

A Collaborative Action Research Project in the Kindergarten: Perspectives and Challenges for Teacher Development through Internal Evaluation Processes

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Abstract

Background: Collaborative action research provides teachers with the framework and methodology to reflect upon their work and take action with regard to specific concerns and situations in their classrooms. Within this approach, internal evaluation could be a useful tool to help teachers develop critical thinking about their work by locating areas of their work that need improvement.

Aims: The present study examines an attempt to introduce internal evaluation processes in the kindergarten within the framework of collaborative action research.

Sample: The study was conducted by a university researcher in collaboration with 4 kindergarten teachers and 4 parent representatives from 2 kindergarten classes in North-Eastern Greece. 35 children and their parents participated in the project.

Method: According to the action research methodology, a combination of methods was used to collect data, such as questionnaires, observations, teacher journals and interviews.

Results: Data showed that the restricted social cohesion in the classroom, the high rates of teachers' authoritarian practices and parent-teacher collaboration were the basic areas of concern. Internal and self-evaluation processes were important for locating the problematic areas and supported decision-making for action while formative assessment techniques enhanced participation and learning for all stakeholders.

Conclusion: Implementing internal evaluation processes in the kindergarten within the framework of an action research project helped teachers to overcome their preconceptions about evaluation as a controlling practice and use its strengths to reflect upon their work, challenge their practices and conditions in the classroom and improve educational processes. The project showed the necessity of giving the children a central and active role in the evaluation process and revealed a problematic dimension, that of the parent-teacher relationship.

Keywords: internal evaluation, collaborative action research, kindergarten teachers

幼兒園內合作行動研究項目：教師通過內部評估程序獲得發展的前景及其面臨的挑戰

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摘要

背景：合作行動研究為教師反映他們的工作並對課堂上遇到的特定問題和狀況採取措施提供了框架和方法。對於這種方法，內部評估可能是非常實用的工具（一條職業發展途徑），可幫助教師找出他們的工作中需要改進的領域，從而發展他們關於本職工作的辯證思維能力。

目的：目前的研究探討了在合作行動研究框架內於幼兒園中引入內部評估程序的前景和面臨的挑戰。

抽樣：本研究由大學研究人員與來自希臘東北部2個幼兒園班級的4名幼兒園教師和4名家長代表合作進行。35名兒童和他們的家長參與了研究項目。

方法：根據行動研究方法，本研究採用了一組方法來收集數據，例如調查問卷、觀察、教師雜誌和訪談。

結果：數據顯示，課堂上有限的社會凝聚力、高比例的教師專製行為以及家長教師間的合作是我們要關心的基本問題。內部和自我評估程序對於發現問題領域、有依據的行動決策以及針對所有利益相關者的、借助形成性評估手段進行的參與和評估十分重要。

結論：在行動研究項目框架內於幼兒園執行內部評估程序有助於教師克服他們將評估視為一種控制手段的成見，並有助於他們利用評估的優點來反映他們的本職工作、對他們在課堂上的做法和狀況提出質疑以及改善教育方法。本研究項目顯示出讓孩子在評估過程中發揮中心、積極作用的必要性，同時發現了一個問題領域，即家長教師間的關係。

關鍵詞：內部評估、合作行動研究和幼兒園教師

Introduction

Teachers' role in their professional development

Traditionally, teachers' professional development has consisted of short-term or "one-shot" workshops and in-service training conducted by outside experts (Henson, 2001). This practice is based on the notion of teachers as consumers of the knowledge produced by others that actually downgrades itself from being a form of systematic knowing (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). On the other hand, practitioners' participation in school-based research programs has recently been identified as a powerful input to the course of teacher professional development (Chapman, 2000) by providing new methods and tools that enable teachers to assume control of classroom decisions and actively participate in their own instructional improvement. Although the power of teachers' voices in these research programs is still questionable, there is growing evidence that collaborative research programs which connect theory and research with practice in a meaningful way for all participants have the strength to influence teacher thinking and instructional practice (Avgitidou, 2009).

