lead to changes in their practice (ibid.). But, as the cited authors explain, critical reflection requires the ability to conceptualize and analyse, as well as the willingness to examine the assumptions that support one's practice in order to improve that practice (ibid.). Practising critical reflection, as a leading tool for achieving reflective practice, enables the practitioner's thinking, which is the real basis of their actions, to become more and more "critical." Following this, Barnett (1997) points out, there are several forms of critical practice, namely critical analysis, critical action and critical (self-)reflection. Critical reflection, according to Fook (2002, 2015), encourages the analysis and deconstruction of personal or professional experience in the direction of understanding the various assumptions, relationships and influences embedded in that experience and how it affects our practice. That is why critical reflection also represents the main potential for the development of "emancipatory practice" (Fook, 2002, 2015).

The goal of critical reflection, as pointed out by Pockett et al. (2011), is to help subjects discover the ways in which, in certain contexts of practice, they experience other people and situations, follow certain perspectives, discover these perspectives and thus create their own assumptions about power. Many contemporary authors were inspired by the work of Foucault (1972) to think about the concept of power, particularly in social relations. In the context of educational institutions, the issue of power is very important because many of them are characterised by an uneven distribution of power with pronounced hierarchical relationships that have a strong influence on the quality of educational practice. Therefore, the discussion about the quality of educational practice, i.e. the ways in which it can be improved, necessarily includes the study of the issue of power (Foucault, 1982). Because, as the said author emphasises, in all serious deliberation on the issues of education, there is always an underlying theoretical perspective that takes into consideration power relations. And as power relations are operationalised in practice in ways that we are not always aware of, reflective processes have a prominent place in their discovery, analysis and understanding. A critical-reflective analysis can indicate the emancipatory direction of changes. Critical reflection is the process of destabilizing the assumptions of individuals, and this is necessary in order to move towards social changes (Fook and Gardner 2007).

The transformational potential of critical reflection

Critical reflection is defined and described in various ways in literature. Some authors emphasize the ability to discover, examine and change deep-rooted, i.e. fundamental assumptions (Mezirow 1991), while others emphasize that what makes reflection critical is the focus on power (Brookfield (1995). However, what these interpretations have in common is certainly the potential for transformation, i.e. changing practice. While in the first definition the questioning of a person's fundamental assumptions should lead to change, in the second the change is the result of the development of awareness of how power works.

Critical reflection and reflective practice are not mutually exclusive and can be based on similar assumptions and thought processes, Fook (2015) points out. In fact, the author explains, critical reflection is a subset of reflective practice. When used to improve professional practice, critical reflection becomes a reflective practice that focuses on the power dimensions of assumed thinking, and thus on how practice might change to bring about changes in the social situations in which professionals work (ibid.). In order to be able to reflect critically, one must obviously be able to reflect.

However, the author continues, not every reflective practice leads to critical reflection, i.e. to fundamental changes. A more thorough and comprehensive critical reflection works to improve the way we live and relate as people, and in the process, can lead to improvements in our professional practice. In any case, the process of critical reflection can help us establish bridges between our own experience and the experience of others, in order to bring about the desired social changes (Fook, 2015).

In practical terms, the critical perspective of critical reflection involves exposing the dominant social understanding or assumption to the individual, thereby giving him or her a choice. Because from the moment these hidden things become exposed, the individual gains the power to change them (Fook and Askeland 2006).

According to Fook and Askeland (2006), there are two basic aspects of the process of critical reflection, namely analysis and change. The goal of critical reflection is to help the individual in discovering and destabilising certain assumptions (particularly about power), and in this way to help them identify new theoretical bases from which they can improve or change a certain situation in practice. So, the individual is trained not only to evaluate and closely study practice, but also to learn directly from their own, concrete practice. Ultimately, this means learning to create theory that is applicable to practice. However, this entire process of critical reflection consists of two phases: deconstruction (analysis) and reconstruction (change) (Fook 2012).

Conclusion

Studies on the effectiveness of critical reflection, i.e. its contribution to the achievement of quality practice, state that it can increase the capacity for research and building knowledge, better application of knowledge, i.e. the ability to use existing knowledge in new cases, the ability to create contextually based answers, improve practice, i.e. create new practice opportunities and increased learning capacity in a period of change and uncertainty (Fook 2015). It also leads to the development of professional courtesy, encourages or deepens the openness of employees to new or different perspectives, and strengthens their motivation to eliminate the various problems they encounter in their daily work. In general, it leads to finding different thinking strategies and building new ways of working which, over a longer period, enable the development of better practice, based on new values, beliefs and understandings. Critical reflection activities can take many different forms and have many different outcomes, depending on the theoretical perspectives of the participants and their ability to deeply explore important assumptions. Certainly, these are highly individualised activities whose outcomes

are difficult to generally apply to all people and situations. Knowledge of the basic elements, values and challenges of critical reflection, as well as the challenges that may arise on the way to achieving reflective practice, are prerequisites for the systematic and continuous improvement of the quality of educational practice in an institution.

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