WHO ARE YOU? PROFILE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARETAKERS AND EDUCATORS

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Abstract

Quantitative research aimed to investigate the professional identity of Early Childhood Caretakers (ECC) enrolled in a professional training program through the Ministry of Education. The training program is an innovative program to increase the professional knowledge of Early Childhood Education staff who have no professional training and are working in the field. The results indicated that the participants had a strong feeling of professional identification based mostly on practical experience. The opportunity to gain theoretical knowledge through a professional training program such as the one in which they are currently enrolled, is expected to increase their feelings of teaching self-efficacy and confidence and consequently improve the quality of interpersonal interactions they provide, and as such to positively affect the development of the children in their care.

Keywords: *Early childhood caretakers, professional training for early childhood, teaching self-efficacy.*

1. Introduction

In 2021, the supervision of Early Childhood Education in Israel was transferred from the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services, which had been responsible from the beginning of the state of Israel for the establishment and supervision of early childhood services, to the Ministry of Education. Even so, there are still many private early childhood facilities for children under the age of three, that are not subject to any official framework or professional supervision to ensure the quality of the services.

As a result of the change in national policy concerning the supervision and standardization of early childhood facilities, and the transfer of early childhood education into an integral part of the national education ministry, one of the first major decisions that were initiated was that all members of staff had to have a professional early childhood certificate, authorized by the ministry of education. The course of training is funded by the government and each student who successfully finalizes their training is entitled to a grant from the government. The responsibility for training the untrained staff was delegated to academic teacher training colleges that are certified by the board of higher education to train kindergarten teachers. The Ministry of Education issued a protocol to invite academic colleges to take part in the professional training of untrained nursery staff who are currently employed from all areas in the country.

In contrast to early childhood educators that work in facilities for young children from three months old to three years old, kindergarten teachers of children from three years old to six, in Israel, by law, must have a first degree in early childhood studies from the academic colleges and a license to teach from the ministry of education. The research study examined the professional and personal profile of the ECCE workers who registered for the training course through one academic college in the North of Israel.

In training programs for students that desire to enhance their knowledge and gain a certificate for professional training, the term "caregiver" for young children is prevalent as the professional title and not teacher .The perception of most people regarding the contents of the profession for working with young children is a person, usually a woman that will provide nurturing and emotional aspects of care and individualized care rather than a planned curriculum or pedagogical interactions (Bergen et al., 2001). Seldom do people perceive the educational activities of infants and toddlers as sophisticated, learning experiences or even important to the child's future development (Jung, 2013).The professional work of staff that work with infant and toddlers entails complex and important reciprocal interactions in their daily practice (Rockel, 2009; Rogers, 1994).

2. Literature review

According to the statistics, 95 per cent of preschool kindergarten teachers in Israel have academic training that puts the country in a comparable place with other nations, such as Norway (95 per cent) and Chile (81 per cent)but the rest of the staff who are assistants, have a lower level of education, 69% have a high school education or less, 24% with post-secondary non-academic education and only 7% have an academic degree (Vakhnin, 2021). In the Arab speaking sectors of the Israeli society the statistics show an even lower percentage of preschool assistants with only high school education (74 per cent). The professional training for Early childhood educators who work in childcare services for children between three months until three years has been mandatory for those that work in supervised day care centers. Each class teacher was required to undergo a course organized by the ministry of Labor and Social Services, directors of childcare centers were required to undergo advanced training. Even though the training is mandatory not all educators enrolled in the training courses, and in private childcare centers that were not under the auspices of the Ministry of Labor and Social Services it was very difficult to enforce the mandatory training. As a result, thousands of early childhood educators without any professional knowledge were employed in various early childhood centers all over the country.

3. Professional identity

Professional identity is built on a combination of internal and external interactions, how one sees oneself and how one is perceived by outside factors. In a study by Doyle and Carter (1996) they stated that becoming a teacher means " a) transforming an identity b) adapting personal understandings and ideals to institutional realities and c) deciding how to express oneself in classroom activity" (p139). Research shows that high-quality early childhood settings have a direct influence on children's future academic success (Schütz, 2009; Bauchmüller et al., 2014; Dämmrich & Esping-Andersen, 2017), therefore it is mandatory that the staff working with young children have the necessary aptitudes, professional ability, and knowledge to be able to assist the young children in their developmental trajectory.

