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Aspects of the professional identity of preschool teachers in Greece: investigating the role of teacher education and professional experience

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present the results of a research programme we developed to investigate the professional identity of preschool education teachers in Greece. Our aim was to investigate parameters affecting not only the creation but also the reform of professional identity and to highlight potential differences in terms of professional identity. Contemporary approaches to professional identity – developed since the 80s – raise issues related primarily to participatory processes, reflection, autonomy and emancipation. Teachers' professional identity is gradually developed through an ongoing process of three interrelated and complementary steps: (a) pre-service teacher education, (b) vocational integration and (c) exercise of professional duties and in-service training. We interviewed 20 teachers on their professional identity. We chose two categories of teachers based on two criteria: (a) their studies, and (b) their professional experience in the field. Tentative findings showed that professional experience was more important than studies in the construction of their professional identity. Professional identity also relates to both their professional experience and the dominant beliefs about early childhood education.

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Professional identity; teacher education; dominant professional discourse; professional experience; change

Introduction

This paper presents the initial results of a study conducted on how the professional identity of preschool teachers is developed in Greece, particularly in terms of teachers who have attended studies of different orientation, as well as relating issues: the content teachers attribute to their professional identity, the impact of teacher education programmes attended by each teacher category, the influence of their teaching and learning experience, and the societal and cultural representations of teachers and teaching. The paper is divided in three parts. The first part outlines the theoretical framework of teacher identity development, focusing on the parameters considered in our study. The second part presents the details of the research programme. The third part discusses the initial results of this study, focusing on the teachers' attitudes about their role in the kindergarten, the skills they consider necessary for their profession and the objectives they set in their work, as these emerge

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from the data analysis. In this way, we also investigate the impact of their studies and teacher education programmes, their experience from their professional activity and from discourses dominant in their professional community and in the social context, as well as dominant representations of preschool education and the role of preschool educators.

The aim was to investigate parameters that affect how teacher professional identity is not only formed and shaped, but also reshaped, depending on the context and stage of the professional life of each participant teacher, as well as to highlight potential professional identity differences between the different categories of preschool teachers.

In the context of investigating parameters affecting how teacher professional identity is not only formed and shaped, but also reshaped, we focused on the extent to which teacher education, particularly University education, can help teachers override pre-existing premodernist intrinsic beliefs and values and challenge modernist demands for technical training and practical apprenticeship. These constitute the dominant discourse of the profession and are backed by the experienced professionals, most of whom have graduated from a two-year course in Teacher Academies. That is, we aimed to study how teachers manage the distance between the postmodern orientation of the University, where identities and roles are constantly negotiated and the focus is not on a fixed role for the teacher but on a reflecting practitioner, and the (pre)modernist discourse of professional experience.

The professional identity of teachers is a relatively recent research topic in Greek literature (Frydaki 2015). Most studies in Greece address the relationship between teachers' professional identity and in-service training, focusing mostly on professional development (Bagakis 2005). Particularly for preschool teachers, who constitute the focus of this paper, no research has been published, though in recent years there have been attempts to explore this field, through postgraduate dissertations.

Theoretical framework

In the past two decades, literature on teacher development and teaching has highlighted the professional identity of teachers and relating issues as a distinct research area (Alsurp 2005; Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004; Connelly and Clandinin 1999; Olsen 2008b; Sachs 2005). A notion common throughout the literature is that teacher identity is dynamic and multi faceted (Cooper and Olson 1996). In this way, teacher professional identity can be understood not only as the result of influences on pre- and in-service teachers, but also as an on-going interaction between the teachers' personal world and the collective discourses of the community they live in. That is, it can be viewed both as a product and as a process in a circular dynamic way (Olsen 2008a).

Definitions of teacher professional identity vary depending on the theoretical framework, authors' point of view and focus of each study. Gee (2001, 99), in a social approach, described identity as 'being recognized as a certain "kind of person," in a given context'. In a psychoanalytic model of teacher identity, the profession to which we are drawn is influenced by unconscious forces and life histories, as are all our choices (Taubman 2007). Within a broad approach, based on research on the professional identity of teachers, it is defined 'in terms of the teachers' sense or perceptions of their roles or relevant features of their profession, or in terms of their perceptions of themselves as an occupational group' (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004, 118).

Recent educational research highlights the importance of teacher identity for teaching and teacher development, as 'it provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of "how to be", "how to act" and "how to understand" their work and their place in society' (Sachs 2005, 15). Yet it is noteworthy that, even if professional identity is a fluid notion and its building an on-going process, subject to interpretation and self-evaluation, fundamental change does not take place easily (Korthagen 2004; McAdams 2001). This is perhaps due to the fact that professional identity is not simply something that teachers have, but also something they use in order to make sense of themselves as teachers (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004). The sense of the self cannot easily be changed, because educators perceive each change as a threat, as a cancellation (Hargreaves 1998; Pajares 1992; Richardson and Placier 2001). Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) note that researchers and academics conceptualise the development of professional identity in various ways (Chang-Kredl and Kingsley 2014), focusing on different factors and varying topics in this context, including concepts of self that determine how they develop as teachers, attitudes towards educational change and the teachers' role, reflection and self-evaluation as factors shaping their professional identity, expectations of other people, etc.

