



THE EDUCATIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A CRITICAL REFLECTION TOOL TOWARDS PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRE-SERVICE EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS

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Abstract:

An overview of the research area reveals the importance of using biographical methods at a higher education level. However, in Greece, there is a lack of systematic research on such applications. This paper presents a study based on the biographical approach and specifically on the method of educational autobiography (EAB). More specifically, it presents an implementation of educational autobiography in the context of the academic education of students from a Department of Early Years Learning and Care. The purpose was to investigate the use of the specific method (EAB) as an innovative academic tool towards personal growth and professional development of the students in terms of promoting critical reflection and transformative processes about themselves and their role as Early Years Practitioners. The sample of participants consisted of 87 4th-year students attending an experiential laboratory course at an Academic Department of Early Years Learning and Care in Greece. The study followed a mixed method approach. The closed-ended questions were analyzed quantitatively while the Educational Autobiography texts were analyzed thematically. The findings showed that all students engaged in reflection on past experiences. Most of them found EAB an interesting, self-enrichment process, leading to a better appreciation of experiences in shaping themselves and their role/practice as Early Years Practitioners.

Keywords: educational autobiography, pre-service early years practitioners, critical reflection, personal growth, professional development

1. Introduction

Various studies in the field of Higher Education have revealed the potential of the academic context in terms of reflective development and transformative learning,

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especially for pre- and in-service pedagogues and teachers (Caruana, Woodrow & Pérez, 2015; Charissi, 2017; Liodaki & Karalis, 2013; Raikou, & Karalis, 2016; Raikou, Karalis, & Ravanis, 2017). University is acknowledged as an educational context with specific characteristics as far as its targeting and participants are concerned, namely, students and teachers. Consequently, university pedagogy has been identified as a special area of research in the field of Educational Sciences (Raikou, 2019).

The exploitation of biographical methods in the fields of Higher and Adult Education may serve as a creative context of interpretation with transformative learning dynamics (Dominicé, 2000; Koulaouzides, 2013, 2017; Magos, 2013; Monteagudo 2014; Pazoni-Kalli, 2012). This kind of learning refers to the critical re-evaluation of the meaning of our experience beyond stereotypic and dysfunctional assumptions and their creative restructuring in the light of new and enriched individual and collective experiences (Mezirow, 2000).

The specific paper is based on an implementation of Educational Autobiography (EAB) as a reflective approach to the development of pre-service early years teachers and towards their optimal preparation for the complex role they are called to play. It also aims to contribute to a sensitive and decisive field defined by the biographical approach, an emerging research methodology in its creative interaction with adult learning processes and transformative learning. Our interest in this study was mainly focused on the extent to which, and the ways in which preschool teachers' involvement with EAB during their studies may contribute to the development of critical reflection and transformative processes about themselves and their role as Early Years Practitioners.

1.1 The Research Interest

Previous theory and research associate autobiography with personal development and inquiry (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Ware, 1979). Educational auto/biography (EAB), in particular, is associated with the work of Pierre Dominicé, due to his extended use of educational biography with academic students from various scientific fields such as psychology and educational sciences (Dominicé, 2000). In addition, various studies have explored the use of life histories, auto/biographies and narrative tools in formal and informal adult educational contexts contributing to our knowledge with specific evidence and guidelines (Dominicé, 2012; Monteagudo 2014, 2017).

Life history research is considered as a narrative constructed field which may provide information on how issues such as assumptions, values and learning processes generally affect education and school (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Life stories as a form of educational research can be used for the benefit of teachers' personal and professional development by making space for self-reflection and self-awareness, for learning about school life issues, for linking theory with experience and also due to their therapeutic nature in times of crisis (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). In the field of university education, there are also research projects which indicate narratives' contribution to the transformation of students' perceptions and attitudes during academic courses and seminars (Mezirow 2000; Van Boeschoten 2008).