Professionalism is a set of behaviors that is required of a profession and a person working in that profession must exhibit these behaviors that are expected of him as a member of a profession (Freeny,2010). Frequently professionalism emphasizes the possession of specialized knowledge that has been acquired through years of academic studying. In the area of early childhood education, a large portion of professional knowledge is acquired through practicum, practical knowledge that is required through daily interactions with young children, year after year. (Kuisma & Sandberg 2008). The authors are convinced that the knowledge required through practical experience has an important contribution to the professionalism of early childhood educators as of course does the theoretical knowledge.

In addition to the professional core values and personal characteristics the quality of an educational setting is influenced by the effectiveness of the staff in their ability to engage children in meaningful activities and engage in meaningful educator -child interactions (Rimm-Kaufman & Hamre,2010). The level of teachers' effectiveness is influenced by the teacher's feeling of self- efficacy, which has been shown to effect student's academic achievement and motivation (Caprara,Barbranelli, et al., 2006). In preschool settings the feelings of high self -efficacy of educators has been found to influence three major areas, emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). Research has shown that teachers with higher self-efficacy have more confidence in supporting children's development through their interactions with children, leading them to engage in more positive, supportive, and sensitive interactions (Barni et al., 2019). Factors affecting the level of teacher self-efficacy are varied, teachers' characteristics and experience, though research has found that teacher's self-efficacy beliefs increased from early to mid-career but decreased after that (Klassen & Chiu 2010), classroom conditions and high levels of interpersonal collaboration between staff members (Guo et 2011).

There are no apparent studies that investigate the self-perception or professional identity of early childhood educators that are responsible for the safety, health and education of children under the age of three, a critical time in human development. Research that investigated the professional identity of kindergarten teachers that are responsible for the education of children between the ages of three years old to six found that a large percentage of the research population had a strong feeling of high professional ability and viewed their career choice very positively and 93% of the research population indicated that their career choice was made from a felling of fulfilling a mission (Simon, Dan,2021).