Due to this lack of a common definition, our research focuses on the essential features of teacher professional identity and the factors that influence its formation and development: prior personal experiences (family, schooling), societal and cultural images of teachers, teacher education programmes, current teaching context and professional experiences, and career plans and expectations.

We selected the above from among the parameters mentioned in relevant literature, believing that we can utilise them to explore the dynamic development of professional identity in evolution. That is, we explore the educators' initial representations of the profession of the preschool teacher (prior personal experiences in family and school, societal and cultural images of teachers), the influence and importance of their training (teacher education programmes) and the role of professional experience (current teaching context and professional experiences), as well as the perspectives of an alternative professional development (professional experiences, and career plans and expectations). We consider these necessary for the Greek context, which seems to be attached to traditional representations of preschool educators (Dafermou, Koulouri, and Basagianni 2006).

It should be noted that we view these factors as interrelated and complementary in different ways. For this reason, we do not approach them as a set of essential characteristics common to all teachers, but as part of a discourse open to continuous redefinition, in a dynamic equilibrium between personal and professional, in a broader social and institutional context. In this framework, we adopted Olsen's sociocultural view of teacher identity, which considers that teachers:

> […] are both products of their social histories, and […] move themselves from one subjectivity to the next, from one facet of their identity to another, and can in some limited sense choose to act in certain ways considered by them to be coherent with their own understandings. (2008b, 24)

The entry into the profession is certainly considered as a process with a significant impact on the formation of professional identity, since teachers have to face dominant discourses and the broader social and institutional context. Apart from the inherent contradictions of modernism, the development process of the teachers' professional identity must also address the tensions, conflicts and gaps arising when entering the profession (Clandinin et al. 2010). These tensions, conflicts and gaps arise through the – almost deterministic – contrast

between educational theory, which novice teachers have internalised during their training, and what is socially and professionally acceptable, through the gap between the idealised image of professional reality formed during their studies and the actual reality of school culture (Flores 2004; Liu and Xu 2011). So, general conflicts emerge between 'who I am now' and 'who I want to be in the future'.

Hence, we aimed to examine the professional identity of preschool teachers, focusing on a variety of parameters that could illustrate the influence of personal, social and institutional factors in their mutual interaction, as well as the negotiated nature of teacher identity and the process by which it is reshaped through experience, as a result of personal and contextual interpretation.

Study design

We developed a research project on the professional identity of preschool teachers in Greece. The aim was to investigate parameters affecting how teacher professional identity is not only formed and shaped, but also reshaped, depending on the context and stage of the professional life of each participant teacher, and to highlight potential professional identity differences between the different categories of preschool teachers. We chose two categories of teachers:

(1) Teachers who graduated from a two-year course in Nursery Teacher Colleges (Academies),[1] and
(2) Teachers who attended a four-year course in the Faculty of Early Childhood Education at the University of Athens.[2]

We chose to study two different categories of preschool teachers, because they represent two a priori different teacher profiles which coexist in Greek preschool education: (a) teachers who attended a two-year course in the Academies, which initially constituted professional training schools, offering initial training with a purely practical orientation, and (b) teachers who attended a four-year course at the University, with an orientation of analysing and interpreting the educational process, along with its practice. The first category represented the majority of preschool teachers, all female, with an average age of 50 years, while the second category consisted of teachers with an average age of 35 years, also including a male teacher. The teachers from the two categories coexist, working in the same institutional framework, with the same curriculum.[3] The age difference reflects both their different initial training and their years of experience.

Clearly, the two groups of teachers who participated in the research entered the profession after attending completely different initial training. The difference lies not only in the content and duration of the studies, but also in the different role assigned to teachers by the two education programmes.

With this research choice, we investigate the extent to which the formation of professional identity is influenced both by studies (which differ significantly in the two categories) and by professional experience (different in terms of the number of years in service), as well as how their identity is influenced by the coexistence of two different groups of teachers in kindergarten.

Specifically, in our research we attempt to find out how the idealised image of the teachers' role nurtured at the University was 'transformed', changed and reshaped when the

teachers entered the profession and came in contact with preschool teachers with long experience and different studies. That is, we investigate to which degree the postmodern attribution of meaning to identity as a mosaic of personal, cultural and professional identities that change and evolve throughout a person's life, as nurtured at the University, is supported or undermined after entering the profession, which is dominated by the modernist discourses of experienced kindergarten teachers, whose training is based on a more compact perception of the identity of preschool education teachers.

