

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Teachers' Feedback from the Implementation of a Project Approach in Greek Kindergarten Classrooms

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Abstract:

The implementation of the "Flexible Zone" an innovative program in Greek kindergarten was a positive step in the effort of upgrading the early childhood education. The experiential learning through the implementation of project approach has gained ground in organizing the educational process in recent years. The systematic implementation of projects through the Flexible Zone, gave the opportunity to the kindergarten to become familiar with its basic principles. In our research there were indicative elements that support the view that participation in the innovative program positively influenced kindergarten teachers. They have been affected by their willingness to organize their educational process on the basis of projects and, on the other, to accept changes related to their role and the role of children in the learning process. Kindergarten teachers worked more cooperatively in organizing the educational process and in the relationship they developed with children. They also enabled children to take an active role in the learning process and to work together in the implementation of the program. Despite the lack of a large percentage of implementation of all teaching methods, educational types of activities and learning processes that characterize projects, significant changes are recorded compared to teachers who did not participate in the innovative program. It is suggested that teacher could continue to develop professionally through training programs and the participation in learning communities in order to stabilize these changes which would be associated with the implementation of an open program in kindergarten.

Keywords: *Project approach, innovative program, educational process, teaching practices, educational activities, learning processes*

1. Introduction

In the post-modern era pedagogical science, a new social framework seems to contribute to reducing social inequalities and school failure. More specifically, early childhood education is oriented towards child-centered approaches that focus on problem solving, experiential learning and child-initiated activities. In terms of educational practice, the role of teacher-child relationships change and new more participatory practices are introduced. The kindergarten teacher and the child emerge as protagonists in this process. Essentially, the education of the post-modern era outlines the profile of a "self-taught" educator, who will be the student's assistant and partner, not the regulator of the development. A "self-taught" educator, who has an active role in undertaking initiatives related to the organization of the educational process and the design of curricula.

Despite the theoretical focus of various curricula in autonomous and experiential learning, its pedagogical application remains at the level of declarations and does not find ground in everyday teaching because it is misunderstood or because teachers lack the appropriate readiness (Raths, 2001). Teachers hamper autonomous learning because they tend to regulate almost directly and exclusively the learners' learning pathways as they have learned to function in the spirit of behaviorism and to expect immediate results in their interventions (Simons, 1992). Teachers are not easily convinced of the effectiveness of processes based on dialectical constructivism, since they are used to operating in a seemingly immediate and effective process that relies more on stimulus and reaction, on the transmission of the right and less on the reflection, on the production and creative synthesis (Kossivakis, 2003). In this context teachers are invited to participate in the implementation of innovative curricula such as those related to the "project approach". From the beginning of the 20th century the proposal for a project approach was formulated by Dewey (1938) and Kilpatrick (1919), who as representatives of pragmatism, were supporters of the active action of the child in the learning process. A second reading of these views, combined with new epistemological approaches, leads to an attempt to re-apply the project method, with very positive results for education (Frey, 1998). The term project, as used in the phrase "project approach", has a certain meaning: "A project is an in-depth exploration of an issue that deserves to learn more. Research is usually conducted by a small group of children in a class, sometimes from the whole class and sometimes from a single child. The key point of a project is that it is an attempt to conduct research that deliberately focuses on finding answers to questions about a subject that is set either by children or the teacher or by the teacher in cooperation with children" (Katz, 1994, 1).

Since the academic year 2001-2002, an innovative program called "Flexible Zone" has been implemented in the Greek kindergartens and the "projects" has been its basic methodological approach. The prevalence of the project approach, as the main feature of the curriculum in the Greek Kindergarten, would result in a series of reclassifications and changes. The main question of our concern is: *"The organization of the educational process, according to the project approach, can dictate certain forms of behavior and teaching practices, so as to shape the way a kindergarten teacher works in the classroom?"*

2. Theoretical Framework

The project approach has been linked to Open Curricula and to Vygotsky's position in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is known for cooperative learning and occurs in small groups of peers with different competencies. ZPD can be applied to the project approach, where children's work is mainly in groups. The biggest changes, when implementing the project approach, are recorded in the organization of the *educational process*, the *role of the teacher* and the *child*. According to Harris & Katz (2002), the interest of children is the main criterion for selecting the topics that the kindergarten teacher and the children discuss, according to the purposes of the curriculum. The goals in the project approach are personal or collective and they put them at the beginning and during the research process. The duration of learning experiences is undetermined, depending on the project's progress and children's interest, which usually lasts from a few days to several weeks, sometimes months (Dejong, 1999). Their work is collective and children have the opportunity to participate in the determination of the activities that emerge, which are authentic and provocative, they are made in the context of the research, they make sense for the children themselves and they are not made for a "teaching purpose".