Collaborative action research and internal evaluation processes

As an alternative to more traditional forms of "scientific" research, action research recognizes and elevates the teacher's central roles in decision making as it is situated in the particular conditions and needs of their students and schools (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003). By being engaged in a more systematic and reflective execution of their instructional and pedagogical practices and outcomes in the classroom, teachers can generate knowledge that is personally relevant and meaningful. Their reflective experience, that is doubting-interpreting-examining-elaborating-deciding, leads to analysis and evaluation of the educational process on a basis of a commitment

to change and development. In this trend, internal evaluation and self-evaluation processes are regarded as essential as they provide the context-specific information and feedback that support decision-making and learning and promote teacher and school effectiveness (Schildkamp & Visscher, 2009). On the basis of self-evaluation and self-regulation, new developments have taken place in formative assessment involving alternative assessment strategies that require teachers to use their judgments about students' performance and development, understand how to include feedback in their practices, change their practices to meet students' varying needs and share decision-making with colleagues, parents and students (Hargreaves et al., 2002. Rekalidou, in press).

The central axis for conducting a collaborative research project in the kindergarten was to investigate the problems, challenges and dynamics of engaging kindergarten teachers in a process of internal evaluation and self-evaluation as a way to improve the quality of the educational process and enhance teachers' professional development. Implementing formative assessment techniques to evaluate different aspects of the educational reality, in other words investigating the research questions in the kindergarten classroom within the line of thought, the purposes and the methodology of action research, was considered an appropriate and challenging way to help teachers alter their negative attitude towards evaluation which has been frequently viewed as controlling, threatening and disruptive (Frechtling, 2002). Within this collaborative and transformative framework of research, the role of the professional researcher, in our case the university partner, was twofold: that of a critical friend, by asking provocative questions, providing the relevant theoretical background and offering critiques in a

friendly context (Costa and Kallick, 1993) and, at the same time, that of an active participant in the research process, conducting observations, analyzing data and providing the appropriate feedback.

Purpose and prospect of the study

With regard to the Greek educational reality, data from such initiatives are very limited as, a) there are many bureaucratic restrictions for conducting research in the public kindergarten, b) kindergarten teachers have not yet developed an identity of professional growth and a teacher-as-learner attitude and c) teachers are generally reluctant to participate in relevant programs as they seem to have developed negative perceptions about evaluation processes due to their experiences of a controlling and oppressive form of school inspection functioning for more than 80 years in the educational system, until the early 1980's.

Although the project was conducted on the grounds of the Greek educational reality and specifically with regard to the educational processes in the kindergarten, it may not have only regional value for it deals with important issues within contemporary action research and evaluation studies. Although many school-based programs that are managed by research centers or universities have been reported in the literature concerning elementary and secondary grades, there is a gap with regard to preschool and kindergarten teachers' participation in university-led action research initiatives. Moreover, these initiatives often include university faculty or educational research and development staff and teachers but rarely do they engage other educational agents in the school or at classroom level, such as parents or even students (O'Brien & Moules, 2007). In our project, internal and self evaluation processes using formative assessment techniques are proposed

as a tool to enhance the first cycle of action research where participants should identify the problematic area or the research questions and at a second stage as a part of the intervention-action.

Consequently, the main purposes of the present study are described as follows:

- a) to implement a collaborative action research project in the kindergarten focusing on internal and self-evaluation processes and describe perspectives and challenges for teacher development
- b) to engage parents as partners in the project
- c) to involve students in the evaluation process
- d) to present a model of formative assessments in the kindergarten

Method

Participants

This university led collaborative action research program was conducted in two public kindergarten classes in Evros, North Greece, affiliated to the university faculty and lasted the whole school year. The choice of the kindergartens was based on the fact that the university researcher had already worked with the teachers in previous years and the idea of internal evaluation as a means for professional development was raised by the teachers themselves.

The university researcher, the four kindergarten teachers (all women) and the parents of the 35 children (4 to 6 years old) attending the two kindergarten classes, decided to implement a series of evaluation processes with regard to different aspects of the kindergarten life, with the aim to improve practices, relationships and educational outcomes.

Process

The process we followed consisted of the following five cyclical phases (for example see Zeichner & Nofke, 2001):

Phase 1. Discussing priorities and goals

This phase lasted about 4 weeks (October) and included one meeting every week. After several meetings with the teachers and the parents in each kindergarten classroom and personal discussions with the university researcher, an agenda of the most important issues with regard to the educational reality in each classroom was formed and priorities for evaluation were set. This process is important for fostering enduring transformation, as it involves an analytical examination of the present situations or demands (personal reality) in the light of a new perspective (in our case the collective reality) (Gavett, 2004).

