Dream versus reality: The process of preschool teacher's professionalization in Turkey

Mehmet Toran[1] & Özge Hacıfazlıoğlu[2]

Abstract: Teaching as a profession starts with "a passion for teaching", which is reflected into teaching and professional practices of the teacher. This study aims to examine the professionalization process of preschool teachers and reveal the reasons why they want to be preschool teachers, their perceptions towards the profession and the initial challenges encountered in Turkey. This study used qualitative method and face to face interviews were conducted with 47 preschool teachers. Preschool teachers' views appeared to extend on the two following extreme spectrums: "Being the caretaker of the young population" and "having a passion to play a significant role in the future of children". Preschool teachers' accounts about their experiences in the career entry phase showed that all of them had the feelings of anxiety and fear.

Keywords: Preschool Teachers; Teacher's Professionalization; Dream; Reality

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[1] **Mehmet Toran,** Assoc. Prof. Dr., Early Childhood Education Department, Istanbul Kultur University, ORCID: 0000-0003-3457-9113

Correspondence: m.toran@iku.edu.tr

[2] **Özge Hacıfazlıoğlu,** Prof. Dr., Educational Sciences, Hasan Kalyoncu University

INTRODUCTION

The quality of preschool is based on the commitment and passion of preschool teachers, who devoted their lives on continuous professional development. Therefore, professionalization of preschool teachers is directly related with their professional competencies (Lipscomb, Schmitt and Pratt, 2015). Teacher professionalization is important in meeting the needs of children in various developmental phases as well as enabling educational authorities to develop plans and strategies that align with the changing needs of the society (Gianina-Ana, 2013). Preschool teacher education enables student teachers to be aware of their professional competencies as a preschool teacher in addition to be one of the members, who contribute to the cultural changes (Vujičić and Čamber Tambolaš, 2017).

Preschool teachers' perceptions of their roles and the professionalization has been shaped and reshaped with the influence of social and cultural changes from the early times until today (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, and Knoche, 2009). Preschool education given in undergraduate programs and the professional development support systems provided after graduation plays an important role about the ways how preschool teachers conceptualize the professionalization process as well as the importance they attribute to their profession (Clark and Huber, 2005). In addition to these, being active in the field of teaching practice and being in close contact with the children enable preschool teachers to put additional meanings to their conceptualization of being a preschool teacher, leading them to identify themselves as the "professionals" in their fields of study (Gemeda, Fiorucci and Catarci, 2014). Moreover, professional support given during their teaching practice contributes positively to their skills as well as giving them a professional perspective on being a teacher (Ackerman, 2004; Vesay, 2008).

As it is the case in many countries, the first step in the path of professionalization of being a preschool teacher is to be a graduate of a bachelors' program. Similarly, preschool teacher should be qualified to teach after receiving his or her bachelors' degrees from four-year undergraduate program of early childhood education in Turkey (Toran, 2012; Yükseköğretim Kurulu [YÖK], 2007). Teacher candidates list their program preferences in accordance with their university entrance exam scores and they are placed to their faculties through a centralized system. Therefore, their professionalization process starts with their preference (Ölçme Seçme ve Yerleştirme Merkezi [ÖSYM], 2017). There are multiple factors that determine one to choose a career as a preschool teacher. In a study focusing on preschool teachers' profile, "family guidance, social setting and teacher guidance" were determined as factors for personal preferences (Erkan et al. 2002). Preschool teachers' reasons for being a preschool teacher and their perceptions towards the professionalization in the follow up years seems to be related. In this respect, preference for being a preschool teacher and being actively in the field of teaching practice could shape one's conceptualization of professionalization. There is scarcity of empirical and qualitative evidence about the ways how preschool teachers conceptualize their

experience of professionalization, based on their own experiences. This study is unique in ways of revealing preschool teachers' expectations of their professions and their experiences in the professionalization process.