Each step is decided as the kindergarten teacher observes the children's research and tries to bring their knowledge to the forefront with the help of various methods (Sloane, 2004). Such methods are the use of catalogs, which are graphical representations of the relationships that exist between the children's comments or their questions, the play, the painting and constructions, where children's knowledge and representations can be captured and represented. The kindergarten teacher then organizes the projects so that children acquire the knowledge by finding answers to questions or research. Emphasis is placed on the multiple perspectives of solving a problem so that every perspective can contribute to the learning of all children, according to their needs, their interest or their learning style and to highlight their inclinations and talents (Helm & Katz, 2001). Activities such as representations (painting, writing, creating various constructions with building blocks) are challenging to create a comprehensive understanding of a concept and are repeated to become apparent. Mostly, children and not just the kindergarten teacher bring in the classroom aids or gather materials from their visits outside the school space. In the implementation of the projects, the learning environment is widened. Kindergarten teacher, children, parents, visitors and others interested in the wider community work together to contribute to the quality of the learning environment.

The kindergarten teacher is a co-researcher, a collaborator, an assistant, a facilitator, a mentor on technical issues, and facilitates the learning process without dominance. Ensures an attractive, safe and rich in stimulus environment. When planning takes into account the possible directions, the project can get. His/her interventions take care to be few, without overturning what children do, encouraging them to focus and expand their ideas. The kindergarten teacher uses the children's mistakes to reach out to knowledge. He/she helps cognitive development of children with open questions about what they would like to learn, what questions they could ask the experts, what would be useful to bring to the classroom to study it and processes it (Katz & Chard, 2000). Together with the children, they search for answers to their questions, urge them to find good ideas and remain open to the debate. He/she recapitulates, helps children understand that their ideas are important and records them. Also, he/she helps them to remember what they said and come back with new ideas (Cadwell, 1997, 70-71). Finally, he/she tries to improve the didactical practices, realizing that he/she is constantly learning.

Brainstorming is an appropriate method for announcing the first ideas and opinions of children on the occasion of the announcement of a topic. The first impressions are recorded and create a first list of subjects that may be related to the subject and will later be investigated (Kostaridou-Euclidi, 1997). The method of investigation is based on the motivation psychology, which finds that exploratory approaches trigger students' internal motivation for learning. Also, constructive learning theories emphasize the active role of the learner in the learning process. Through the exploratory approaches, children's active engagement contributes to the development of attitudes and skills that self-regulated learning requires (Matzangouras, 2003).

The project approach is the compact framework and medium that causes children to use multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1991), to find talents and weaknesses, to develop as a whole and to learn continually. The relevant information, collected and recorded, compiles the children's image and is useful to kindergarten teachers and parents to make decisions about educational interventions (Gardner, 1991). The assessment in the project approach is continuous as well as the learning process and is based on the continuous recording of learning. By recording all phases, knowledge, decisions, reviews and initiatives of the children, the teacher collects reliable material for assessing the development of each child (Katz, 1993). The assessment of the work plan focuses mainly on children's interest, participation, collaboration, creation and communication.

Despite the methodological advantages of the "project approach", a wide-ranging discussion is needed with all the factors who want and can have an opinion on their application to the Kindergarten. Of course, one of these factors is the kindergarten teacher, because it is not possible to achieve any reforming endeavor in education without the conscious participation of his educational action. For Dewey, the "educated" teacher is the one who possesses three traits, such as the breadth of spirit, responsibility and dedication, which combines them with the ability to conduct research, that is, the ability to observe, analyze and evaluate (Dewey, 1933). Teachers who think, in Dewey's opinion, are evaluating their practice by asking themselves broader and more meaningful questions like: "Are the results good, for whom and in what sense?" And not just questions like: Did I achieve my goals? "

Reflection is an internal process, during which teacher's personal and professional knowledge arises. It is a process and a method together, which feeds the act with a *raison d'être*. Reflection is not static, it involves action, it is a vehicle that causes changes in behavior and professional practices, it is an instrument that enhances the capacity for an intuitive approach to situations and at the same time reduces the chances of adopting inappropriate actions (Knowles 1993, p. 83).