In Greece, there is a lack of systematic research concerning such applications during the teaching process at an academic level. An example of a similar study was conducted at a Preschool Education University Department in Thessaly. It was focused on issues of handling ethnic and cultural otherness by exploring the use of oral and written narratives as a starting point towards critical reflection and transformative learning in the perceptions of pre-service kindergarten teachers (Magos, 2013). Methodologically, it was mainly based on the study, analysis and reflection on the written narratives of others or face-to-face life narratives from people invited during an experiential workshop about otherness and narrative, encouraging students to present personal experiences and reflections about diversity issues (Magos, 2013).

The overview of the research area shows that there is space for further implementations of biographical methods in general and educational autobiography in particular, at a higher education level, in order to investigate their effects on students' learning and growth. The present study was inspired by the work of Pierre Dominicé, who developed the idea of using educational biographies with groups of adult students at the University of Geneva (Dominicé, 2012) and a long-term (at least 15 years old) implementation conducted by José González Monteagudo at the University of Seville within the context of "Anthropology of Education" course since 2002.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Contribution of Biographical Approaches

Life history and life writing research uses oral stories, personal narrative, autobiography or biography and life evidence, as a main source of study which imprints the relationship between the individual and society, the present and past, the private and public. It also constitutes a field where disciplines such as History, Sociology, Anthropology, Philosophy, Cultural Studies and Psychology meet (Savvakis, 2012). Lately, the biographical approach has been increasingly used for a deeper understanding of the inter-subjective reality in the context of historical-cultural changes, but also for the needs of education, training and policy making (Wengraf, Chamberlayne & Bornat, 2002).

Biography was originally developed as a special approach in the fields of sociology and psychology (Tsiolis, 2006; Pantazis, 2004). Theoretical discussion of biography, in terms of biographical research in the German-speaking tradition of social sciences since the late 1980s, highlights new ways of exploring and understanding lifelong learning through the lens of the biographical approach (Tsiolis, 2012). As Tsiolis points out, *"biography is not a 'natural' dimension that accompanies every single individual life, not just research material[...]. Biography is a social construct involving important biosocial and social functions in late (second) modernity societies"* (Tsiolis, 2012, p. 12).

In the field of education and adult education, biography or life stories are considered as a creative context of interpretation based on our experiences due to the fact that *"learning, decisions and desires within an educational environment are observed and perceived as processes that individuals adopt as part of their own story"* (Pazioni-Kalli, 2009, p.

166). Within this framework, it seems particularly useful to understand the way in which one constructs his or her personal biography, forms his/her identity and defines the social place:

So, biography is, according to these beliefs, the self-referential result of cognitive and reflective processes of consciousness, ensuring that experiences are internally organized and consistently linked to a biographical structure.[...] The biographical structure, which is circularly composed and reproduced, can be transformed when 'critical' life events occur which cannot be coded on the basis of its crystallized internal logic. Then the biographical transformation and the biographical work are required. (Tsiolis, 2012, p. 15)

Alheit uses the term "Biographicity", by which he refers to the "hidden potential of the biographical learning process" (Alheit & Dausien, 2000, p. 401). According to Illeris (2007), biographicity is an important concept that is closely and directly related with, while at the same time covers, reflection and personal development. Reflection refers to a deeper understanding of how lived experience is reflected in personal identity and the ability of the individual to recognize the limitations of the socio-cultural context, enabling him/her to decide for himself or herself and in relation to social conditions. The concept of biographicity refers precisely to the ability of adults to make use of their biographical experience in a way that enables them to shape their own lives (Illeris, 2007).

Qualitative biographical method constitutes an interpretative paradigm of understanding adult learning processes and turns the research interest from the subjects to the subject (Koulaouzides, 2012). As Dominicé highlights: "*Throughout their lives, adults accumulate many personal references that characterize how they learn*" (2012, p. 33). The biographical analysis of their own learning processes and experiences can become a deeper source of understanding and development, which includes oneself and others (Dominicé, 2012; Tsiolis, 2012). Understanding our biography involves a learning and transformative potential at an individual and collective level. In particular, constructing and jointly analyzing/interpreting a teacher's educational biography may contribute to the critical reflection of assumptions which make up his frame of reference and shape his perception of her/himself and her/his professional identity (Koulaouzides, 2013, 2017).