Besides, as dominant discourses reveal, teacher professionalism in Greece is somewhere between the pre-professional age, when 'teachers were virtually amateurs: they only needed to carry out the directives of their more knowledgeable superiors' and the age of the autonomous professional, when 'the spread of teacher pre-service education in the universities and the growth of in-service education provided by experts added weight to the claims to expertise on which the rights to autonomy would rest' (Hargreaves 2000, 158).

The sample was random and purposeful, in the sense that teachers from each category were randomly invited to participate in the study, as they met the criteria of each category; those who agreed became the study sample. They all worked in public kindergartens in the region of Attica. The research findings presented here are based on data collected from semi-structured interviews with 20 teachers, 10 from each group, with an average duration of 30 minutes.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted by two researchers who have no connection to this particular field, but are also educators in other rungs, with postgraduate studies in educational sciences. The interview questions, which were revised after two initial pilot interviews, were all open, revolving around three axes: initial and continuing education, professional experience and reasons for selecting a profession.

In order to interpret the data collected, two phases of analysis were conducted. First, we identified broad themes and thematic categories by studying the interviews through open inductive coding. Second, we analysed the data collected with regard to which teacher group and thematic category we focused on each time, so as to conclude the analysis in a way that would reveal similarities and differences in the professional identity of these two categories of preschool teachers.

The study design and the choices we made illustrate two limitations of this research, which may form the basis for new investigations and studies. The second category consists only of graduates of the University of Athens and not all Preschool Departments of Greece. It would be useful for future research to expand the sample to include graduates from other departments. Also, data collection through observation would allow us to explore in greater depth, as well as to cross-check data that emerged from the discourse of the interviewed educators.

Data analysis

The interview analysis implemented the thematic content analysis method, using the following categories:

- *Pedagogical principles and practices:* Curriculum and institutional texts, Teacher education, Programmes: University courses and practicum, In-service education, Teaching practices, Relationship with students.

- *Professional context:* Memories of entering the profession, Professional experiences, Relationship with colleagues and school administration.
- *Beliefs and attitudes:* The children's life, The parents' role, The role/objective/aims of preschool education, Their role as teachers.
- *Autobiography:* Reasons for selecting this profession, Expectations, Their memories as learners, Turning points.

By analysing the data, and taking account of factors influencing the formation and evolution of professional development, we focus on four themes, which we believe offer insight into the building of teacher identity: reasons for selecting this profession, role of studies, professional context and how teachers represent their role. We chose to present these four themes because they constitute key elements in the shaping of professional identity, and can illustrate trends and potential changes occurring during the dynamic development of professional identity.

Reasons for entering the profession: prior personal experience and social representations

The reasons for entering the profession are deemed indicative of the prospective teachers' perceptions both of the teaching profession and of themselves as teachers. For future teachers, this entails entering a teacher identity, exploring its components as well as their own understanding of teaching and its practices. An important number of studies shows how teachers, by talking about why they chose the teaching profession, reveal both their personal beliefs, constructed by their experiences as pupils, and the social representations of the teaching profession (Azman 2013; Chang-Kredl and Kingsley 2014; Olsen 2008b).

For example, in Olsen's study (2008b, 30, 31), teachers 'revealed a perception of teaching careers as compatible with mothering', highlighting the dominant perception that teaching is a female profession. Other reasons for entering this profession, presented in this study, included 'specific talents or capacities they possessed that they believed suited them well for teaching' and the desire to work with and make a difference for youth. These findings reveal not only the influence of prior experiences on teacher identity but also the perception that teaching is talent-based, not a professional activity that requires training and professional skills development.

In such a reflective context, interesting findings emerge:

Both groups of preschool teachers, that is, the graduates from both the two-year Colleges and the four-year University Departments, display common reasons for selecting this profession.

For most teachers (16 out of 20), the main reason for choosing to become a preschool teacher is their love for young children, their desire to nurture and educate very young pupils, to contribute, but also the love and warmth that the children reciprocate to their teachers.

> To work with children. I loved working with kids. Mostly I would see my friends and other moms, not that they abused them, but maybe they smothered them. And I thought, I will work with children, at least to offer something. I did not like the way they kept telling them to stop, always no, go wash yourself, get dressed… I cannot remember what I thought the job would be like. Certainly something pleasant, time would pass pleasantly. (TAc1[4])

> Because it is very creative, there is a lot of give and take in this, well [it is] not a job, I would not call it a vocation either, it is a gift, starting out in the morning and working with children – as

> romantic as it might seem – I consider myself a happy person, not having to deal with what has difficulties and pain. I mean, if I am going to work with people, I will work with the best part, well in terms of age anyway. Because if you love it, you can create something extraordinary. Or maybe you do not love it, but still – this may seem romantic too – you can be good at it and create something extraordinary. (TUn3)

The role of a little mother, or a beloved older relative who cares for children, is latent in their selection of a profession. In general, the presence of children in the family or wider circle comes up in several interviews as a reason for choosing to become a preschool teacher.