Figure 1.
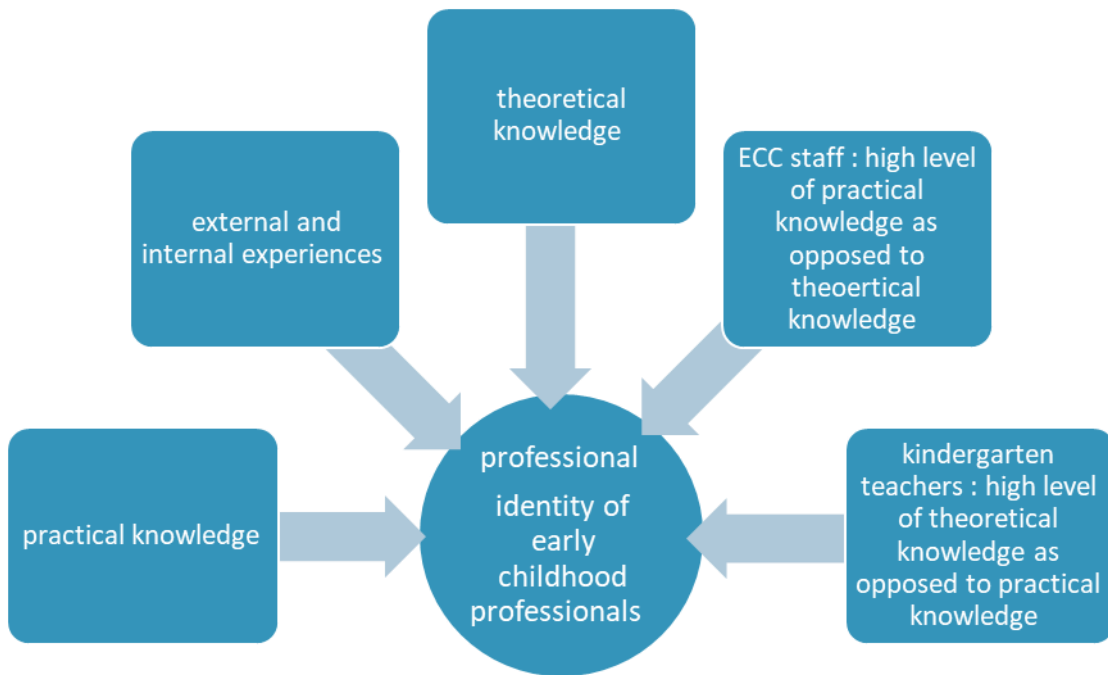
4. Design

Participants in this study were 143 Israeli female ECC. They presented a wide age range: about 30% of them were up to 30 years old, another about 30% were in their thirties, about one fifth were in their forties, and the rest were mainly in their fifties (table 1). Most were married (about 61%), and others were single (about 22%) or divorced (about 17%). They had up to seven children, with a mean of about two children (SD = 1.50). Most had a high school education (about 77%), and about 56% were working in rural areas.

5. Research instruments

The Teacher's Professional Identity Questionnaire (Fisherman and Weiss, 2011).

This questionnaire depicts the professional identity of teachers as their thoughts and feelings about their professional choice, their professional conduct, their sense of mission and the general reputation they ascribe to the teaching profession. Phrasing of the items in the current study was adapted to the ECC staff.

The questionnaire includes 34 items, such as "I see the teaching profession as a mission", "I am sure I have the qualities to be a good teacher", "I have the right approach to students". Items are rated on a five-point scale from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5). They are organized according to four sub-scales:

The questionnaire was distributed among the research population by digital means. As google docs at the beginning of the course. The questionnaire was anonymous and entailed the filling in of the form. The researchers were not present at the time and had no previous relationships with the research population. The population was recruited through local regional councils that are responsible for providing early childhood care for young parents.

6. Results

Results show high means for the sub-scales of the teachers' professional identity. A repeated measures analysis of variance between them was significant (F(3, 426) = 9.42, p < .001, η2 = .062), and showed that the mean for 'Teaching self-efficacy' was highest, the means for 'Confidence in the professional choice' and 'Sense of mission' were next, and lowest was the mean for 'Teaching reputation'. This rank ordering of the means is significant, yet all mean is high. Correlations among the

scales were all significant and moderate to high, revealing that the higher was the professional identity on one dimension, the higher it was on the others.

Results show that the ECC staff were highly confident in their professional choice, although some had some doubts. Rather similarly, they reported high self-efficacy, and even the lowest items had rather high means. The ECC perceived education and teaching as a mission, and many (though not all) reported they had always perceived it as their mission. Many of them, yet not all, have corrected people who thought of them as working in another profession. They reported appreciating other kindergarten teachers, and believing that those who do not like to educate young children should not engage in teaching them. They partly agreed that only a few qualify for the definition of a professional in education and were not always personally negatively affected by the media.

7. Discussions and conclusions

The findings show that the EEC staff felt that their choice of profession was a decision made from a feeling of education being a mission, I always thought my mission was to be an ECC(3.64, 1.27)Early childhood teaching is a mission for me (4.62, 0.79) this feeling of ideology was expressed in research that investigated the professional identity of kindergarten teachers ,who also indicated that their professional choice was due to a feeling of fulfilling a mission (Simon, Dan 2021). This is a surprising in today's modern society and encouraging to see that educators of young children feel like their profession is a calling or a mission.

Teacher's self-efficacy has been shown to affect the quality of education (Barni et al., 2019). The results in this research show that the EEC staff had a high sense of self efficacy towards teaching. From the results it can be seen that the population that had a previous background of education above high school level indicated higher levels in all parameters of confidence in their professional choice, in feelings of teaching self-efficacy, that working in early childhood settings is fulfilling a mission and they had a higher evaluation of being an EEC. Therefore, it is imperative to implement a policy in the country that anyone who is to work with young children will have to have an education above high school level. This research shows the importance of ECC staff to have an opportunity to supplement their professional knowledge that is mostly practical knowledge with theoretical knowledge.

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