Teachers, parents and the university researcher discussed and agreed on the following five domains for evaluation and improvement:

a. *Teachers' classroom management practices:*

Teachers presented the difficulties they were facing when dealing with children that had problems in adjusting to the peer group and showed aggressive behavior. They were concerned about the appropriateness and efficacy of their practices especially when they tried to promote children's autonomy and self-regulation:

"... it is easy when it comes to theory. When I try to do things in the classroom I lose control and there is a chaos with the children. Then I have to assume control ..."

The same concern was also expressed by parents who reported many incidents with

their children complaining about their classmates' behavior.

- b. *Peer relationships in the classroom:* In line with the aforementioned concerns teachers expressed concern about the children's lack of communication skills and the development of a competitive attitude, mainly during free-play activities. Many conflicting incidents were recorded every day by teachers, while parents drew from their children's narratives and had formed a negative idea, though not always based on the actual facts, about the situation in the classroom.
- c. *Children's participation and performance in activities:* The effectiveness of the teachers' instructional practices was one of their major priorities for evaluation. They expressed their concerns about the lack of relevant training and most specifically with regard to observation techniques.
- d. *Teacher-parent collaboration:* Parents participation at school involved only attendance at organized events and festivities while their communication with teachers was restricted to short informal conversations when bringing their children to school or collecting them after school. Teachers complained about parents' indifference while parents' thought that teachers did not want them to be more involved in the kindergarten. Both parts expressed their desire for better communication and collaboration.
- e. *Space and equipment in the classroom:* Both teachers and parents seemed very interested in aspects of the classroom environment,

for different reasons though. For teachers space organization and material provision constituted an essential part of their management and instructional role while for parents the focus was on safety, functional and organizational matters.

This phase of the program had an exploratory character and the purpose was to investigate participants' ideas and interests with regard to the educational processes in the classroom in order to develop an agenda of priorities for research-evaluation and action-improvement. The next phase included decisions about research instruments and assessment implementation.

In the meantime, teachers attended a number of workshops organized by the university researcher responding to their demand to be trained in evaluation processes, especially classroom observation and self-observation. Apart from acquiring practical knowledge, the purpose of those workshops was to help teachers adopt a positive attitude towards evaluation and reflection as a means of educational improvement and professional development. Moreover, participants decided to form a research team that consisted of the university researcher, the four teachers and four parents, two representatives from each classroom, as it was difficult for all the parents to attend every meeting.

Phase 2. Instrumentation and Assessment

This phase lasted about 6 weeks (November-December). Daily observations by the teachers and 3-weekly observations by the university partner were included in the assessment agenda. Parents took part in the final part of the assessment, the last two weeks of the phase.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and different methodological tools such as questionnaires, interviews, observation protocols, journals, were used as it is advisable to have at least two or three different data resources or/and methods (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007. McFee, 1992) (Table 7).

Teachers' classroom management practices were assessed through observations conducted by the university partner. An observation protocol was used (Konstantinou, 2001), to assess teachers' authoritarian and democratic practices during free-play and organized activities. Teachers were observed in 15 daily programs, from 8 to 12.30, during a set of 15 free-play and 56 organized activities. More specifically, teachers' behaviors were recorded every 3 minutes on the observation sheet (Table 1), during every cycle of the program activities.

Table 1. Teacher classroom management practices Observation Protocol

Authoritarian Practices		Democratic Practices	
1.Compliance with the teacher		1. Teacher-student collaboration in communication	
Criticism		Student free opinion	
Rules imposed by the teacher		Co-construction of rules	
Teacher decisions		Student initiatives	
2.Behavior control		2.Participatory pedagogical communication	
Orders/demands		Collaboration in reaching goals	
Prohibitions		Supporting student initiatives	

Directives		Enhancing student opinion	
Demand for silence		A context of interaction	
Gestures		Gestures	
3. Controlling questions		3. Questions for inquiry	
4. Student manipulation		4. Free expression	
Preaching		Freedom in behavior attribution	
Coercion		Supporting autonomy	
Raising voice		Polite tone towards students	
5. Student marginalization		5. Motivating student communication	
Not allowing a student to talk		Autonomous expression	
Interrupting student activity		Avoidance of marginalization	
Expulsion		Gestures	
Excluding pupil from communication			
Gestures			
6. Teacher monologue		6. Dialogue-collaboration	
Teacher asking and answering -questions		Communication competence student asking teacher or other student	
Intervene in students' answers/interrupt students			
7. Student offence		7. Respect in students' temperament	
Irony		Respect, avoiding stigmatization	
Sarcasm		Pedagogical evaluation	
Subjective assessment		Behavior approval	
Disapproving student behavior		Gestures	
Gestures			
8. Punishment		8. Pedagogical use of dominating methods	
Reprimands		Rewards	
Punishment		Responding to student needs	
Negligence of student needs		Support/understanding	
Threats		Gestures	
Physical force			
Gestures			