> Perhaps it is because of my position in the family. I come from a family with four children, and I was the second, a boy and a girl came after me, and, I do not know, maybe it just came from within, nobody taught me that, certainly nobody imposed it on me, but I took great pleasure in caring for them, so much, I was a little mother and so, I do not know, probably it just came naturally… (TUn5)

> I do not know, my mum says that, since I was little, we would go to the park and she would lose me, because I'd go behind the strollers of other babies. I always enjoyed a great relationship with children. It was something I loved greatly. I loved it, I love it and I will… So, basically, I always imagined myself as part of a lovey dovey team, just doing things together. (TAc3)

Their choice is decisively influenced by views expressed in their family environment, representing the profession of a preschool teacher as easy, with convenient working hours, and advantageous, especially for 'a woman who also wants to become a mother'. Educators reproduce these views in school, as they provide their students with guidance, direction and advice on how to select a profession.

> That is, she (my mother) would tell me, because she too was a civil servant and had struggled a lot, in fact she worked far away and long hours etc., so she would tell me that apart from working with children, you get good hours and holidays, so, she stressed this point. And when you have a family of your own, it will be easier for you to do both, to balance work and family. (TUn1)

> And, for practical reasons, like, as a woman I chose it because I was aware of, I knew how many hours and days teachers work. So I knew that when I would have my own family, my children and I would have the same vacations, as it eventually happened. In the summer, you get the longest vacations, these are the practical aspects which I knew that, as a future mother, would be very convenient for me. (TAc6)

> On the other hand, I had been told that, OK, the salary is not high, but at least for a woman it is fine. You are close to home, well at some point you will be close to home, you have a family and you are close to your children. And your children stay with you when they are young and then they go to school, and so I made up my mind. Mostly, I was fascinated by the innocence of children … (TAc2)

Only one of the Academy graduates, focusing on the professional nature of the process, stated that she chose this profession because she considers it creative, thanks to its flexibility and open curriculum. It is significant that for most educators, despite their kindergarten experience, this open framework does not seem to play a decisive role.

> Because there is flexibility and freedom in the kindergarten curriculum. In elementary and high school a specific curriculum is to be followed. There are restrictions. (TAc7)

It is apparent that gender-related influences emerged from the interviews of most participant teachers (14 out of 20):

(1) When they were young girls, most participants played school, pretending to be teachers for their brothers and sisters or other children.

(2) Their family and school teachers had supported their plan to become a preschool teacher, or urged them specifically, as women, to choose this profession because it would be convenient for them as future mothers.
(3) Most participants viewed the structure of teaching in preschool education as compatible with motherhood.

Moreover, it seems that selecting a profession is associated with dominant perceptions of the aims of preschool education: it relates more to providing children of this age with care and affection, and less to education. This perception does not view preschool teachers as professionals, but rather in terms of an expanded mother's role. This is why relationships of love are considered the core of the preschool process. The role of social representations of preschool teachers is evident in this case: a profession convenient for women, who can behave as mothers, loving and caring for their children. No reference is made to professional skills or the complex and challenging role of educators, as teaching skills are considered innate ('it came naturally', 'I was good at', etc.). According to this stereotypical gendered perception and discourse, preschool teachers' professionalism can hardly be acknowledged, as it may be taken for granted that women can take care of children (Jónsdóttir and Coleman 2014). This gendered image of preschool teachers as 'substitute mothers', emphasising 'care', renders training almost pointless (Moss 2006). In this sense, it is apparent that this strong social representation of preschool education as childcare and creative engagement to a great extent determines, for most educators in both groups (16 out of 20), the reasons for selecting a profession, also influencing their expectations from their studies: a vocational school with a practical orientation, nurturing children group management skills, and nothing more than that.

The role of studies: teacher education experience

Literature refers to the contribution of studies and teacher education programmes to shifts in teacher professional identity, claiming that their curricula focus on the teaching process, addressing issues of knowledge and teaching skills (Chong, Ling, and Chuan 2011), as well as the complexity of the teacher's role (Connelly and Clandinin 1999). Yet it remains unclear 'how recognition of this importance translates into concrete action in the form of teacher education programme design and activities' (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009, 184). Does it relate to the courses student teachers attend or only to their practicum? Regarding their beliefs, which have been influenced by their prior experiences as pupils (Lortie 1975), 'do they change after exposure to academic discourse and practical experiences in the classroom during their teacher preparation years?' (Chong, Ling, and Chuan 2011, 34).