Auto/biographical approach may help in promoting one's self-awareness and a deeper understanding of the other (Pazioni-Kalli, 2012). In relation with the teaching profession, it may be a necessary strategy of teachers' personal growth and professional development (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Some of the questions that could be addressed within this kind of research could be the following: why do we choose a particular profession?, Why do we operate in one way or another within our role?, What is it that shapes our personal philosophy and influences our choices, behaviors, and practices?, What makes a teacher a lifelong learner and capable of practicing properly his profession?

2.2 Educational Autobiography

Educational autobiography (EAB) is a personal story that includes first-person narration, reflection, and interpretation of the experiences that influenced one's education,

development, and career choices. As an instrument of training and research it integrates cognitive and affective dimensions of learning and may contribute to self-knowledge, reflexivity and personal development (Monteagudo, 2017). Its application to groups of students is intended to enhance self-awareness, a fuller understanding of life conditions, mutual understanding and the ability to play an active role in shaping our lives despite social constraints. Although not psychotherapeutic in nature, it can also operate therapeutically (Monteagudo, 2014). This effect is due to a revision of the past through the present and the co-construction of a more complete and coherent conception of our personal history (Monteagudo, 2017).

The autobiographical method engages various sources of empirical material collection such as life stories, oral histories, diaries, videos, photographs, official and personal documents. It is based on the reconstruction of life stories through the analysis of empirical sources and their critical reframing in combination with each other and with the wider socio-economic and cultural context where those who are being studied live (Abrahão, 2012).

Memory is the “key-feature”, which forms the basis not only for the narrative but also for the researcher in order to restructure the elements of analysis that will lead to a deeper understanding. Memory is “*an active meaning making process*” (Abrahão, 2012, p. 30). Franzosa (1992) points out that one’s own story writing undoubtedly engages him in a critical process in his attempt to isolate important persons, events and contexts and to reveal possible links and influences. As she explains: “*One tells her or his ‘side of the story’ in autobiography by bringing together an understanding of personal identity and cultural context that are meant to call into question a taken-for-granted rendition and logic of a time and place*” (Franzosa, 1992, p. 396).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Rationale - Aims and Objectives

The basic hypothesis this study was based on, was that EAB is a self-reflection narrative that can assist in delving into our life stories and the way in which we perceive our learning/educational experiences, personal values and aspirations, as shaped by these experiences, as well as how all these influence the way individuals make sense of their roles in the social worlds they live in. This, according to Goodson & Sikes (2001), is very important because the teacher profession is very personal and includes values, relationships and diverse interactions such as those with colleagues, parents, students, and the community.

Educational autobiography (EAB) is suggested as a creative alternative tool that enables students “*to accommodate within the framework of academic rigor (reading, rational reflection and research), a growing postmodern sensitivity shared by young people (experience, subjectivity and uncertainty)*” (Monteagudo, 2014, p. 1). Such claim is mainly based on the principal goal of EAB which aims for the enhancement of “*self-reflection, the clearest possible comprehension of our life circumstances, mutual understanding, tolerance and the*

capacity to play an active role in our own lives within the confines of a certain social conditioning” (Monteagudo, 2014, p. 2).

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of Educational Autobiography (EAB) as an innovative academic educational tool and its effects on personal growth and professional development of pre-service preschool teachers in terms of promoting critical reflection and transformative processes about themselves and their role as Early Years Practitioners. The specific objectives were to examine whether their engagement with EAB method could contribute to enhancing their sensitivity to experience, enriching their understanding of learning processes evolutionarily and through various spheres of life, developing critical thinking and expression.

3.2 Participants and Method

The specific intervention was conducted during an academic semester as part of an experiential laboratory course attended by 4th-year students from a Department of Early Years Learning and Care in Greece. During this project 87 academic students (4 men and 83 women) participated in writing their own EABs, combining oral exercises and writing, mixing together individual and group work, completing an evaluation form. Participants agreed to undertake the project and were given a guidelines framework, including respect for privacy and right to anonymity.

