

BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND RECOGNITION: PERCEPTIONS OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL STATUS AND THE PATH TOWARD TRANSFORMATION WITHIN THE TEACH-MC PROJECT

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Abstract

In the context of contemporary challenges in early childhood education and care (ECEC), this pilot study explores the perceptions of preschool teachers and parents regarding the status of preschool teachers. The aim was to identify key factors shaping its social positioning and to examine differences between key stakeholder groups. The study included 125 participants (59 preschool teachers and 66 parents) from a public kindergarten institution in Rijeka. Data were collected via an online questionnaire using an adapted version of the Status Scale (Šteh, Čepić & Kalin, 2017), piloted on a sample of preschool teachers and parents, with the results informing its refinement for subsequent use within the TEACH-MC Project. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical approaches to examine group differences and relationships with key sociodemographic variables. The findings indicate significant differences between the two groups, with preschool teachers perceiving their status as lower, while parents maintain a more favourable view. A notable discrepancy emerges in perceptions of social recognition and respect, suggesting differing expectations and a potential communication gap between stakeholders. Higher levels of education among preschool teachers are associated with more critical perceptions, pointing to a mismatch between increasing professional demands and societal recognition. This study forms part of the TEACH-MC Project (2025–2029) and represents its pilot phase, providing initial findings that inform its further development. The results contribute to the development of evidence-based recommendations aimed at strengthening the status and long-term sustainability of the profession.

Keywords: *Preschool teachers, status, teacher identity, TEACH-MC project, professional development.*

1. Introduction

Despite the established scientific consensus on the crucial role of early childhood education and care in children's holistic development, the preschool teaching profession continues to occupy a marginalized position and is associated with a lower social status compared to other educational professions. It is characterized by a paradox between its recognized societal importance and its relatively low level of social valuation, insufficient recognition of professional competencies, and demanding working conditions (Chan, 2019; Chong & Lu, 2019; Majerčíková & Urbanecová, 2020). Low salaries, limited opportunities for career advancement, and the reduction of the professional role to care and basic childcare further undermine the status of the profession, while its educational dimension is often overlooked (Harwood & Tukonic, 2016; Majerčíková & Urbanecová, 2020). Comparative research indicates significant differences in the perception of professional status, shaped by cultural context, educational systems, and societal values (Arnold & Rahimi, 2024; Chong & Lu, 2019). In many contexts, including Croatia, the profession faces ongoing challenges related to marginalization and declining interest in entering the field, further intensified by a global shortage of educational professionals (Flores, Oliveira & da Ponte, 2025). Empirical findings show that preschool teachers tend to perceive their professional status as lower than parents do, while the general public often fails to recognize the complexity of their work (Vu et al., 2023; Wong, 2022). Low status is associated with professional insecurity, lower job satisfaction, and potential implications for the quality of educational practice (Šteh, Kalin & Čepić, 2017, Čepić & Kalin (Eds.), 2019; Jurčević Lozančić, Tot & Kudek Mirošević, 2023).

In this context, the aim of this study was to examine the attitudes of preschool teachers and parents toward the status of the preschool teaching profession in a preschool centre of Kindergarten Rijeka (Primorje-Gorski Kotar County, Republic of Croatia), in order to gain a deeper understanding of the

position and role of preschool teachers within the educational system. The findings indicate the need for a more systemic approach to this issue. In response, the TEACH-MC Project (2025–2029) was developed and is briefly outlined in this paper. This study represents the pilot phase of one segment of the project and provides initial findings that inform its further development.

2. Purpose, aim and research questions

The purpose of this study was to contribute to a better understanding of the status of preschool teachers in early childhood education and care by examining the perceptions of preschool teachers and parents in order to gain insight into their social position and role within the contemporary education system. The aim of the study was to examine the attitudes of preschool teachers and parents toward the status of the preschool teaching profession and to identify key factors influencing its formation within social and professional contexts.

The study addressed the following research questions: (1) What are the basic descriptive indicators and metric characteristics of the instrument used to assess perceptions of preschool teachers' status? (2) Is there a correlation between participants' scores on the status scale and selected sociodemographic variables? (3) Are there differences between preschool teachers and parents in their perceptions of the status of the preschool teaching profession?