The exploration of the role of their education in this research reveals the following points, regarding the role of their studies and how these affected the formation of their professional identity.

Most preschool teachers from both categories are satisfied with their studies (18 out of 20), claiming that their education provided them with the qualifications necessary for practice.

Academy graduates are particularly satisfied both with the practical orientation of their studies and with attending sample teaching sessions in model kindergartens. In fact, they attribute their excellence to this practical orientation. For this reason, they believe they have been trained more adequately and therefore more efficiently.

> The academy gave us the opportunity to learn many things, and see how they work in practice. It taught us about all systems, we went through all the systems, seeing how they work in practice. … The American Open School … corners, which were introduced to the other kindergartens much later. At the time, we had already been learning to work in corners … Montessori, Emilia Reggio, all the systems […]. Our minds opened, and we received so many stimuli … piano, gymnastics, arts … (TAc4)

In contrast, University graduates identify the following as positive elements: the wide spectrum of their studies, their solid theoretical education, which allowed them to familiarise themselves with the complex needs of the teaching process, and the research orientation with which they became familiar.

> Along the way I found the programme to be very interesting, with all these courses, the syllabus, if I may call it so, it had so many subjects that related not only to pedagogy and psychology, but also to the arts, to actions within and outside the school, and this attracted my interest, it was the main reason why I decided I wanted to continue studying in this department. (TUn2)

> I think that everyone should get a general education, particularly when intending to work in this field, to become an educator. (TUn6)

However, they consider the distance between theory and practice to constitute a deficiency of their studies. They feel that their theoretical knowledge was not sufficiently linked to educational practice. Their narratives take for granted that University 'theory' is superior and opposed to 'practice'. They seem to connect practice with the profession, and theory with the University.

> The training we received was mainly theoretical. Many theories, many kinds of psychology, but I think there is a difference between theory and practice. It is one thing to learn a theory about something and quite another thing to implement it in practice on a daily basis. I think that we have … there is a gap there, regarding practice I mean. (TUn8)

> Courses on practical issues, like what I just said, I mean that is what was missing, […] at least they should give some advice, in this case for instance in this case, this is what you can do, and provide some ideas. (TUn1)

For this reason, they feel unprepared when they enter the profession.

> I did not feel that what I learned in theory could help me in practice, every day, with the children, that is, I felt I knew nothing. I am talking about everyday practice, how to organise the activities. I had so much knowledge in my head, bur regarding everyday practice, I felt I knew nothing. (TUn4)

The difference between the attitudes of Academy and University graduates towards their studies confirms the dominant view on Academies and University departments: the former provided preschool teachers with professional knowledge, while the latter offered a wealth of knowledge, but did not prepare teachers for their profession. This view is dominant in teacher discourse, adding to the perception that although University departments have been operating in Greece for the past 30 years, they have not been able to reverse the perception of the kind of studies they offer.

This discourse is also apparent in the way teachers refer to the practicum as a process of vocational practice and implementation. They adopt the widespread dominant view that pedagogy consists of practical/technical learning, which is learned in practice, and that theory constitutes either a distanced and perhaps useless body of knowledge for their teaching practice or a set of teaching techniques and survival tactics that could be used in practice. This is obvious in their reference to the courses which they attended during their studies

and which they consider useful for their work in the future. Regardless of whether they graduated from the Academies or the University, they view as useful everything that provided them with specific instructions, that is, everything that guided them and helped them gain control of the teaching act. They also reveal their need for guidance and useful tips in order to manage discipline problems and any difficult situations that may arise. So, the courses identified as most important are the pedagogical and teaching courses (of language arts, literature, mathematics), courses of psychology, courses relating to kindergarten activities, like visual arts, music, puppet theatre. Therefore, they consider important the courses from which they can draw applicable examples of classroom activities or management. In the perceptions of preschool teachers, the value of courses is judged based on their direct link to practice. They seem to understand the teaching act as a series of applications, not as an open process for which they are to plan activities, after analysing and understanding the context of their classroom.