The guidelines framework students were given from the outset was formed accordingly and focused on recalling and critically reflecting on important people, critical life events and dilemmas, various socio-cultural contexts and the way in which these experiences affected their learning/educational courses as well as their professional choices, personal expectations and needs. A multi-perspective and in-depth appreciation of the role of experiences in their learning and growth as well as an establishment of interrelations between theory and practice were also encouraged.

This study used a mixed-method approach. The research tools used were: 1) reflective texts in the form of an EAB composed within the context of the workshop, including an identification of the advantages and disadvantages of having done the project 2) a questionnaire completed by the participants upon the completion of the workshop 3) research reflection notes kept by the researcher after each class guiding following steps. The closed-ended questions were analyzed quantitatively. An open-ended question specified descriptively the final section of the questionnaire and the EAB texts were analyzed thematically.

3.3 Procedure

The procedure was based on a combination of specific steps and activities as proposed by Dominicé (2012) and Monteagudo (2014). At the outset participants were provided with a list of bibliographic sources on biographical approach and educational autobiography, as well as a detailed thematic guide on which to base their written educational autobiography. However, they were encouraged to maintain flexibility and freedom in approaching and describing individual issues.

During the first session, students were informed about the project and the educational autobiography. They were given a detailed framework about oral exercises and writing, individual and group work and final evaluation of the project. Ethical implications were clarified and an agreement was reached between the participants about personal data privacy issues concerning themselves and their family members or relatives, the right to omit facts or issues that they wish due to their particular personal and private nature, their obligation to avoid derogatory or defamatory comments. In addition, the importance of ensuring conditions of mutual respect, trust, participation, coherence and active listening during the group work was emphasized (Monteguado, 2017).

At the following sessions students were supported through certain activities to prepare their oral and written narratives. A process of presenting in small groups and discussing a draft of their EABs was also included in order to gain feedback from peers and deepen in their self-reflection process. The biographical activities, carried out during the group sessions, aimed to support the elaboration of the autobiographical document and concerned issues such as family tree, family group and its socio-psycho-pedagogic dynamics, local-community and cultural context, students' lifeline with significant personal, educational and social paths, their personal escutcheon, narratives of formal and non-formal learning experiences as well as reflections on and interpretation of the outcome of these experiences (Monteguado, 2017).

Students were encouraged to give special emphasis on issues related to critical life events and transformative processes. Furthermore, they were asked to dedicate the final part of their Educational Autobiography to an interpretative reflection and a comprehensive appreciation of the approach they managed to develop and the establishment of interrelations between various spheres of life and learning contexts. This, in turn, is characterized as *"a matter of building meaning from the experience lived and told"* and *"implies the reflection on personal identity and its relationship with individual, interpersonal and sociocultural history"* (Monteguado, 2017, p. 54).

3.4 Data analysis

The closed-ended questions were collected and coded using an Excel spreadsheet to prepare the answers for data analysis. In addition, the participants' answers were analyzed using a 5-point Likert scale (5 for absolutely agree, 4 for agree, 3 for neutral, 2 for disagree, and 1 for absolutely disagree). They were analyzed statistically using SPSS. The reliability of the questionnaire was guaranteed by using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability of the questionnaire items addressed to all students is confirmed as Cronbach's alpha significance value is (.820), which is higher than 0.70. This value implies that the items show good internal consistency and reliability. The Educational Autobiography texts were coded and analyzed thematically according to 5 axes, that is, reflection on critical experiences and life events, reflection on the Educational Autobiography experience, self-awareness, reflection on the role of various contexts in shaping life

conditions and meaning-making, reflection on the participants' role/practice as Early Years Practitioners.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Quantitative Results

In this section, we present the results of the research questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to all the participants by the end of the semester upon the completion of the EAB project and the response rate was 90.8% (79 participants, 75 women and 4 men). All the participants had no previous experience with Educational Autobiography theory and practice prior to this project.