2.1. Study Purpose

The current study is part of a larger research that included the investigation through questionnaires the kindergarten teachers' opinions about the way the project approach could be implemented in the kindergarten. The study presented here examines the organization of the educational process by kindergarten teachers participating in the innovative program of the "Flexible Zone" (F.Z.) where the "projects" has been its basic methodological approach, compared to the educational process organized by teachers who did not participate in the innovative program (nF.Z.).

3. Methodology

This section describes the methods and procedures of examining the influence of the kindergarten teachers' participation in the "Flexible Zone" an innovative programme, where the "projects" has been its basic methodological approach. We adopted the application of a teaching observation protocol based on an official protocol formulated by the Ministry of Education.

3.1. Participants

This survey was conducted during the 2003-2004 academic year and the participants were fourteen ($n=17$) kindergarten teachers, seven (7) constituted the experimental group (F.Z.) and seven (7) the control group (nF.Z.). In the present study, we refer to the experimental group as a sample ($n=7$) who participate in the innovative program. They are all female and they work in fourteen (14) public kindergartens located in the urban region of the second populated city of Greece. The ethnicity of the teachers is Caucasian. The sample is voluntary and the participants' years of experience ranged for the experimental group from 0-10 years 1(14,28%), 11-20 years 1(14,28%), 21-30 years 4(57, 14%) and 21-30 years (14,28%). All the teachers had a Bachelor degree.

3.2. Instrument-Measure

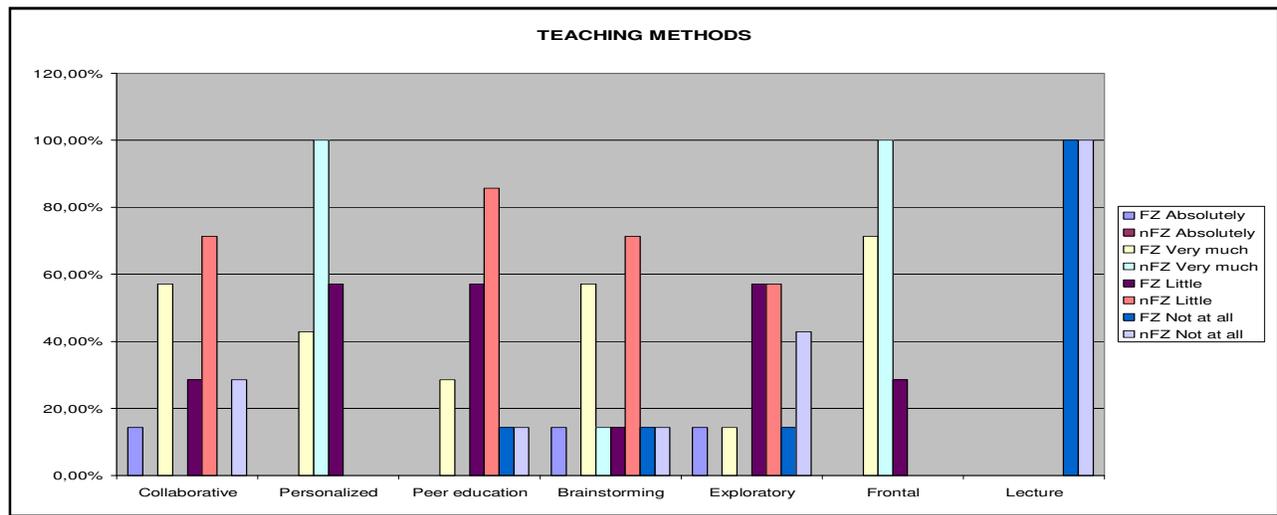
The observation protocol included eight areas of observation, which concerned in particular the organization of the educational process (4 items), the time of implementation of the activities (3 items), the space (8 items), the social organization of the class (5 items), the teaching methods (7 items), the activities (11 items), the objectives of the activities (5 items) and the teaching/learning processes (18 items).

3.3. Data Sources and analysis

Three components of the educational process were evaluated: (a) the teaching methods (b) the type of the educational activities, (c) the teaching / learning processes developed in kindergartens by the teachers. For the statistical analysis of the results absolute and relative frequencies (%) were employed and the Excel program was used.