> Because our work is complicated, I think all courses had something to offer. In retrospect, I can conclude and say for sure that… certainly the courses involving teaching methodology and pedagogics – after all this is our job, the core of our studies –but also courses that I had underestimated and I was not very good at, like visual arts, music. I find they are very important, and I was wrong to underestimate them at the time. (TUn8)

> Yes, great expectations, and all subjects were very nice and interesting. Maybe this is why I was disappointed by reality afterwards, as I said before, because I saw there was a distance, I mean, some practical issues, we had not learned about them … (TUn1)

> Certainly, Pedagogics, Advanced Didactics, that we attended, but I think all of them, even Physical Training that we attended, it was Physical Training for children. That is, how they can exercise their body through game situations. Through games you can nurture their body, their mind, their teamwork, their sociability. (TAc2)

> The most useful courses were the practical ones, where we entered the classroom, and we – I am trying to remember –we prepared a theme and around this theme we would develop the music education and counting and writing and the arts. Mostly the arts. (TAc1)

As data analysis revealed, all preschool teachers, regardless of their education, attribute importance to direct guidance and practical orientation. They do not seem to view the educational act as a complex multifaceted process that requires reflection and thoughtful evaluation of the educational framework and their involvement in it. In such an approach, their own role is executive, as they actually implement what the experts propose as appropriate and effective. That is, they neither discuss nor elaborate on the notion that pedagogy, as an interdisciplinary field, is at the same time a perspective and a process, derived from the combination of theory with educational practice. They do not consider pedagogy a field that utilises the theoretical findings of various disciplines, illuminating the parameters that influence educational practice, expanding or even reshaping them in the light of new data that emerge from practice and its systematic investigation.

And if this seems to reflect the training of Academy graduates, where the curriculum reflects such an orientation, it is certainly not consistent with the curriculum of the Faculty of Early Childhood Education. The curriculum of this faculty is organised with the aim of training reflective practitioners of preschool education. The course content and various teaching types offered (auditorium lectures, small seminars, thematic weeks, supervised practical exercises, research practice) aim at the functional activation of transmitted

knowledge, helping students understand the educational field and interpret the processes developed within it (Androussou, Kortessi-Dafermou, and Tsafos 2012; Androussou and Kourti 2014). In other words, the Faculty of Early Childhood Education curriculum aspires to train educators who do not simply implement 'good practices', but research their work and contribute in shaping the curriculum.

Current teaching context: the role of experience

All teachers of the sample, regardless of their education category, attribute great importance to the role of experience, as it allows them to: (a) make up for any deficiencies in their education, (b) deal with a difficult situation or a crisis, (c) avoid making mistakes, and control their group more efficiently, and (d) operate more autonomously and effectively.

A comparison of these excerpts, from teachers from the two different education categories, reveals how their views coincide:

> All these experiences make me feel I am more effective, more critical in my decisions on everything. And the teaching experience, it is a very important thing … (TAc5)

> That is, suddenly, I had to lead a classroom, when I did not have – at the time – without experience, I felt I did not have the right skills. The skills developed with time, and they are still developing, of course. (TUn7)

In their narratives about entering the profession, it is obvious that experience has a catalytic effect on how teachers perceive the teaching process. They claim that more experienced teachers transmitted their empirical professional knowledge, shaped by practice itself and presented as independent of any theory. This approach is mainly supported by the University graduates, perhaps feeling that the guidance offered by their colleagues makes up for the inadequate practice offered by the University.

For instance TUn4, who earlier in her interview attributes importance to the theoretical background acquired during her studies, says:

> I would see, I would learn, she would tell me, from the simplest thing, like 'talk to the kids in a low voice', and she told me, but I also saw many things, how she worked. (TUn4)

And she continues:

> OK, so when I found out that I was going to [rural] Lasithi, as I grew up in Athens, I was in shock. Then I went, and I, for one thing, I was very lucky to go to that kindergarten, because of my supervisor there, all the things I may know how to do today, all the foundations, she established them. I mean, I was very self-conscious in the classroom, I did not know what to do, but she helped me immensely. These four years, that I spent there, I believe they were very important for afterwards. With my supervisor, Maria, we developed such a close relationship that I see her as a mother. (TUn4)

The way they present the contribution of experience demonstrates that they view it as more important than anything else. Particularly for the University graduates, the importance of experience is presented as opposed to their 'theoretical' studies and their inadequacy for the profession. They support that becoming preschool teachers is something they owe to their experience. That is to say, experience is viewed as the 'great teacher', who made them effective in what is advocated and indirectly legitimised by school culture; what is empirical and practical, capable of dealing with any challenges and alternatives, mistakenly perceived as unrelated to theory.

How teachers perceive their role

Academy graduates define their role almost exclusively in emotional terms, without reference to professional skills and/or knowledge. It would seem that 'love for children' suffices as the sole qualification for the educational process. This reference to the emotional dimension of the profession dominates in the discourse of most preschool teachers from this category (8 out of 10).

> To love her work and the children. Only if she really loves it. (TAc8)

> It's love, giving your soul. Mostly she needs to love children. (TAc3)

For this reason, the skill considered most necessary is mental strength (perseverance), which can be combined with specific personality traits (happy, smiling, active, versatile, giving). They therefore associate their profession with innate inclinations, talents and passion in their discourse.

> The kindergarten teacher actually, as in every profession, must be a talented person, right? She must be passionate about her work. (TAc10).