The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions in which 14 items were closed-ended questions and one item was an open-ended question. The questionnaire was arranged based on four main sections. The first section investigated students' evaluation of EAB contribution to their personal reflection. The second part examined students' evaluation of EAB contribution to their professional reflection. The third part examined students' evaluation of EAB project experience. The last part included two closed-ended and one open-ended question and was addressed only to 43 students who had participated as part of their internship in the implementation of an educational project at pre-school settings called "Art in Children's Life Program (AinCL)", asking them to relate their EABs with the specific intervention experience. The AinCL project consisted of the systematic exploration of artworks in raising children's critical thinking and empathy on friendship and difference as well as in raising children's healthy eating habits in Early Years Education (Charissi, Tympa & Karavida, 2019; Tympa, Karavida & Charissi, 2019).

The findings derived from the first three parts of the questionnaire are presented in the tables below. First, table 1 demonstrates students' evaluation of EAB contribution in their personal reflection:

Table 1: Contribution of EAB in personal reflection

EAB helped me in...	Response rating	Number of participants	Percentage
Critically reviewing important life events and remaking-meaning	Strongly agree	47	59.5%
	Agree	29	36.7%
	Neutral	2	2.5%
	Disagree	1	1.3%
	Strongly disagree	-	-
Deepening in my learning / educational experiences	Strongly agree	42	53.2%
	Agree	31	39.2%
	Neutral	6	7.6%
	Disagree	-	-
	Strongly disagree	-	-
Appreciating interconnections between learning experiences	Strongly agree	51	64.6%
	Agree	19	24.1%
	Neutral	6	7.6%

and personal-professional choices	Disagree	3	3.8%
	Strongly disagree	-	-
Knowing myself better	Strongly agree	51	64.6%
	Agree	24	30.4%
	Neutral	3	3.8%
	Disagree	1	1.3%
	Strongly disagree	-	-
Expressing emotions	Strongly agree	43	54.4%
	Agree	26	32.9%
	Neutral	9	11.4%
	Disagree	1	1.3%
	Strongly disagree	-	-

Table 1 shows that the majority of the students strongly agreed with the statements in the section about the contribution of EAB in personal reflection. In particular, 59.5% of the students strongly agreed that EAB helped them in critically reviewing important life events and remaking-meaning, while another 36.7% agreed with the statement, summing a total of 96.2%. Furthermore, 53.2% (strongly agree) and 39.2% (agree) stated that EAB contributed in deepening their learning/educational experiences (total 92.4%). In addition, 64.6% strongly agreed that EAB helped them in appreciating the interconnections between learning experiences and personal-professional choices, while 24.1% also agreed on this statement (total 88.7%). Last, 64.6% of the students (strongly agree) and 30.4% (agree) stated that EAB helped them in knowing themselves better (total 95.0%), while 54.4% (strongly agree) and 32.9% (agree) stated that EAB contributed to expressing their emotions (total 87,3%).

Next, table 2 displays students' evaluation of EAB contribution in their professional reflection:

Table 2: Contribution of EAB in professional reflection

EAB affected the perception of my role as an Early Years Practitioner about...	Response rating	Number of participants	Percentage
Its complexity and importance concerning interactions with children, parents, community	Strongly agree	35	44.3%
	Agree	35	44.3%
	Neutral	7	8.9%
	Disagree	1	1.3%
	Strongly disagree	1	1.3%
The significance of developing positive psychological climate and socio-emotional skills in children	Strongly agree	34	43.0%
	Agree	42	53.2%
	Neutral	3	3.8%
	Disagree	-	-
	Strongly disagree	-	-

Table 2 shows that the majority of the students were positively disposed (strongly agreed and agreed) towards both of the statements in the section about the contribution of EAB in their professional reflection. Sum totals of "strongly agree" and "agree" answers are

considerably high in both statements. In particular, a total of 88.6% of the students, that is 44.3% strongly agreed and 44.3% agreed that EAB affected the perception of their role as Early Years Practitioners in terms of its complexity and importance concerning interactions with children, parents, community. In addition, a total of 96.2% of the students, that is 43.0% strongly agreed and 53.2% agreed that EAB affected the perception of their role as Early Years Practitioners regarding the significance of developing positive psychological climate and socio-emotional skills in children.