Being a preschool teacher brings many interrelated challenges and the teacher faces those to the greatest extent in the first year. This study specifically focuses on preschool teachers and aims to see how preschool teachers conceptualize professionalization by reflecting upon their experiences over time. The study also examines the constraints encountered at the entry phase and reveals the insights given by teachers. The study sought answers to the following research questions:

- Research question 1: Why do preschool teacher chose this profession?

- Research Question 2: What are preschool teachers' perceptions towards the profession?

- Research Question 3: What are the initial challenges encountered by preschool teachers?

This study is expected to understand and improve the work and lives of preschool teachers and bring unique insights to teachers and teacher educators as well as contributing to the scholarship of early childhood education.

The paper unfolds in the following manner: First, we review the literature on teacher professionalism and teacher identity. Then we analyze and interpret the interview data through the prism of "professionalism and teacher identity". Finally, we provide provisional insights for preschool teachers at various levels in schools.

Teacher Professionalism

The notion of professionalization is defined as "the process of using education and certification to enhance the quality of performance of those within an occupational field" (Shanahan, Meehan, and Mogge, 1994, pp.3). Tütüniş and Hacıfazlıoğlu (2017) underlined the impact of education and training in the definition although there be various categories that could emerge in different professions and puts emphasis on the impact of "reflective practice and communities of practice and other socially constructed professional development practices" as a "means for teacher professionalism". The notion of professionalism dates back to 1980s with the research on teachers' lives and their professional stories.

Ben-Peretz and Fiores (2018) claims the idea that teachers should be prepared for professional autonomy in the world of externally imposed educational policy along with the tensions and paradoxes in teaching contexts. Teacher professionalism is categorized under the following themes:

- Hyperactive professionalism (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012)

- Managerial professionalism (Sachs, 2016)

- Constrained professionalism (Wills and Sandholtz, 2009)

- Performative professionalism (Evans, 2011)

- Collaborative and democratic professionalism (Whitty, 2008)

- Collaborative professionalism (Fullan, 2007)

Above mentioned views of professionalism also seems to align with preschool teachers' context. In an era of change and competition, preschool teachers also deal with challenges created in school policies as well as opening alternative professional path for their professional development as a teacher.

Goodson's (2000) is one of the pioneers, who opened a path to analyze professionalism from the lenses of teachers' life stories and brought a sociologically oriented view point of investigating lives in the fields of sociology, anthropology and educational studies. Sikes, Measor and Woods (1985); Huberman (1988) and Clark (2001) analyzed teachers' careers, career phases of teachers and their experiences from a narrative perspective and related the professional stories with idea of professionalism. In line with this view, Noddings (1986, pp.502) underlined the importance of being aware of our role in our story as a teacher and emphasized the value of learning "by living with those whom we teach in a caring community, through modeling, dialogue, practice and confirmation".

The construct of professionalization also seems to align with the notion of communities of practice proposed by Wenger (1998), who in a way explains the professionalization process in which individuals develop and transform their thinking through their active participation and engagement with others in various social and cultural communities. The theory of community of practice is rooted in sociocultural theories of learning and development that claim that human development is based on social interaction in cultural practices (Hacıfazlıoğlu, Olson, Carlson, and Clark, 2017; Sachs, 2001). Billett (2007) discusses the relationship between personal and the immediate social experience in learning through participation and calls for "the reinstatement of the individual agent as equal in importance to the community to which they are situated". He illustrates the ways in which the situation (community) and the individual are shaped by and in return help to shape each other. Therefore, the individual learner is seen as an agentic being, whose actions are influenced by their biography, life history and sense of identity (Billett, 2007).

Wenger (2009) describes learning as a journey through landscapes of practices through engagement. Through imagination and alignment, identities come to reflect the landscape one lives and the experience. Therefore, he believes that identity itself becomes a system with the following characteristics: "Identity is a trajectory, identity is a nexus of multi membership and identity is a multiscale" (pp.5). In this context, many levels of scale are expected to get into the constitution of identity by means of "engagement, imagination and alignment". The landscape plays an important role

in shaping the experience of individuals: "practices, people, places, regimes of competence, communities, and boundaries become part of who we are" (pp.6). This study focuses on views of preschool teachers and reveals their experiences on the professionalization process.