Even most University graduates refer to their role in emotional terms (6 out of 10):

> It's not just working, it's giving your soul. (TUn9)

> I think it is a unique job, in the sense that you come in contact with people who express their love every day in a different way, and you know it's something real, and you return it, and this grows throughout the year, and this human dimension of the profession, it's what makes me want it so much. (TUn2)

In both categories, however, there are voices that distance themselves from this dominant logic, attributing other aspects to their role, beyond sentimentality. They are preschool teachers who connect their professional activity with meeting the needs of each child, developing their skills in various areas and considering that their professional development requires personal exploration, reflection and training:

> To keep my eyes and ears a little bit more open, to watch the kids, not to take them lightly, to spend many hours talking with them. (TAc9)

> Each year there is something different. This year, with the potential of the class as it begins, you can think of activities to do that are different, depending on the capabilities of the children. (TAc4)

> To listen, to understand the children's interests, to be close to them, so that they can feel you are close. It's not about being a mommy. Not at this level. So that they can understand that you are their teacher and that, that, that, but also to be open as an individual in general, you have to be like that in your life too, this is what I believe. (Tun4)

> A kindergarten teacher has to listen, to observe, to write a lot. A journal. […] To write and to work on himself on a personal level, but I do not mean that everyone should turn to a psychologist or something. To write about himself. (TUn9)

The difference between the two categories is that this exploratory and reflective discourse occurs more frequently in University graduates, who speak of their profession and the skills they consider necessary, in terms that refer to the methodology they were taught at the University. It seems that the University studies have left their mark on some of the preschool teachers, a mark which, in the long run, could create a fissure in the dominant view on the profession and role of the preschool teacher, and therefore lead to teaching practices of a different type.

Conclusions

Becoming a professional is a process of interaction between what is found relevant by others in the vocation and what teachers value themselves (Brooke 1994). As Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop point out, 'identity formation is a process of practical knowledge-building characterised by an on-going integration of what is individually and collectively seen as relevant to teaching' (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004, 123). It is argued that teachers' attitudes, values and beliefs originate from their life experiences, particularly the way teachers remember and interpret these experiences. So, from their classroom experience as pupils, student teachers have an educational memory that influences their thinking; they develop lay theories about teachers and teaching and a very strong sense about what it means to be a teacher (Alsurp 2005; Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Schempp, Sparkes, and Templin 1999), theories which were developed unconsciously in the absence of understanding of educational theories and pedagogical principles (Furlong 2013).

According to what the teachers claim, these lay theories, in conjunction with social representations of preschool education teachers, determined their choice and expectations from the profession. As their words reveal, when selecting their profession they perceived the professional identity of preschool education teachers mostly in premodernist terms: love for young children, a desire to nurture and educate very young pupils, to contribute, but also the love and warmth that children reciprocate to their teachers. Then their expectations from their studies and their demand for instrumental knowledge and practical skills which meet their work needs, mark their transition to a perception of teacher identity in modernist terms (Frydaki 2015).

What ultimately emerges from the data analysis is that the modernist perception of professional identity is dominant. As revealed by the analysis of the teachers' interviews, although the two groups have received different training and belong to different age groups, their representations of their professional identity converge to a great extent. That is, despite the efforts of University teacher educators to replace the student teachers' lay theories with scientific theories that have solid foundations and have been thoroughly researched, the core of these preconceptions remains very strong. This means that, although University studies focus on critical readings of the dominant pedagogical logic, this is not enough to set the foundations of an open professional identity. It seems that the modernist dominant perceptions governing the profession have a decisive influence on professional identity, and that it is not easy to break with the dominant model.

The research data indicate that, after entering the profession, these teachers, regardless of their studies, to a great extent revert to many of their preconceptions and lay theories, which are obvious in their reasons for selecting this profession. Evidently, when they enter the profession as novice teachers, they find these lay theories pervasive in the culture of the profession workplace (Furlong 2013). Moreover, they feel that this reinstatement offers the only route for coping with the reality shock of everyday classroom challenges, and therefore that it constitutes a good survival tactic. As Burke points out:

> [In the culture of the workplace] where coping with unprecedented change the educational theories of teacher education become displaced and the lay theories become the theories of practice, or put more simply the student teachers revert to the way they were taught themselves. (1992, 116)

The persistence in the modernist perception through their tendency to revert is obvious in:

(1) How they view the educational process in preschool education and themselves as professionals. The educational act is a sequence of specific prescribed phases, which can lead to specific expected results. In this framework, preschool teachers are skilled craftsmen who can implement what they learned in a decontextualised educational environment. In this case, university education seems completely ineffective and unsuitable for their needs.
(2) The way they view their teacher education: They view their practicum as a necessary and essential parameter, considering it mostly as practice in predetermined techniques, and not as systematic investigation of educational practice, in terms of both observing/planning and implementing/evaluating, in order to gradually develop and adopt the professional attitude of teachers who research their educational action (teachers as researchers).
(3) The skills that most preschool teachers believe they need, so that they can deal efficiently and effectively with everyday challenges in kindergarten: (i) A body of specific knowledge regarding the content of teaching, as well as in the field of psychology and special education, so they can manage relationship issues, mostly interpersonal, and deal with difficult cases individually, (ii) Techniques that relate to teaching specific subjects, providing teachers with specific guidelines for the educational process, (iii) Survival tactics for coping with everyday problems of the educational process in the kindergartens, and (iv) Love and concern for the children, so they can care for them, substituting their mother at such a tender age phase.

We can conclude that the influence of professional context and environment, including the characteristics of the educational institution, teacher colleagues, school administrators and the wider school community, is strong, especially in the early years of professional practice (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009). It should be noted that this environment is not limited to the other teachers in the school, but also includes the school administration, counsellors and the children's parents. Moreover, there is no established channel of communication between school and University at any level, and therefore these two institutions operate in parallel worlds: the University has adopted a postmodern approach and follows a reflective and radical logic, based on the orientation of the teachers as researchers movement (Darling-Hammond 2006; Katsarou and Tsafos 2013; Zeichner and Liston 1990), while kindergartens reproduce the hitherto dominant logic, focusing on individual 'innovative programmes' (e.g. health education, emotional intelligence, etc.), which reinforce the modernist notion of implementing best practices. Thus, newly appointed preschool teachers find themselves in a world that is different from that of their studies and more similar to their own lived experience as pupils (Bullough, Knowles, and Crow 1992; Nelson and Harper 2006; Pajares 1992).

Faced with this contradiction, most teachers seem to assimilate the discourses that dominate the profession and fully conform to social representations of the teaching profession, as reflected in their lay theories. In such an experience-oriented framework, their studies constitute a parenthesis, a theoretical walk through alternative versions of professional identity. Although the University curriculum places emphasis on reversing established perceptions of the profession, it seems that it does not really succeed. In the Faculty of Early

Childhood Education, the professional identity promoted through the courses and the emphasis placed on the practicum, is that of the educator-researcher. In fact, it constitutes a proposal for establishing an 'open' professional identity, of a reflecting practitioner in evolution. Based on our research findings, it seems that this process has not sufficiently deconstructed the student teachers' preconceptions of the profession, and so they return to them as they come in contact with professional life.

Thus the postmodern notion of identity as a dynamic process of transformation throughout a person's life, nurtured at the University, is actually undermined after entering the profession, dominated by the modernist discourses of experienced kindergarten teachers, whose training is based on a more compact perception of the identity of preschool education teachers, discourses that are consistent with the wider social representations of preschool teacher identity.

We should therefore review how student teachers are trained at the University. It is obvious that, although University courses place emphasis on critical readings of the educational process, this does not suffice to provide solid foundations for the creation of a different professional identity, that of the reflective practitioner who is also a reflective companion in the students' learning. It seems to lead to the deconstruction of the dominant logic, though not entailing the reinforcement of another model, capable of confronting the inertia of the current system.

We still have a long way to go. We believe that we need to strengthen the dialogue with educators, create networks of communication and interaction, reinforce the dialogue with preschool teachers and education officials, and nurture communities of learning and practice. Such communities, when they function properly and provide their members with feedback, can constitute a forum for negotiating dominant determinations of professional identity and elaborating a different role for educators, and thus indirectly support the new approach being developed in Universities for the education of future teachers. Otherwise, the obstacle of lived experience will remain insurmountable, as it will constitute the only constant and 'real' reference that offers security.

Notes

1. The main feature of Pedagogic Academies and Nursery Teacher Schools was that they actually constituted professional training schools. The studies lasted for two years. The syllabus included psychology, with emphasis on the children's individual characteristics, pedagogy and application of various subject matters. Teachers were practitioners, school counsellors, masters of puppet show and creative arts. It was not oriented towards the sociological dimension, educational politics or the analysis of educational practices. There were many 'practices', that is, observation sessions in model kindergartens, where students went to 'learn the job'.
2. In Greece the University Departments of Education are an evolution of Teacher Colleges, (Pedagogic Academies) for primary education teachers and Nursery Teacher Schools for preschool and kindergarten educators (Presidential Decrees 1982, 1983).
3. As Greek University Departments of Preschool Education do not implement a common curriculum, while some of them preserve the practical orientation of training that was dominant in Academies, the participants chosen in the second category were graduates of the University of Athens, where we work as teachers' educators and are familiar with the orientation of the Faculty.
4. TAc: Academy graduate teacher, TUn: University graduate teacher.

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