Table 3 below displays students' evaluation of EAB project experience:

Table 3: Students' evaluation of EAB project experience

As concerns my experience of the EAB application...	Response rating	Number of participants	Percentage
I was more positive with EAB by the end of the project compared to the beginning	Strongly agree	32	40.5%
	Agree	36	45.6%
	Neutral	8	10.1%
	Disagree	3	3.8%
	Strongly disagree	-	-
The exchange of experiences and points of view helped me process my experiences and their meaning	Strongly agree	28	35.4%
	Agree	40	50.6%
	Neutral	10	12.7%
	Disagree	-	-
	Strongly disagree	1	1.3%
The exchange of experiences and points of view helped me to address alternative points of view	Strongly agree	22	27.8%
	Agree	44	55.7%
	Neutral	13	16.5%
	Disagree	-	-
	Strongly disagree	-	-
The whole process empowered me to understand better the way I think, feel and act	Strongly agree	28	35.4%
	Agree	35	44.3%
	Neutral	11	13.9%
	Disagree	3	3.8%
	Strongly disagree	2	2.5%
EAB is a useful tool for the personal and professional development of a pedagogue	Strongly agree	39	49.4%
	Agree	30	38.0%
	Neutral	10	12.7%
	Disagree	-	-
	Strongly disagree	-	-

Table 3 shows that most of the students were positively disposed (strongly agreed and agreed) towards all the statements in the section about their evaluation of the EAB project experience, even though in most of them the “agree” answer prevails. In particular, 40.5% of the students strongly agreed and 45.6% agreed that they were more positive with EAB by the end of the project compared to the beginning. Furthermore, 35.4% of the students strongly agreed and 50.6% agreed that the exchange of experiences and points of view helped them process their experiences and their meaning. Moreover, 27.8% strongly agreed and 55.7% agreed that the exchange of experiences and points of view helped

them to address alternative points of view. In addition, 35.4% strongly agreed and 44.3% agreed that the whole process empowered them to understand better the way they think, feel and act. Finally, 49.4% strongly agreed and 38.0% agreed that EAB is a useful tool for the personal and professional development of a pedagogue.

Table 4 demonstrates the possible interrelations between EAB and practice/experience for 43 students who participated in the implementation of an art-based intervention at 5 preschool settings:

Table 4: Interrelations between EAB and
 “Art in Children’s Life Program (AinCL)” experience (n=43 participants)

For those who participated in implementing the art-based intervention (AinCL) at preschool settings...	Response rating	Number of participants	Percentage
EAB enhanced my sensitivity about the significance of children's experiences including learning/educational ones	Strongly agree	21	48.8%
	Agree	13	30.2%
	Neutral	7	16.3%
	Disagree	2	4.7%
	Strongly disagree	-	-
My participation in AinCl Program affected my own EAB	Strongly agree	16	37.2%
	Agree	11	25.6%
	Neutral	9	20.9%
	Disagree	6	14.0%
	Strongly disagree	1	2.3%

Table 4 demonstrates that most of the 43 students who participated in completing the fourth section were positively disposed (strongly agreed and agreed) towards both statements in this section. In particular, 48.8% of the students strongly agreed and 30.2% agreed that EAB enhanced their sensitivity about the significance of children's experiences including learning/educational ones. In addition, 37.2% of the students strongly agreed and 25.6% agreed that their participation in AinCl Program affected their own EABs.

Some of the most representative comments that students made when asked (open-ended question) to specify descriptively the meaning of the statements in the above section (table 4) for them were: *“We always learn from the children. I am proud of my profession”, “Yes, it affected me in the ways in which I can help children to become a team. One of the most important things is the love that you receive from children”, “The whole experience helped me review, evaluate my course, express emotions, change my way of thinking”, “I appreciated more the interaction with children”, “I better understood my role as an educator and the importance of realizing children’s needs in order to cope with them more effectively”, “Experiential learning, real-time application of knowledge, monitoring reactions, choices and characteristics of children to various stimuli given to them”.*

4.2 Qualitative Results

The following table demonstrates the results of the thematic content analysis of EAB texts (n=87) according to 5 basic axes, that is, reflection on critical experiences and life events, reflection on the Educational Autobiography experience, self-awareness, reflection on the role of various contexts in shaping life conditions and meaning-making, reflection on their role/practice as Early Years Practitioners.