METHOD

The study is based on a qualitative stance and "phenomenology" was used as a design. Views and experiences of preschool teachers were collected via face to face interviews. Voices are powerful and useful tools in both educational practice and research, yet preschool teacher's voices about their professionalization process are rarely heard. Seidman (1998) has stated that when we encourage participants to tell their stories, we hear about their experiences in illuminating and memorable ways.

In this study, preschool teachers were asked to share their views and lived experiences during the interviews. They were expected to reveal their views and stories through the prism of "professionalization". As we interviewed preschool teachers, we used reflective listening, remaining open and non-judgmental in the process.

Participants

47 preschool teachers constitute the study group in the study. All of the teachers hold bachelor degree in early childhood education. Their experience as a preschool teacher range from 1 to 32 years. All of the teachers work at public early childhood education institutions.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants

Demographic Information		f	%
Gender	Female	47	100.0
	Male	0	0.0
Age	20-29	19	40.42
	30-39	20	42.55
	40-49	6	12.76
	50+	2	4.25
Experience	1-5 years	4	8.51
	6-10	9	19.14
	11-15	14	29.78
	16-20	8	17.02
	21-25	7	14.89
	26-30	4	8.51
	31+	1	2.12
Membership to Teaching Organizations	Yes	8	17.02
	No	39	82.98
In service training	Yes	28	59.57
	No	19	40.43
Experience at schools	Suburb	9 years	
	City	16 years	

Interviews and Procedure

We contacted prospective interviewees in person or by email, requesting their participation. We sent a letter to preschool teachers inviting their voluntary participation, informing them of participation requirements and safeguards, and asking that they certify their informed consent. Interviews were conducted at schools in teachers' offices, where they felt comfortable. Teachers were reassured that their identities would remain confidential unless they wished to be identified by name or institution. No real names were listed on any documents or data related to this research.

Data Collection Tool

Semi structured interview form was used as a tool for data collection. In the interview forms, preschool teachers were asked to share their views about:

… the reasons why they chose to become preschool teacher

… their initial experiences as a preschool teacher

… the ways in which they manage their own professionalization process.

Interview questions were open-ended. This was done so that the preschool teachers *could better their views and stories.*

Bias and Validity

The procedures used to collect and analyze the data were put in place to address the issues of bias and validity. We bring to this study our own background as the scholars working in the fields of "early childhood education" and "teacher education". Maxwell (1996) emphasizes the potential for bias and the threat to validity when filtering information through our own prior experiences. We were very cognizant of not allowing, as much as possible, our own assumptions to influence the interview process. We were also careful to minimize the possibility of misunderstanding in the interview process. That is why we allowed participants to review their own interview transcripts (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2016). During the analysis phase, we also solicited input from our colleagues, inviting them to challenge both our thinking and the interpretation of the data (Maxwell, 1996).

Data Analysis

Analysis was based on the following procedures: "Organizing the data, identifying themes, patterns and categories, testing the emergence hypothesis against the data, searching for alternative explanations of the data and writing the report (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). We also used "thumbnail sketches" to capture a few pertinent highlights from a preschool teachers' perspective (Maxwell 1996). During transcription, we were very careful to transcribe the audio recordings word-for-word and paid close attention to the subjects' unsolicited comments and observations. We carried

out cross-case and cross-over analyses based on the various responses from the interviews (Merriam, 1988; Miles and Huberman, 1994). We then presented the data in a series of tables, which incorporated direct quotations from participants to illustrate their viewpoints (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Interview data was coded and categories were developed to reach the themes and sub-themes.

Results

Two main themes and three sub-themes under each main theme were determined.