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

A total of 125 participants were included in the study, comprising 59 preschool teachers and 66 parents from the Turnić Preschool Education Centre within Kindergarten Rijeka. A convenience sample was used, including participants who were willing to take part at the time of data collection. The sample included parents from four and preschool teachers from six sub-centres. In the total sample, the mean age was ($M = 38.57$, $SD = 9.01$). Most participants were female (86.10%), while 12.80% were male and 0.80% preferred not to disclose their gender. Most held a master's degree (43.20%), followed by a bachelor's degree (20.00%), a professional undergraduate degree (16.80%), and secondary education (16.00%); a small proportion held a scientific master's degree (2.40%) or a doctoral degree (1.60%). Among preschool teachers, 98.31% were female and 1.69% male ($M = 39.61$, $SD = 11.59$). A total of 33.90% held a university graduate or undergraduate degree, 27.12% a professional undergraduate degree, and 5.09% secondary education. Among parents, 75.86% were female, 22.73% male, and 1.70% preferred not to disclose their gender ($M = 37.64$, $SD = 5.45$). Educational attainment among parents was distributed across all levels of education. Most parents had two children (51.52%), followed by one (42.42%) and three or more (6.06%). The majority were married or cohabiting (96.97%), while 3.03% were single. Most assessed their socioeconomic status as medium (69.70%), followed by high (21.21%), while none reported low status.

3.2. Instruments

Data were collected using an online questionnaire that included an adapted version of the Scale of Reputation (Šteh, Kalin & Čepić, 2017), referred to as the Status Scale. The scale was adapted to the context of early childhood education and care by replacing the terms teacher and teaching profession with preschool teacher and preschool teacher profession in all items, while one item was completely replaced with a newly formulated statement. The scale consists of eight items, including four positively and four negatively worded statements assessing the status of the preschool teaching profession. Participants indicated their level of agreement using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

To examine the factor structure and metric characteristics of the instrument, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted using principal component analysis with oblique (oblimin) rotation. A two-factor structure was identified in the total sample, with the first factor explaining 30.30% and the second factor 18.90% of the total variance (49.20% in total). The scree plot and parallel analysis confirmed the two-factor solution, while factor loadings and communalities are presented in Table 1.

The internal consistency of the first factor was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.654$), whereas the second factor demonstrated low reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.361$). Consequently, only the first factor (The Low Status Scale) was retained for further analyses. This factor comprises the first four items and reflects aspects related to the negative perception of the preschool teaching profession, including low salaries, low social status, negative media representation, and lower job satisfaction.

Table 1. Factor loadings and communalities for the Status Scale.

	Total sample (N = 141)		Communality
	F1	F2	
1. In the preschool teacher profession, salaries are lower than in other equally demanding jobs with an equal degree of education.	0,727	0.058	0,528
2. The preschool teacher profession enjoys a low status in society.	0,620	0.284	0,440
3. The media usually portray preschool teachers in a negative light.	0,588	-0.026	0,347
4. The low status of the preschool teacher profession affects job satisfaction.	0,648	-0.142	0,447
5. Preschool teacher's work is among the most important ones in society.	0,643	0.284	0,479
6. Preschool teachers respect parents.	0,336	0.754	0,660
7. Parents respect preschool teachers.	-0.283	0.751	0,662
8. The preschool teacher profession provides regular income and financial independence.	-0,367	0.474	0,374
Eigenvalues	2.478	1.459	
% of explained variance	30,30	18,90	

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected online using a Google Forms questionnaire administered to a convenience sample of preschool teachers and parents who voluntarily participated in the study. Participation was anonymous and voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the study prior to data collection. Data was analyzed using JASP statistical software (version 0.18.3). Descriptive statistics were calculated, and group differences between preschool teachers and parents were examined using the Mann–Whitney U test. Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to assess relationships between scores on the Status Scale and selected sociodemographic variables.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Descriptive findings related to the status scale

Descriptive analysis indicates that preschool teachers scored higher on the Low Status Scale ($M = 3.764$, $SD = 0.659$) compared to parents ($M = 3.299$, $SD = 0.862$), suggesting a more critical perception of the profession's status. The highest mean score was observed for the item related to low salaries ($M = 4.072$, $SD = 1,071$), while the lowest was associated with media representation. The Mann–Whitney U test revealed a statistically significant difference between preschool teachers and parents in their evaluation of the profession's social status, with preschool teachers expressing more negative perceptions. No significant differences were found for the remaining items. All results are presented in Table 2.

The findings indicate that preschool teachers assess their own professional status significantly more critically than it is valued in society, which is consistent with previous research (Majerčíková & Urbanecová, 2020; Vujičić, Boneta & Ivković, 2015). The perception of low salaries emerges as a key determinant of low professional status (Chan, 2019; Chong & Lu, 2022).

