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Scientific article

Self-Reflection as an Epistemological Approach to the Research of Pedagogical Issues – Case Study as an Example

Extended summary

Self-reflection is understood as a cognitive activity in which educators (professionals in education) have the opportunity and tendency to develop their level of self-awareness about their practice, its meaning, achieved outcomes, and development. The first part of the work discusses the epistemological foundations of other approaches. In the 19th and throughout the past century, the deductive-rational-philosophical approach dominated the study of pedagogical phenomena, with Herbart as its main representative, negating the importance of practice and empirical research, as well as the context in which the pedagogical phenomenon occurs. Empiricism must fit into rational schemes, and its truth and value are proven by its alignment with pedagogical norms and principles. Two epistemological approaches are distinguished: positivist and anti-positivist. Positivists consider knowledge to be measurable, objective, and discoverable through the senses, using exact methods of natural sciences, and the valid source of knowledge is empiricism. In contrast, anti-positivists attribute subjectivity to knowledge, depending on the personality of the knower, making it unique, so methods of natural sciences cannot be used. Consequently, new approaches to researching pedagogical phenomena emerged: constructivist - focusing on the individual and subjectively perceived pedagogical phenomena from the individual's perspective; postmodernist - emphasizing interactive communication for interpretation, negotiation, and deconstruction; transformative - arriving at knowledge through active construction, making it culturally and historically conditioned, containing values, and serving specific interests and purposes. Supporters of self-reflection aim to

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unite common characteristics and overcome the shortcomings and one-sidedness of these approaches, i.e., to contemplate "from within" - from the perspective of the subject of knowledge and action. Reflective thinking is considered a separate activity, independent of other cognitive activities and interactions between subjects and objects of education.

The paper aims to interpret self-reflection as an epistemological approach through a case study to clarify and better understand the theoretical foundations of this approach. A part of a broader study conducted in the spring of 2023 during the pedagogical-psychological practice of the pre-service preschool teachers (future educators in preschool institutions) is presented. The goal of this practice was to monitor and identify indicators for identifying an "exceptional" preschool teacher. Based on the analysis of collected data from observation protocols, student assessments, the analysis of pedagogical documentation, semi-structured interviews with parents and children, and children's pedagogical work products, a critical case was selected for a case study. This case was used as a paradigmatic case in which self-reflection stands out as an epistemological approach to researching pedagogical phenomena. The second phase of the research involved designing a case study with the research question: what research approaches do an "exceptional" educator use to solve pedagogical issues? Qualitative analysis concluded that self-reflection significantly stands out in the analyzed case in comparison to other epistemological approaches to researching pedagogical phenomena. A section of the semi-structured interview conducted with the future preschool teachers is presented to consider the theoretical foundations of this approach in a practical example.

In the concluding part, the following conclusions are listed: firstly, practitioners who go beyond the limits of their own experience can see reality from a different perspective and find new ways of knowing to engage in self-reflection as an epistemological approach in researching pedagogical issues. Secondly, pedagogical epistemology should guide and empower educators to discover the researched pedagogical reality. The question is raised about whether and to what extent future preschool teachers encounter various theoretical epistemological approaches to researching pedagogical issues and whether they are given the opportunity to become self-reflective researchers during their initial education. This opportunity is not provided to them to a sufficient extent. The solution to this problem can be found in introducing changes in the curriculum of the preschool teacher education, especially in the area of studying methodological subjects. By enabling future teachers to think about their experiences and actions and providing them with the opportunity to apply and develop this ability in their profession, a path to lifelong learning for educators is opened. The interconnection between approaches to knowing pedagogical phenomena and the status of the pedagogical profession is also noted. Only when professionals in education become more efficient, achieve higher-quality results, and continuously develop and improve, can we expect an elevation of the status of their profession. Finally, the need to improve the competencies of professors who educate future educators, especially in the field of studying epistemological approaches to researching pedagogical issues, is emphasized.

Keywords: self-reflection, epistemological approaches, self-reflective practitioner, educational research

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