4. Results

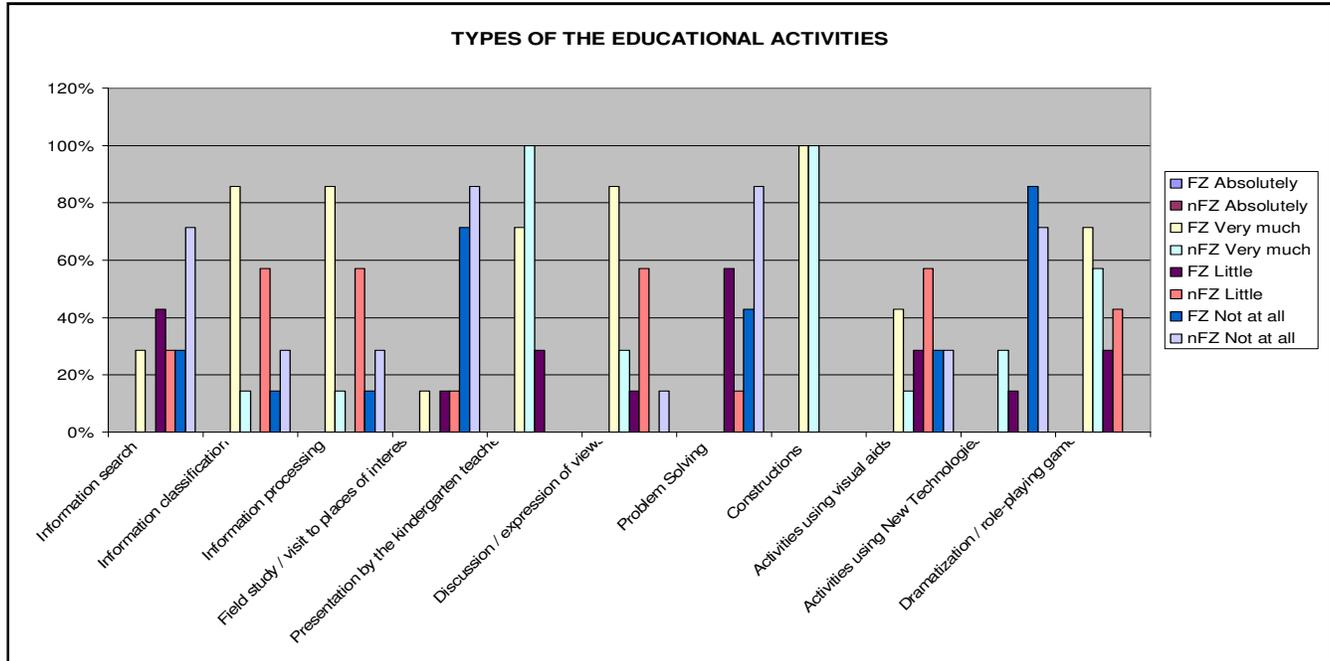
Regarding the *teaching methods* developed by the kindergarten teachers of the two groups there is a remarkable difference in the frequency of application of the methods that characterize a teaching as "flexible". In the kindergartens of F.Z. there was a lower percentage of "frontal" teaching (71.42%) compared to the kindergartens of the n.F.Z. (100%). The "frontal" rate is still high for F.Z. kindergartens, but there are also high percentages in the "cooperative" (57.14%) and "brainstorming" (57.14%), which are applied "very much". The following are the "peer-learning", "personalized" and "exploratory", which are applied "little" with the same percentage (57,14%). On the contrary, in the kindergartens of n.F.Z., the application of "frontal" (100%) and "personalized" (100%) is observed "very", while methods such as "cooperative", "brainstorming", "peer education" and "exploratory" are applied "little". The lecture is not applied at all by both groups.



