

Improving Teachers Reflective Practices through Coaching during Professional Development Training in Inclusive Education and Autism – A Case Study in Italy

My academic interests have focused on how support for teachers working with students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) might be reviewed and improved on. Therefore, I have sought possible solutions to potentially increase the effectiveness of ASD-training provided to teachers during their process of professional development. In this study I explored how one teacher perceived and experienced coaching as an alternative training model in autism. At the same time, I aimed to create conditions where the participant would become a reflective practitioner. This provided useful indications of how theoretical learning might be generalised/transferred into teachers practical context.

I developed a model of teacher support comprised of two phases. The first phase was verbal-based training and was composed of traditional methods of teaching. The second phase was performance-based (coaching model). In this case, I created conditions where theories referred to during the verbal-based phase of training were shown in a practical manner through demonstrations in classrooms. Here, I functioned as a model for the teacher during classroom activities, with the hope that she would acquire expertise through a process of experiential learning and individualised support. Through this approach, the learning process was facilitated by the combination of theory and practice. This was also supported by the implementation of a Reflective Model (RM) that I have created (which was also used for data collection). The teacher was asked to complete it in order to structure and facilitate the process of reflection. The RM would examine on the practice of reflection of the participant. The aspiration here was that the participant would develop her own capacity for reflection in action, while acting as autonomously as possible within her own context. Moreover, it supported the participant while undergoing the process of learning.

The analysis of data shows an improvement of teacher understanding of the characteristics of autism as well as an increase in confidence in her own abilities. She perceived a sense of benefit, relief, greater responsibility and awareness as the learning process developed. She stated that the specific strategies and practices as shown during coaching were useful for her professional development. Particularly, observing how I worked during coaching was a good modelling strategy for her learning process. The teacher saw the combination of coaching and RM as a trigger to change her perspectives, leading to more inclusive approaches to education. She claimed that my support led to a personal introspective change.

I believe that using coaching for teacher development might have potential implications for future investigation into professionals' collaboration in autism. In particular, the sensitivity of the approach to local contextual frameworks makes it potentially effective in working in different cultural settings. It was interesting to analyse if this was more effective than just bringing an outside 'expert' for a short period training in ASD. Further, in this study it was believed that the concept of Best Practice cannot be taken for granted, but should be contextually appropriate. It dealt with the potential limitations of traditional approaches to teacher development and autism. As a result of this, rethinking the practice of professional cooperation would support possibilities of creating conditions where teachers working in a particular context would not feel overly-dependent on the presence of external advisers.