



Full length article

Learning from each other: The design and implementation of a cross-cultural research and professional development model in Italian and U.S. toddler classrooms



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HIGHLIGHTS

- A description of a multi-modal, participatory cross-cultural research design.
- Methods ensure decreased ethnocentricity and research equivalency.
- Participatory context repositions teachers from the researched to researchers.
- Video micro-analyses and recursive observations challenged teachers' taken-for-granted beliefs.
- The design and professional development model provide a new context for teacher education.

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ABSTRACT

A cross-cultural PD model for early childhood teachers in Italy and the U.S. included a cross-national exchange amongst two teacher communities within which teachers viewed practice in another context and engaged in dialogue about their own and others' practices. Teachers utilized multiple modes of encountering a “day in the life” video via video cues, micro-analyses, and recursive observations. Qualitative methods informed by sociocultural and expansive learning theories countered ethnocentric tendencies, ensured equivalency, and trustworthiness of data. Exchanges across sites revealed ways the process prompted critical inquiry and reflexive discourse and challenged teachers' taken-for-granted assumptions about teacher-child proximity, children's competencies, and autonomy.

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1. Introduction

The over-arching aim of this study is to describe the design and implementation of a cross-cultural professional development model in early childhood in-service teacher education in Italy and the U. S. The professional development of in-service teachers has been shown to have a significant impact on the quality of young

children's early care and education experiences, locally and internationally (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Craig & Orland-Barak, 2014; Oberhuemer, Schreyer, & Neuman, 2010; OECD, 2012; Zaslou, Tout, Halle, Whittaker, & Lavelle, 2010). Yet on the international level, limited models of co-designed, cross-cultural, situated professional development initiatives exist because they are difficult to negotiate and plan, take time to implement, and require resources beyond the scope of most programs. Rather, what has become more common are teacher study tours and field experiences in which teachers observe teaching practices and teaching environments in other cultures, most notably in the innovative and inspiring infant-toddler and preschool centers in Reggio Emilia,

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Italy (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1997).

While traveling across cultures for short, intensive professional development trips can be deeply informative, we wondered what would happen if teachers participated in a prolonged study of their own practice in relation to that of teachers from another culture, with an opportunity to dialogue across cultures and share perspectives. From this stance “processes of critique and innovation are generally more constructive when multiple perspectives are represented” (New, 2005). We were curious to see what would happen if teachers from two cross-national sites viewed a video sampling of each others' practices and then had the opportunity to engage in dialogue about what they noticed, or what questions arose.

The creation of the study design and professional development model involved teachers and researchers from two university lab-infant-schools; one in central northern Italy and one in the southeastern U.S. Often, contemporary cross-cultural researchers face the dilemma of combating ethnocentric research designs in which a study in one culture is simply replicated in a second culture (Adler, 1996). Addressing this challenge requires a “decentered approach” (He & van de Vijver, 2012) in which scholars from different countries work collaboratively to develop the conceptual model and research instruments, characterized by “discussion, dissension and triangulation” (Holzmüller, Singh, & Nijssen, 2002).

The three-year study began in 2009 with exchanges and negotiations built upon shared perspectives of researchers in both sites that included: (a) the co-creation of an equivalent, situated professional development model, (b) the study of the impact of the role of multi-modal, multi-vocal methods on the critical reflective practice of infant-toddler teachers, (c), and the incorporation of a comparative – contrasting analysis framework (Tobin, Mantovani, & Bové, 2010) in which an effort to consider similarities and differences – across cultural settings - “together” without pretending to eliminate our differences was paramount.

The first section of this article includes the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings that contributed to the conceptual framework for the study. In the next section we describe the set of conditions that created a situated professional development model intended to provide opportunities for collaborative inquiry, critical reflective practice, and interpretation as part of co-constructing new understandings about classroom practice. Further, it was anticipated that these conditions of viewing video from abroad, reflecting, sharing emerging insights and questions, both cross-culturally and locally, would position teachers to “re-meet their pedagogical truths” (Mac Naughton, 2005). The article concludes with implications for future research and practice and appeals for the design and implementation of more equivalent, situated, cross-cultural professional development opportunities.

2. Theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings

In this project, the creation of activities for making teacher practices visible for cross-cultural viewing and interpretation was grounded primarily in the key tenets of social constructivist theory (Rogoff, 1990, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978) and expansive learning theory (Engeström, 1987). From a social constructivist orientation, learning occurs during social activity through which participation in joint activities mediate shared understandings or intersubjectivity. Shared understandings are co-constructed, communicated and mediated with others through the use of language, tools (computers, cameras) and materials (video recordings, transcriptions of verbal exchanges). In these activities, materials contribute to an “intra-active relationship” among the teachers and “the material environment: things, artefacts, spaces and places” (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 10), broadening the scope and attention beyond

a focus on individual thoughts and interpersonal exchanges. Social construction of knowledge is located within “persons-acting, partly in contexts, but most strongly in their relations” (Lave, 1989, p. 20) as they create collective zones of proximal development. Thus, meanings are socially constructed and consequently fluid with no one truth, no single way of viewing but rather generative and transitory. Furthermore, one's gaze moves from a myopic view to one that is multi-lensed and layered with interpretation (Goldman-Segall, 1998).

The process of meaning making with others is distributed across minds, materials and social contexts. When teachers from different cultures are brought together to view and discuss video recordings of classroom practice, for example, their role is one of apprentice of one another's practice, prompting them to regard the meanings they each assign to their own teaching. This self-other orientation can reposition one from listening/viewing “as usual” toward “a shift away from will, intentionality, and repetition, toward *receptiveness* to the not-yet-known (of self and other)” (Davies, 2014, p. 36). These relationships are formed around an exploration from which new knowledge, new meanings, and new activities develop. Furthermore, as Davies further notes, “The fundamental communication behaviors here would be those of continual questions and interpretive listening ... that seeks mutual and reciprocal production of “co-constructing new understandings rather than “collaps [ing] one's perspective into that of the other” (p. 252). As differences arise and are scrutinized, challenges are made to conventional practice that represent “implicit forms of affiliating with a culture ... often go[ing] beyond what we ‘know’ in an explicit form” (Bruner, 1996, p. 153).

Expansive learning theory, according to Engeström and Sannino (2010), “puts the primacy on communities as learners, on transformation and creation of culture” (p. 2). From this perspective, learning is not transmitted but rather characterized by “exchange and hybridization between different cultural contexts and standards of competence” (p. 2). Participants' learning is “formative not linear” (p. 15) expanding to include whatever is needed. There is a weaving together of skill, knowledge and the disposition to engage in critical reflection, problem-posing, discernment and the generation of new ideas and ultimately agency.

What characterizes such learning spaces in which the learner is repositioned to engage in unscripted exploration, meaning making, and re-encountering taken-for-granted assumptions? In what ways do such settings create a “need to know, to question, and to discern seminal information for systematic and deliberate study” (Moran, 2009, p. 421; Tegano & Moran, 2005)? The tool of pedagogical documentation, first brought to the attention of the international early childhood field by the pedagogues of the Reggio Emilia Approach, explicitly aims to make visible teacher practices that are “subject to research, dialogue, reflection and interpretation (meaning making)” (Moss & Dahlberg, cited in Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. xiii).

The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Education (REA) has evolved for over 50 years, lead for most of this time by Loris Malaguzzi, and started by mothers, municipal leaders and teachers following World War II. Today, the more than 35 Reggio preschools and infant-toddler centers programs are based on an image of children as competent and powerful learners—not isolated and needy, who draw upon more than “one hundred languages” to express and create knowledge in relation to adults and children across the contexts of schools, families and communities (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993, 1997). Currently, Reggio centers are supported, in part, by the municipal government and provide “educational experiences that consists of reflection, practice and further careful reflection” by educators (Gandini, 2004, p. 15). This child-centered approach emphasizes the rights of young children

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