Children's peer relationships were assessed using Moreno's (1942) sociometric test, adapted for preschool children. Children were asked by the teacher to identify three of their counterparts that they most liked to play with and three that they did not and explain their choices. Six emotion faces, three for positive nominations (very happy, happy, smiling) and three for negative nominations (very sad, sad, neutral) were used to facilitate the selection process

(Royer et al., 2008).

In order to capture parents' beliefs about the teacher in their child classroom and their communication with her, the research team used Ostrander's questionnaire (1995) as a basis to develop an instrument that would fit the specific socio-cultural context and their research interests. From the initial pool of items proposed by the participants, teachers agreed to include only 11 (Table 2).

Table 2. Parent-Teacher Relationship Questionnaire

Please circle the number that shows how often the classroom teacher(s) does(do) the following

1= Always 2= Most of the time 3= Sometimes 4= A few times 5= Never

	Always	Most of the times	Sometimes	A few times	Never
Communicates with me	1	2	3	4	5
Makes me feel comfortable	1	2	3	4	5
Provides me with information about my child	1	2	3	4	5
Informs me about my child's progress	1	2	3	4	5
Knows very well my child's abilities and strengths	1	2	3	4	5
Acknowledges my child's positive behavior	1	2	3	4	5
Supports my child	1	2	3	4	5
Is interested in my child's participation in activities	1	2	3	4	5
Informs me about programs	1	2	3	4	5
Provides a safe learning environment for the children	1	2	3	4	5
Provides a welcoming and creative environment for the children	1	2	3	4	5

Parents also reported their ideas about their child development on the basis of a semi-structured interview conducted by the teacher. Questions included the child's preferences and inclinations, activities and customs at home, parental involvement and socialization practices.

Children's progress was assessed using a questionnaire developed by the research team on the basis of the Observation Guide (Astolfi, Peterfalvi

& Verin, 1998). Children were assessed, by both parents and teachers, in the following five domains: a) adjustment in the kindergarten, b) participation in activities, c) communication, d) socio-emotional development and e) autonomy.

Moreover, teachers kept journals during free-play and organised activities especially with regard to children's interaction with space and materials in the classroom:

Photo 1. House and drama play centres



30th November (free-play activities): "Boys again have chosen to play with the blocks and other construction materials while girls showed preference for the house and the drama-play centre. These two centres constitute a unit for symbolic play (see photo 1) but we should find a way to attract boys' attention. Could a play scenario challenge boys, for example call a plumber? What about making hats for policemen, fire-fighters, etc for the drama-play centre?" (from classroom2 teacher's journal)

Phase 3. Analyzing and evaluating data, identifying ways for improvement

Data analyses were conducted mainly by the

university partner during Christmas Holidays. The research team discussed the results and designed a plan for action during the five meetings that took

place in January.

With regard to teachers' classroom management practices, 2,444 authoritarian (Table 3) and 361 democratic (Table 4) practices were recorded during the 15 daily program observations. Controlling behavior, punishment techniques and offensive

treatment were the three factors of the recorded authoritarian practices that showed the highest frequency. Among the observed democratic practices, responsiveness, communication and autonomy granting were the dimensions with the highest frequency.

Table 3. Teachers' authoritarian practices observed during free-play and organized activities

Factors	2444	Percentage of the factor	Percentage of the factor
		in the total scale	in the total number of activities observed
Compliance	216	9%	5.59%
Control	862	35%	22.63%
Controlling questions	26	1%	0.73%
Manipulation	244	10%	6.41%
Marginalization	204	8%	5.25%
Teacher monologue	64	3%	1.62%
Offence	342	14%	8.88%
Punishment	486	20%	12.67%

Table 4. Teachers' democratic practices observed during free-play and organized activities

Factors	1365	Percentage of the	Percentage of the factor in the total number
		factor in the total scale	of activities observed
Collaboration	100	7%	3.56%
Communication	289	21%	7.30%
Problem solving	29	2%	0.74%
Autonomy granting	223	16%	5.69%
Motivation	87	6%	2.17%
Interaction	150	11%	3.69%
Respect	136	9.50%	3.46%
Responsiveness	351	26.34%	9.34%

On the basis of the children's selections and rejections, classroom sociometric tables and sociograms revealed some interesting information about children's relationships with implications for teachers' behaviors and practices in the classroom. Children in both classrooms seemed to form relationships mainly in dyads. From the explanations they gave with regard to their peer selections and rejections, the main criteria children used were their

common interests, the same gender and behavior.