Table 5: Covered themes by EAB texts

Axes	Number of participants	Percentage	Subthemes	Engagement
Reflection on critical experiences and life events	82	94.3%	Recall important people, critical experiences and life events that impacted one's education and desire to become a teacher	strong
			Reflect on important dilemmas, life transitions and changes	moderate
Reflection on the Educational Autobiography experience	64	73.6%	Advantages- disadvantages	strong
			Transformational dynamics	moderate
			Appreciation of the learner's personal involvement in the learning process	moderate
Self-awareness	44	50.6%	Development of personal self-knowledge (thoughts, acts, emotions)	strong
			Relating the personal biography, the family and local context, and the global social and cultural environment in terms of reflective learning and personal development	moderate
Reflection on the role of various contexts in shaping life conditions and meaning-making	59	67.8%	Develop understanding of the role of various contexts in shaping life-conditions and experiences	strong
			Increasing the ability to analyze and criticize the various daily frameworks (family, school, media, religious and spiritual groups, cultural diversity, peer group and friends, leisure and free time, work)	moderate

Reflection on their role/practice as Early Years Practitioners	55	63.2%	Connecting theory with experience	strong
			Assisting in the reflective review of personal difficulties, by creating resources to better manage conflicts and problems in daily (personal and professional) life	moderate

Table 5 shows the main themes that students managed to cover within their EAB texts. It also demonstrates how strong their involvement was regarding specific subthemes in terms of their in-depth and multidimensional exploration. In this way, we are provided with important information about the degree to which they were able to reflect and deepen in their EAB and its implications on their personal and professional development.

5. Discussion

This section discusses the contribution of Educational Autobiography (EAB) as a critical reflection tool in higher education and in particular, towards personal growth and professional development of pre-service early years teachers. Based on the results of the previous section, all participants showed a strong agreement in the reflective potential of their EABs in terms of enhancing their sensitivity to experience, enriching their understanding of learning processes evolutionarily and through different spheres of life, developing critical thinking and expression. These findings are consistent with the relevant literature which supports that biographical-narrative methods may contribute to the personal and professional development of adult learners as it encompasses critical reflection and experiential learning (Monteagudo, 2017).

Results from the first section of the questionnaire, which investigates personal reflection of the participants, show general agreement between students that EAB promoted their ability to: (a) critically review important life events and remake-meaning, (b) deepen in their learning/educational experiences, (c) appreciate interconnections between learning experiences and personal-professional choices, (d) know themselves better and (e) express emotions. Also, the thematic content analysis of biographical texts demonstrates that 94.3% of the students managed to reflect on critical experiences and life events. More specifically, they strongly engaged in recalling important people, critical experiences and life events that impacted their education and desire to become teachers. Their engagement in reflecting on important dilemmas, life transitions and changes that affected them was moderate. Furthermore, 50.6% of the students managed to increase their self-awareness. More specifically, they strongly engaged in covering issues related to personal self-knowledge and increased awareness about thoughts, acts and emotions, while their engagement in relating the personal biography, the family and local context,

and the global social and cultural environment in terms of reflective learning and their personal development was moderate.

Results from the second section of the questionnaire which investigates professional reflection of the participants show that the majority of students generally agree that their EABs contributed to appreciating their role as Early Years Practitioners in terms of: (a) its complexity and importance concerning interactions with children, parents, community and (b) the significance of developing positive psychological climate and socio-emotional skills in children. Also, the thematic content analysis of biographical texts demonstrates that 67.8% of the students managed to reflect on the role of various contexts in shaping life conditions and meaning-making. More specifically, they engaged strongly in developing an understanding of the role of various contexts in shaping life-conditions and experiences, while their engagement in increasing the ability to analyze and criticize the various daily frameworks such as family, school, media, religious and spiritual groups, cultural diversity, peer group and friends, leisure and free time, work, was moderate.