*F.Z.: kindergarten teachers participating innovative program
 nF.Z.: kindergarten teachers non-participating innovative program

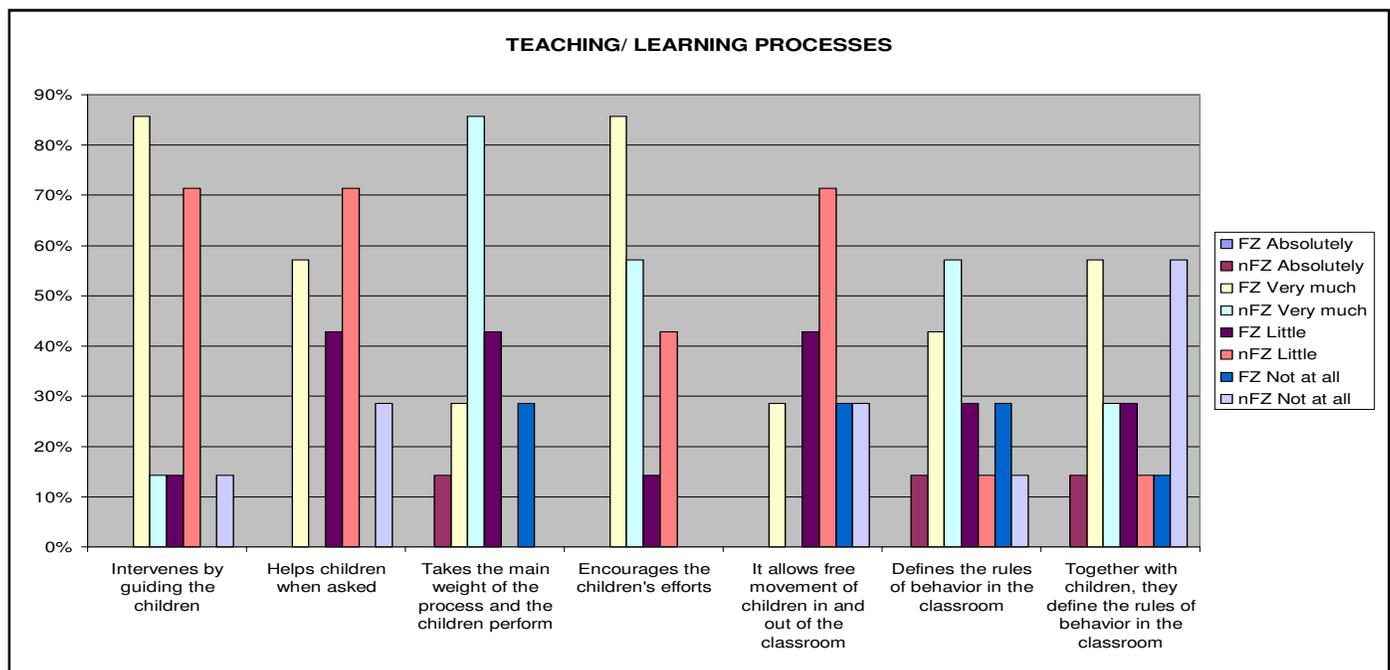
Figure 1: The frequency of teaching methods implementation

Differentiation is also observed between the two groups about the types of the educational activities being developed. More than 70% of the activities have been observed for the kindergartens of F.Z. to be the types of "constructions" (100%), "information classification" (85.71%), "information processing" (85.71%), "discussion/expression of views" (85.71%). A high percentage was also observed for the "presentation by the Kindergarten teacher" (71,42%) and the "dramatization" (71,42%). On the contrary, for the kindergartens of the nF.Z. group there was a high rate for "presentation by the kindergarten teacher" (100%) and "construction" (100%). There appears to be a "little" use of "information classification", "information processing", "debate / expression of views" and "activities using New Technologies" with the same percentage (57.14%). It is characteristic for both groups that "problem solving" was not "at all" observed at high rates (F.Z. 42.85% and nF.Z. 85.71%).



*F.Z.: kindergarten teachers participating innovative program
 nF.Z.: kindergarten teachers non-participating innovative program

Figure 2: The frequency of educational activities implementation



*F.Z.: kindergarten teachers participating innovative program

nF.Z.: kindergarten teachers non-participating innovative program

Figure 3: The frequency of teaching/learning processes implementation

As regards the *teaching/learning processes* developed by the kindergarten teachers, it was observed in the kindergartens of the F.Z. group the teachers "very much" to "intervene by guiding the children" (85.71%), to "encourage the efforts of children" (85.71%), to "help children when asked" (57.14%) and "together with the children, to define the rules of behavior in the classroom" (57.14%). Also, the kindergarten teachers of the F.Z. group appear "little" to "take the main weight of the process and the children perform" (28.57%). On the contrary, the kindergarten teachers of nF.Z. group appear "very much", to "take the main weight of the process and the children perform" (85.71%), to "encourage the children's efforts" (57.14%), to "define the rules classroom behavior" (57.14%) and "little" to "help children when asked" (71.42%) and to "allow the free movement of children in and out of the classroom" (71.42%).