Parents' reports about their relationship with the classroom teacher(s) (Table 5) showed that they generally held positive views about them. The only domain with which they did not seem quite satisfied was the domain of communication. Parents wanted teachers to contact them more often and provide them with more information about the program and the child's progress.

	Frequent communication	Being comfortable in communication	Information about the child	Information about child progress	Being aware of the child's abilities	Acknowledge positive behavior	Providing support	Interest in child participation	Information about the program	Safe learning environment	Creativity
Mean*	2.18	1.36	1.27	1.60	1.36	1.36	1.55	1.36	1.54	1.2	1.36
SD	0.26	0.20	0.14	0.20	0.20	0.20	0.21	0.15	0.25	0.13	0.20

Table 5. Mean scores of parents' reports on their relationship with teachers

*1= always, 2= many times, 3= some times, 4=a few times, 5= never

Results from the observations conducted by both parents and teachers regarding children's performance and achievement during free-play and organized activities were transformed into a scale along with the descriptive assessments of the competencies observed in the aforementioned domains (Table 6).

Although children's performance seemed to be quite satisfactory in all the observed domains, they

showed lower rates with regard to their adjustment to the educational program and their participation in the activities. Only 60% of the children were observed always to engage in the activities. 14 out of the 35 children in both the kindergarten classes seemed to participate only after being asked by the teacher, participate without being interested or motivated or to refuse participation.

Table 6. Results regarding children's performance and achievement

Domain	Behaviors/competencies	Mean *	Total
Socio-emotional development	Enjoys symbolic play with other children	2.93	2.18
	Is cooperative with peers	2.58	
	Participates in groups with friends	2.61	
	Decides who enters/participates in the group	1.34	
	Has leadership skills	1.25	
	Shares things with others	2.51	
	Is angry when things are not going as he/she wants	0.64	
	Knows which behaviors are allowed	2.87	
	Waits for turns	2.61	
	Follows the rules	2.70	
Can solve a problem in the group	1.96		
Autonomy	Is able to dress up alone	2.83	2.28
	Arranges his/her personal things	2.90	
	Finds solutions to a problem or difficulty alone	2.29	
	Asks the teacher's help	1.87	
	Asks the other children to help	1.51	

Communication	Expresses verbally his/her desires or needs	2.35	2.18
	Uses other ways to express his/her desires or needs	1.57	
	Uses common ways of communication	1.18	
	Asks questions	2.16	
	Answers questions verbally	2.51	
	Talks to adults	2.48	
	Talks to children	2.74	
	Participates in conversations	2.32	
	Understands directions and rules	2.74	
	Supports his/her opinions and uses arguments	1.75	

*3=very much, 2=enough, 1=a little, 0=not at all

Data so far had provided participants with interesting and valuable information but mostly descriptive in nature. For example, while it was interesting to know that a number of children did not participate in the activities data could not highlight our knowledge about the reasons why those children were unmotivated in the classroom. Other, contextual factors should have been considered to enhance participants understanding and insight of the educational processes in the classroom (Zeichner & Nofke, 2001). Moreover, while the competencies of the children in the selected domains were recorded, participants did not have a clear idea of the course of their performance in the two classrooms. In addition, children were only the objects of the evaluation processes and did not actively participate so as to develop some kind of responsibility over their behaviors and boost their participation in the classroom. Their performance in the classroom should somehow be connected with the teachers' practices, taking also into account the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the children in each classroom. It was decided to apply an intervention program with the following aims:

- i. to enhance social cohesion in the classroom, help children develop social skills and boost relationships in the classroom through group work.

- ii. to change space organization and material arrangement in the classroom using parents' help and children's ideas in shaping innovative "play and learning corners"
- iii. to introduce more authentic evaluation processes applying the portfolio assessment .
- iv. to enhance parent-teacher relationships by organizing more systematic workshops and meetings with the teachers. Teachers are, by expertise and position, more responsible for promoting parents' participation and engagement (Xu & Gulosino, 2006).