The analysis from the third section of the questionnaire shows a general agreement among students about EAB experience in terms of: (a) their final positive attitude toward EAB project despite any initial hesitations, (b) the exchange of experiences and points of view which helped them process their experiences and their meaning, (c) the exchange of experiences and points of view which helped them to address alternative points of view, (d) the dynamics of the whole process which empowered them to understand better the way they think, feel and act and (e) their evaluation of EAB as a useful tool for the personal and professional development of a pedagogue. Also, the thematic content analysis of biographical texts demonstrates that 73.6% of the students managed to reflect on the Educational Autobiography experience. More specifically, they managed to detect advantages and disadvantages of the EAB project such as the general difficulty to recall past experiences and the advantage of having a chance to reflect on their personal story. At the same time, their engagement in acknowledging transformational dynamics and appreciating the learner's personal involvement in the learning process was moderate. Furthermore, 63.2% of the students achieved some kind of reflection on their role/practice as Early Years Practitioners. In particular, they managed to connect theory with their personal experience, while their assisting in the reflective review of personal difficulties, by creating resources to better manage conflicts and problems in their daily personal and professional life was moderate.

According to the above findings, it is evident that during their engagement with EAB, students managed to give special emphasis on reflecting on important people and life events that affected their learning/educational courses and increased their self-awareness. This evidence supports previous research results for the contribution of EAB to personal development and inquiry (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Ware, 1979). However, their engagement in achieving an in-depth and multidimensional understanding of critical life events and dilemmas as reflected in their identity, of the possibilities and constrains that various socio-cultural contexts impose on them and their role was

moderate. According to the theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000), they were involved in reflection, but they were partly engaged in a critical re-evaluation of their experiences in the light of new and enriched meanings. The interpretative reflection they were asked to undertake at the final part of their Educational Autobiographies was basically focused on detecting the advantages and disadvantages of shaping their EABs and connecting theory with personal experiences. However, they found it more difficult to accomplish a comprehensive appreciation of the approach they managed to develop and to establish interrelations between various spheres of life and learning contexts as relevant literature suggests (Monteagudo, 2017).

6. Conclusion

The use of biographical methods in general and Educational Autobiography (EAB) in particular have been acknowledged as important educational tools in the fields of adult and higher education because of their reflective, self-awareness and transformational dynamics. In Greece, there is still space for implementing and investigating such methods during the teaching process at an academic level.

This study investigated the use of Educational Autobiography (EAB) as an innovative academic tool towards personal growth and professional development of pre-service preschool teachers in terms of promoting critical reflection and transformative processes about themselves and their role as Early Years Practitioners. It also explored their appreciation of the role of experiences in learning and the establishment of interrelations between theory and practice. The findings indicate that all students engaged in reflection on past experiences. Most of them found EAB an interesting, self-enrichment process, leading to a better appreciation of experiences in shaping themselves and their role as Early Years Practitioners. Writing their EABs was an unprecedented but useful process despite any initial difficulties in recalling previous experiences, thoughts and emotions.

Although we can't say that they fully accomplished an in-depth and holistic critical approach of their educational biographies, participants had the chance to engage in personal and professional reflection. During this process they gained an increased appreciation of life conditions, improved self-knowledge and mutual understanding of the role of life experiences. They also reviewed perceptions regarding their significant role as Early Years Practitioners in terms of promoting positive interactions with children, parents, the community, developing positive psychological climate and socio-emotional skills in children. In particular, EAB project contributed to getting to know themselves better by reconstructing their personal routes and their meaning. They were also able to reflect on the interrelations between their experiences, choices and actions, personal as well as professional, to empathetically understand decisive factors that shape the lives of children such as family, school, social context, as well as implications of their role in affecting children's lives.

Findings indicate the reflective and transformational dynamics involved while incorporating biographical methods in academic teaching and learning. Furthermore, students' involvement with EAB during their studies may contribute to the promotion of critical reflection and transformative processes about themselves and their role as Early Years Practitioners. This, in turn, complies with a new conceptualization of higher education pedagogy based on a holistic critical perspective. Within this approach future practitioners should develop the appropriate skills in order to be able to reflect, make meaning and grow out of the complex realities within which they work and interact with children, families and communities in various socio-cultural settings.

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