The absence of significant differences regarding media representation and job satisfaction suggests that these factors are not perceived as primary determinants of professional status, although the literature highlights their broader impact (Flores, Oliveira & da Ponte, 2025). Overall, the results point to a gap between preschool teachers' professional self-perception and societal evaluation of the profession.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and group differences for the Low status scale items.

Items	Total sample M(SD)	Preschool teacher M(SD)	Parents M(SD)	U	p	Biserial corr.
1. In the preschool teacher profession, salaries are lower than in other equally demanding jobs with an equal degree of education.	4.072(1.071)	4.203(1.013)	3.955(1.115)	2190.500	0.199	0.125
2. The preschool teacher profession enjoys a low status in society.	3.472(1.154)	3.881(1.019)	3.106(1.152)	2673.500	<.001	0.373
3. The media usually portray preschool teachers in a negative light.	2.768(1.115)	2.915(1.022)	2.636(1.185)	2208.500	0.177	0.134
4. The low status of the preschool teacher profession affects job satisfaction.	3.592(1.178)	3.695(1.178)	3.500(1.180)	2115.500	0.389	0.087

4.2. Correlations with sociodemographic variables

Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to examine the relationships between scores on the Low Status Scale and sociodemographic variables due to non-normal data distribution. In the subsample of preschool teachers ($N = 59$), a strong positive correlation was found between age and years of experience ($\rho = 0.811$, $p < .001$), alongside moderate negative correlations between age and education ($\rho = -0.454$, $p < .001$) and between years of experience and education ($\rho = -0.402$, $p < .01$). A statistically significant, albeit weak, positive correlation was observed between education level and low status scores ($\rho = 0.284$, $p < .05$), indicating that more highly educated preschool teachers perceive the professional status as lower. No significant correlations were found for other variables.

These findings suggest that higher levels of education are associated with more critical perceptions of professional status, consistent with research highlighting the role of formal education in fostering reflective and critical perspectives (Wong, 2022; Yu, An & Zhao, 2023). In contrast, the absence of associations with age and professional experience indicates that perceptions of status are shaped less by experience and more by broader professional and societal contexts.

4.3. Group differences between preschool teachers and parents

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine group differences. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between preschool teachers and parents, $t(123) = 2.705$, $p < .010$, with preschool teachers reporting higher scores on the Low Status Scale ($M = 3.746$, $SD = 0.659$) compared to parents ($M = 3.299$, $SD = 0.862$), indicating a more critical assessment of their professional status. These findings confirm the existence of a gap between preschool teachers' professional self-perception and the societal evaluation of the profession, with preschool teachers highlighting insufficient recognition of their expertise by parents (Chan, 2019; Jurčević Lozančić, Tot & Kudek Mirošević, 2023). The results are consistent with previous research indicating that preschool teachers tend to evaluate their professional status more negatively than parents and the wider public (Majerčíková & Urbanecová, 2020; Blanuša Trošelj, 2024).

The findings of this pilot study highlight the need for a more systematic and comprehensive approach to understanding and improving the status of preschool teachers within early childhood education and care. The identified differences between preschool teachers and parents, as well as the association between higher levels of education and more critical perceptions, point to broader structural challenges within the profession. This study forms part of the TEACH-MC Project (2025–2029) and represents the pilot phase of one of its segments, providing initial evidence to inform its further development. The project adopts a systemic approach to examining factors influencing the attraction and retention of preschool and primary teachers across key stages of professional development, including entry into the profession, initial teacher education, and retention in practice. Particular emphasis is placed on understanding young people's motivations for career choice, as well as on strengthening the social status and long-term sustainability of the teaching profession. In this context, the findings offer important empirical insight into the perception of professional status as a key factor shaping both the attractiveness of the profession and retention. The TEACH-MC Project thus provides a research and development framework for addressing challenges related to the status and sustainability of the profession in a systematic and evidence-informed manner.

5. Conclusion

The findings point to a pronounced gap between the societal importance of early childhood education and care and the perceived status of the preschool teaching profession, the reduction of which is essential for ensuring the quality and sustainability of the system. While the results should be interpreted within the context of the study design and its pilot nature, they provide relevant insights for improving professional status. In this regard, the TEACH-MC Project (2025–2029) offers an important framework for systematically addressing issues related to the attraction and retention of preschool and primary teachers. Addressing these challenges requires improvements in working conditions, educational standards, and public perceptions of the profession, alongside stronger media representation and efforts to challenge persistent stereotypes. Investing in the status of the preschool teaching profession ultimately represents an investment in the quality and long-term sustainability of the education system.

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