

Continuous professional development in Early Childhood Education and Care: following learning processes from an initiative in Denmark.

This paper emerges from an ongoing research project into a practice-based continuous professional development (CPD) initiative for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) practitioners in Denmark, engaging with the Abecedarian Approach (Ramey, Sparling, & Ramey, 2012) to adult-child interactions, entitled Educational Quality in Daycare (EQD) (B. Jensen & Walker, 2021). This extensive initiative emphasizes participation and reflection in and across social practices in CPD, rather than transfer of pre-determined content through stand-alone workshops. Occurring from 2020 – 2022, the initiative was planned prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. An ethnographic study of this initiative is undertaken to explore factors encouraging and inhibiting professional and organizational learning processes in CPD. The timing of the study also allows consideration of the impact of the pandemic on these learning processes and their facilitation.

Interest in CPD as a pathway to high quality ECEC has increased internationally in recent years (Waters & Payler, 2015), recognising potential for ECEC to have influence on children's immediate and future opportunities for development (Brunsek et al., 2020; Cunha & Heckman, 2007, p. 4). Extant literature in this area (Hamre, Pardee, & Mulcahy, 2017; P. Jensen & Rasmussen, 2018) shows a decisive element in ensuring quality in ECEC is a continuous and sustainable approach to professional development. Emphasis is increasingly on a constructivist notion (Cherrington & Thornton, 2013) of CPD, where point of departure in practitioners everyday practices, and facilitation of individual and collective reflection through participation in professional learning communities (PLCs) is prioritised, rather than modal, stand-alone training in predetermined content (Cherrington & Thornton, 2013; Gomez, Kagan, & Fox, 2015; Schachter, Gerde, & Hatton-Bowers, 2019; Waters & Payler, 2015).

The EQD initiative was informed by such principles, seeking to encourage practitioners inquiry into own practices, and facilitate cultures of reflection through systematised

participation in PLCs (B. Jensen & Walker, 2021). EQD specifically targets family day-care practitioners in 9 municipalities across Denmark, focusing on 0-2 year olds. The initiative progresses over four modules, comprising foundational elements from Abecedarian (Ramey et al., 2012) and focusing on strengthening participants' planning, evaluation, reflection and practice through knowledge sharing in PLC's. The CPD process gears towards increasing opportunities for participation and collaboration, by establishing three learning contexts in each municipality: workshops (involving researchers and educational managers) PLCs (comprising family day-carers) and the home (where individual practitioners work with children). All participants have equal access to EQD resources through a digital learning platform - including films, pamphlets and articles covering theoretical content, models, activities, practical suggestions and digital tools for planning, evaluation and reflection. Emphasis is placed on facilitation of participant-driven, work-oriented practice-based learning processes informed by theory and evidence-based practices of Abecedarian. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered conditions for the initiative, illustrated by the instantaneous movement of workshops and meetings in PLC's to online forums. The ethnographic study follows these contexts, practices and the practitioners populating them across online and physical settings, considering implications of continuous change, uncertainty and the applications of new technologies for organisational and professional learning processes.

Inspired by a "tool-kit" (Nicolini, 2013) approach to studying organisational and professional learning processes, a practice theory (Schatzki, 2002) framework focuses attention on how practices unfold and examines interconnections (or lack thereof) of practices across the three contexts. Social learning theories (Dreier, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991) train analysis on persons participating in these practices. This analytical framework allows consideration of the CPD initiative from an organisational learning perspective, emphasising processes of participation and interaction (Brandt & Elkjaer, 2012), exploring how disturbances and affordances manifest, including those presented by the pandemic.

Methods

The paper builds on preliminary findings from the multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), making it possible to focus on and investigate the practices taking place in the three learning contexts identified in the study, mapping these individually, but also tracing eventual connections and disconnections arising between them. This detailed ethnographic study follows three of the municipalities participating in the EQD initiative, following the manifestation of practice-based learning processes as they unfold within and across the three learning contexts established : workshops (involving researchers and educational managers) learning groups (comprising family day-carers) and the home (where individual practitioners work with children). Empirical material is produced through observation of EQD workshops and observations of meetings in municipal management meetings, where they coordinate their work with the EQD initiative. Furthermore, group meetings between selected PLCs of day-care practitioners are observed. Individual day-care practitioners from these groups are observed at work, over four intervals covering the duration of the CPD initiative. Interviews are conducted with managers and participants at the beginning and end of the initiative, enabling insight into their experiences of the learning dynamics which play out. This encompasses consideration of organization and leadership of learning processes, the influence of EQD resources and tools on interactions in situated work practices, as well as eventual changes in practitioner's understandings and professional identity. Furthermore, the nature of the study allows the impact of COVID-19 and the consequential (and changing) national restrictions on the conditions for learning processes to become observable. This fuels reflection on the methodological implications of following and studying these processes on the backdrop of a global pandemic, where it became necessary to shift between traditional and online ethnographic approaches in order to follow learning processes as they unfolded in continually changing circumstances.

Conclusions:

The ethnography studies how the endeavour of establishing a coordinated system of practice-based CPD influences adult-child interactions in situated work practices, and considers factors influencing learning processes. Preliminary insights suggest facilitation of cultures of reflection within PLCs plays an important role in supporting participants'

engagement and inquiry into work practices, informed by resources from the EQD initiative. Establishing a common frame of reference and shared language makes exploration of specific practices, such as reading and linguistic interaction with children, possible. Observations suggest this encourages experimentation with these practices in the workplace, re-energising routine tasks. Cultures of reflection orchestrated through the CPD initiative provide an opportunity for professional practices to be rejuvenated, with participants' understanding of their own role and capacity to support the educational development and well-being of children revitalised.

The role of the managers in supporting individual and collective reflections proves pivotal. Differing approaches to engaging with practitioner PLCs influences the character of reflective practices and interactions available, influencing the learning processes within them. The central role of the online platform offering resources and tools of the EQD initiative is found to present both affordances and disturbances for practitioner engagement. Likewise, the shift to online forums for meetings due to the impact of Covid-19 is significant. This emphasises the importance of the managerial role in facilitating meetings, and supporting practitioners' appropriation of EQD resources. Managerial PLC's supported through EQD workshops prove to be a forum for sharing challenges, approaches and insights from working with practitioners in different ways. The longevity of the CPD initiative (lasting two years) proves to be an important factor, providing opportunities for sustained engagement with resources. This is found to be the case in both PLCs and work practices, allowing gradual shifts in participants' understandings and their appropriation of resources offered through the initiative.

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