5. Discussion

In terms of methods, the kindergarten teachers of F.Z. group, applied together with collaborative, brainstorming, personalized, peer education and frontal - to a much smaller percentage than others - teaching methods, giving their teaching flexibility. Also, the types of educational activities they carry out such as "constructions", "information classification", "information processing", "debate/expression of views" and "dramatization" characterize teaching with more flexible elements than these of the nF.Z. group, which presents teacher centered activities, such as "presentation by the kindergarten teacher" at a high rate.

However, the absence of activities, such as the "problem solving" typical of the project approach, states that the impact of the implementation of the innovative program of the "Flexible Zone" is not decisive for the F.Z. group. Regarding the teaching/learning processes observed, the comparison between the two groups reveals that the group of F.Z. presents teaching/learning processes where the role of the teacher is more of a mediator and less of a facilitator, because they give their help to children when asked, encourage their efforts and define with them classroom rules.

The above findings, related to the flexibility of kindergarten teachers, are also in line with the research results (Good & Brophy, 1986), who argue that in the learning process, "flexible" teachers are more effective because they approach teaching in many different ways and at the same time they have enthusiasm, sense of duty and clear orientation. In the nF.Z. group, although fragmented elements of flexibility are presented, such as the free movement of children in and out of the classroom and the positive climate in the classroom, the kindergarten teachers take the main weight of the process and the children perform.

The appearance of the above individual domains can be attributed to many factors. Research results support the view that teachers' efforts at the level of initiative development are also accompanied by problems. Qualitative surveys (Compe-Buchen, 1996) integrate to the main forms of encumbrance on teachers' work, among others the problems arising from the need to organize learning processes and develop initiatives, while not being able to intervene effectively because of the limited design and organization capabilities provided by the school's facilities and logistical infrastructure.

Findings from other studies (Rauschenberger, 1999, Constantin, 2001, Bruzos, 1995) showed that some teachers attempt to dare implement new teaching practices while the majority remain in traditional practices. However, those who wish to provide students with more freedom on a permanent basis - regardless of the results - seem to be in an ascending trend.

In conclusion, significant changes have been noticed in the teaching methods, types of educational activities, and the learning processes developed by the F.Z. group from their participation in the innovative program. An important factor in the significant but not far-reaching change is considered to be the lack of educational training of the kindergarten teachers in the context of professional development. The findings of this study highlight the importance of continuing professional development (CPD) in order the kindergarten teachers to incorporate the benefits of an innovative approach. Professional development which strongly fosters professional learning, is an important factor that actively encourages teachers to take all necessary steps to enhance their knowledge and change their views and teaching practices in order to become more efficient in teaching (Day & Sachs, 2004).

6. Conclusion

From the theoretical development of our subject, it is concluded that the post-modern era pedagogical science developed a sensor for the value of the diversity of the children and especially at the level of didactic act brought a change in teacher-student relationship. The importance of autonomous learning, the role of the communication framework in education, the role of interpersonal relationships and interactions developed between the student and the teacher, among pupils as well as between pupils and extra-curricular factors (family, social groups) are now acknowledged, with a direct impact on the role of the teacher in an open kindergarten curricula and innovative program such as the "Flexible Zone", where the "projects" have been its basic methodological approach. Essentially, it is outlined the profile of a "self-taught" teacher who has an active role in introducing initiatives for the organization of the educational process and the design of the curricula, as well as a mediating role in the child's learning cycle, in a role of the assistant and partner and not the regulator of its development.

This dual function of the teacher is now at the heart of every reform effort in education. The teacher is called upon to understand the expectations and the objectives of each reform measure in modern educational reality, to manage this "self-reliance", which in theory is provided to him, to develop initiatives and organize learning processes and to modify his didactic behavior. It should be noted that it should have the characteristics of a professional teacher, which he does not seem to possess, and in addition, because of the conditions prevailing in the educational reality, he is more obliged to function more as a processor of a pre-fabricated didactic act and less as an organizer of learning situations in the spirit of new learning examples. It is suggested that teachers should participate in learning communities in order to be able to relate theory to experience and to reflect their teaching practices (Smith & Sutherland, 2003).

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