From all the activities of the intervention program, portfolio was chosen to be presented in this study because it addressed most of the problematic areas identified in the previous phases: i. recording and reflecting children's progress, ii. engaging children in the evaluation process, iii. strengthening parent-teacher relationship, iv. providing contextual feedback for teachers' practices.

Phase 4. Implementing the intervention activities: Portfolio assessment (February-May)

Portfolio approach is included in the spectrum of the curriculum-embedded performance assessments, or "authentic assessments", that are integrated into the daily curriculum and instructional activities in the classroom and provides a methodology for illustrating

children's efforts, progress and achievements in different developmental domains in a highly organized and structured way (Meisels et al., 2001). Its strengths lie in: a) the variety of evidence collected of children performance (children's works, photos, interviews, checklists, observation data, teacher notes, drawings, etc) b) the different source of input (teachers, children, parents, peers, and school administrators) c) its dynamic, progressive and developmental character and d) the potential for deeper understanding of both the children's development and the educational processes in the classroom. Portfolio processes have been found to have a positive impact on learning in terms of increased child motivation, ownership, responsibility and engagement in the classroom, on challenging and enriching teachers' practices, as well as on parents' understanding of their children's learning, appreciation of instructional goals and approaches and on enhancing their involvement at home and school (Davies & LeMahieu, 2003).

Portfolio assessment was implemented in the two kindergarten classes on the basis of the following objectives:

- a. to apply authentic methods of assessment that would provide teachers with substantial information about both children's potentials and difficulties, as well as about possible factors that may contribute to these difficulties
- b. to collect evidence and monitor children's performance especially with regard to the acquisition of certain cognitive and social skills
- c. to enhance teachers' motivation to improve their methods and teaching practices
- d. to engage children in the evaluation process
- e. to promote parents' active participation in the assessment and evaluation, as well as

enhance their involvement and relationship with teachers

At first, it was considered essential to provide teachers with a theoretical background and relevant training concerning portfolio methodology, as they were the ones who would organize and carry out the whole process by engaging children and parents. Some basic criteria were also set with regard to the selection of the children's works so as to avoid transforming portfolio into a storage file instead of an assessment tool. Moreover, some essential decisions were made about: a) sessions with each child (twice a month, during free-play activities) and with parents (at least twice a year) b) the process followed with children in each age group, 4 to 5 and 5 to 6 (for younger children different criteria and facilitative questions were followed) c) feedback meetings with the research team where teachers were supposed to present their reports on the procedure.

Teachers informed parents about the process, the purposes and the benefits of portfolio assessment as well as their specific role both as informants and co-evaluators. In particular, the stress was on their unique contribution in the recording of the children's development by monitoring their out-of-school performance and providing evidence information to be included in the portfolio. In this way, apart from gaining a more complete picture of the child's progress, a more robust home-school connection and collaboration would be created.

Big colorful files were chosen as containers for the evidence collected for each child. They were put in an easily accessible place in the classroom and children made suggestions about their possible use. Children were encouraged to personalize their file. The selection of the children's work took place mainly during the organized sessions, through the dialogue between the teacher and each child. All

evidence selected and included in the portfolios was accompanied with transcribed children's arguments and criteria for selection, teachers' comments and sometimes parents' feedback.

With regard to the content of the portfolios, mainly four different categories of evidence were included:

- a) children's works in art, math and language. The emphasis was on language and evidence concerning samples of children's writings, classroom library borrowing sheets where children could write down some information about the books they borrowed and their work with the parents at home, the book presentations and their comments on the book content, narratives about their school and out-of-school experiences, audio-visual evidence and teachers' observations.
- b) recordings from the sessions with the teacher to select evidence and children's presentations in the classroom of their individual and group work along with evidence from the self-evaluation and evaluation processes that took place concerning these presentations, the teachers' anecdotal recordings, information provided by parents.
- c) observation protocols with reference to the evaluation of children's progress in the following domains: adjustment in the classroom, participation in the activities, socio-emotional development.
- d) interview protocols with the parents about their beliefs and ideas with regard to their children's adjustment and progress in the kindergarten.

The whole process had a formative character, so that interactions and exchanges between participants led to many improvements. Apart from the organized sessions with the teacher, parents had free access to their children's portfolios and were encouraged by the teacher to discuss them with their child or the teacher whenever they had time. At the end of the school year, every parent was invited to a meeting with the teacher, to be informed about the child's overall progress and discuss the portfolio.

Phase 5. Observing and reflecting on the process of the plan

The research team met three times while one final meeting took place with all the parents (June).

Although teachers embraced the idea of portfolio assessment with enthusiasm, they had difficulties in engaging children in a productive dialogue with regard to their works or to promote their critical thinking. They used fixed questions that could not motivate children's expressive potential and critical statements. As they became more familiar with the process and with the constant help, support and feedback from the university partner, teachers were able to use more imaginative and seminal ideas that stimulated children. Gradually, they let the children show greater initiative and develop their own criteria for self-evaluation:

Photo2: Child's choice for portfolio



Child 1: "I choose it because I put flowers and it became very beautiful. I have not done it before. We don't have such flowers at home neither did we in the preschool. Also, when I was younger I could not draw ducks!" (photo 2)

When children were quite familiar with the process they were encouraged to select their portfolio material with one of their peers. In this way, older children provided scaffolding to their younger counterparts.

Parents did not respond to the process as it had been expected. Only a few of them contributed to portfolio assessment by bringing evidence of their children's out-of-school development and progress. They were invited to participate in short-time sessions with their child at the end of the school-day whenever they could but they demonstrated little interest in being engaged in the process and most of the time they followed their children's desire to show them something from their portfolio. The research team concluded that it was quite premature for parents to become so involved in the kindergarten program and organized a meeting at the end of the month for parents to discuss their child's progress with the teacher using portfolio evidence. These formal, scheduled meetings seemed to be closer to parents' perceptions of their role and levels of engagement in their children's educational lives.

Child-teacher sessions during portfolio assessment seemed to boost their relationship and

enhance teachers' expectations about children's potentials. Teachers seemed to develop a greater sense of achievement and fulfillment. They became more receptive to children's ideas and sensitive to their needs. They reported using more democratic management practices not only as a consequence of data evaluation gathered during the third phase of the project but as a result of viewing the children and their own role in the classroom from a different perspective.

Children showed great interest in portfolio assessment. At first the colorful and personalized containers seemed to impress them. They were motivated to evaluate their progress through assessing their works as it was a process that had a positive orientation. They were looking for their best works. Through this procedure they were able to identify their weak points but the focus was on the effort and progress. This process enhanced children's self-esteem and their social status in the classroom.

Although parents did not show the levels of participation anticipated by the research team they seemed very satisfied with the process and expressed positive ideas.

Table 7. Model of formative assessment in the kindergarten

Assessor	Focus	Assessment technique	Instrumentation
University partner	Teacher classroom management practices	Observation	observation protocol Konstantinou, 2001
Teacher	Children's peer relationships	Interview	adaptation of Moreno's test for preschool children
Parent	Parent-teacher relationship	Questionnaire	adaptation of Ostrander's questionnaire (1995)
Teacher	Parents' ideas about their child development	Semi-structured interview	interview protocol developed by the research team
Parent & Teacher	Children's progress	Questionnaire	questionnaire developed by the research team on the basis of the Observation Guide (Astolfi, Peterfalvi & Verin, 1998)
Children, Peers, Parents and Teachers	Children's overall performance and development	Portfolio assessment	Children's works, interviews

"I liked the whole process. It was something new for me. I could monitor my daughter's progress..." (mother from classroom 1)

"It was something different. Although I lived abroad, I was not familiar with anything like that in my first child's kindergarten. I liked it a lot, but I would prefer better information and communication from teachers regarding this process..." (mother from classroom 2)

Discussion

In line with the action research paradigm, school internal evaluation and self-evaluation processes do not have a clearly defined starting point or a predetermined end. In our study, the formative character of the self-evaluation processes combined with the commitment for change drawn from the action research legacy led to a cyclical course of reflective actions in the classroom that seemed to continually "open new doors" in acting and thinking (McBeth, et al, 2005). The focus of the project was not only on practices per se, but also on the way participants think and talk about practices as well as on the conditions that shape practices, that is circumstances, things and relationships that frame the educational processes in the classroom.

During the first phase of the project the basic concern was the differences in teachers and parents' criteria and priorities for improvement. Parents focused mainly on operational aspects, such as materials and technical equipment, children's breakfast or lunch time and sanitary arrangements, as well as information about the behavior of the child and his/her relationship with the teacher and peers. Teachers emphasized their pedagogical role, especially with regard to children's conflicts and misbehavior in the classroom and the lack of communication and co-operation with the parents. The work of the research team to promote converging lines of thought and action was quite difficult. However, this communication of ideas and expectations seemed to help participants broaden their perspectives and understanding of each other:

"I always thought of the teacher as a figure of authority. Our discussions helped me understand the concerns and problems they have when they educate our children. Actually I could not believe that they need so much preparation and that they do so many things with our children. I also felt nice that I could help and that my voice had a meaning for them..."

Teachers are considered the cornerstone of success for any reform as they have to carry out the demands of the new standards in their classrooms (Garet et al., 2001). Consequently, their preconceptions about different aspects of the educational processes are assumed to influence their desire and attitude towards any change. The limited period of one school year could not provide the research team with the time to work and fulfill all the purposes of the project. Especially, as far as the belief systems are concerned, long-term interventions are needed to help participants change their preconceptions and attitudes. Taking into account that kindergarten attendance is compulsory only for one year, such a long-term intervention could not be possible unless there is continuity in the primary grades. Engaging parents in the project and allowing every view to be expressed provided the research team with the challenge to meet different perspectives and expectations that could enhance continuity between family and educational settings.

Communication and collaboration with parents proved to be one of the most difficult aspects of the whole process to handle. Although parents were quite willing to participate and co-operate in most of the activities, they had some difficulty in understanding the purposes and the rationale of the processes and in many cases they had conflicting ideas with teachers, especially when a problem arose with a child

"we have noticed a developmental delay in Christine but her parents do not want to talk about that... they only care about their career... when we invite them they always have an excuse not to come"

Parents on the other hand seemed to focus on teachers' practices and lack of communication and collaboration:

“yes we know that our child has some difficulties but she is very good in other areas. Teachers should know what to do and provide us with the right information. We do not know what is going on in the classroom. We can only rely on what the teacher says... so we need to be better informed”

Collaborating with parents was a difficult task for teachers and it seemed that preconceptions about how the relationship with children’s families should be developed prevented them from building trust and rapport with the children’s parents. Teachers were afraid that being friendly and open with parents would be an indication of weakness that would give parents the chance to be more critical and judgemental. They were very reluctant to be assessed by parents, at least at the beginning of the project.

Although teachers were very enthusiastic about implementing new practices in the classroom, such as the portfolio approach, they showed resistance and even indifference towards their training with regard to building a robust theoretical background that could enable them both to gain deeper insight into their practices and manage more effectively the whole process. During workshops, teachers showed interest in practical applications but not in the theoretical background; they mostly wanted some readymade ideas. The problem of connecting theory with practice was bigger than it had initially been thought. However, their engagement with the action research methodology seemed to enhance their critical thinking and the reflective consideration of the problems that arose in every phase of the project allowed them to perceive the power and dynamic of combining theory and practice to boost their effectiveness and professional development. The role of the university partner was critical in this shift. She did not want to guide teachers into the “right” steps but to help them as a critical friend to realize the situation and discover their own true answers through a desire for change.

The action research process also helped teachers to realize the necessity to apply more authentic forms of evaluation along with surveys in the classroom. The descriptive and somehow static data provided by the surveys gave a picture of the situation in the classroom but failed to highlight the context so as to guide any reform attempt. Moreover, such processes seemed to provide little if any possibility of real interaction and communication among participants. Combining traditional with authentic forms of evaluation in the classroom was suggested as the best way to get an insight and understanding of the educational processes in order to further change them.

In the first part of the project, children were only the objects of the assessment. Data regarding the social cohesion among peers and children’s participation in the classroom activities reflected this passive role the children had in the educational process and the negative consequences of this role on their behaviors, interactions and relationships in the classroom, at least for some of them. By engaging in a more authentic process of evaluation, teachers seemed to enhance their democratic and child-centered practices by assigning new roles to the children concerning both their behavior and learning that increased their sense of responsibility and belonging in the classroom. Children, through discussions with the teacher and their peers, were able to develop personal criteria to evaluate their progress and became more motivated and engaged in classroom activities.

With regard to the purposes of the project, one of the important advantages of implementing evaluation processes in the kindergarten through the methodology of collaborative action research concerns the fact that it helped the teachers to walk a small distance on the long road towards changing

their preconceptions and negative attitudes towards evaluation as a controlling mechanism. Instead, they used the different evaluation and self-evaluation techniques as a tool for improvement and professional growth. Good assessment practice has been described by Gipps (1997) as ‘assessment that supports learning and reflection, including formative assessment’. The engagement of each participant in the project was a process of constructing a new kind of experience and learning, shifting from the individual reality to collective knowledge.

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