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes emerged

Theme 2: Dream of Being a Preschool Teacher
1. 1. Familial factors and setting
1. 2. Conceptualization of professional identity as a preschool teacher
1. 3. Passion for children
Theme 2: Reality of Being a Preschool Teacher
2.1. Initial challenges encountered as a preschool teacher
2.2. Struggle to create a professional identity as a preschool teacher
2.3. Anxiety for failure as a preschool teacher

Theme 1: Dream of Being a Preschool Teacher

Three sub-themes were determined as a result of the analysis of first main theme of preschool teachers' dreams of being a teacher.

The first sub-theme of "Familial factors and setting" shows that preschool choose their professions in line with the guidance given from their family members or as a result of the scores they obtained from centralized university entrance exams rather than their own preferences.

> *I should say that I did not choose to study this field with my own decision. Instead, my family gave the decision for me. Fortunately, I have always been in good relation with children. That is why I am happy… (Ayşe; 3)*

> *I did not make my decision willingly. I am a regular high school graduate [not a vocational one]. Having a degree in the field of early childhood education was one of my preferences. Though it was not one of my favorite ones in the list [preferred departments]. I do not recall saying myself I have to study at the Faculty of Education … (Şahika; 13)*

The second sub-theme theme of "Conceptualization of professional identity as a preschool teacher" shows that preschool teachers construct a professional identity with the self-realization of the importance of the profession.

> *When I decided to be a preschool teacher, I was proud of myself. Finally, I would be able to contribute to the development of children, who will shape the future … (Havva; 2)*

Teacher Havva's words revealed that, some of the preschool teachers choose their professions with the consciousness they have about the responsibilities of being a teacher for the children. They choose the profession with an awareness of what is expected from them while developing and conceptualizing a professional identity as a preschool teacher.

The third sub-theme of "Passion for children" reveals that some of the preschool teachers choose their professions due to their passion and love towards the children.

> *Choosing this profession starts with the love of children. I chose this profession because I have always enjoyed being with children... (Yasemin; 3)*

> *I decided to have my bachelors' degree in early childhood education because I love children. I love playing and spending time with them ... I have always thought that I could be a good teacher for them. (Vahinur; 9)*

Reflections of the preschool teachers showed that being passionate towards children and enjoy having time with them had an influence on some of the teachers' decision to be preschool teachers.

Theme 2: Reality of Being a Preschool Teacher

The theme of Reality of being a preschool teacher falls into three sub-themes. The first sub-theme of "Initial challenges encountered as a preschool teacher" showed that teachers experienced feelings of incompetency and had difficulty when working with children in the entry phase of their careers. This was the phase of adjustment both for the profession and children.

> *I had enormous difficulty ... I did not have any experience before. I did not know what to do. I felt incompetent in the beginning asking myself 'what I would do'... (Besi; 3)*

> *I thought I would not succeed. I had the feeling that I would never be able to build a line of communication with children at first ... (Ayşe; 6)*

The second sub-theme of "Struggle to create a professional identity as a preschool teacher" showed that preschool teachers were able to construct a professional identity and having a self-efficacy of being a teacher. They perceived themselves as a competent teacher in professional terms while being aware of their professional development needs and make career development plans accordingly.

> *Students in my class were very smart. They had a mind as sharp as a steel trap ... Their eyes were like fire balls. I was expected to serve them as a mentor and help them to broaden their horizons. I had the desire to provide them with what they need ... I have never seen myself as a care taker, instead as an architect that shape their future... (Şebnem; 3)*

The third sub-theme of "Anxiety for failure as a preschool teacher" revealed the psychological factors such as anxiety, fear, discomfort and stress encompassed in the lives of some of the preschool teachers in initial years of their profession.

I had the feeling of fear at first… being solely responsible for the children scared me… (Meryem; 10)

When I first encountered with the children, I was stressed and scared… I had all these mixed feelings of anxiety … That is why I felt myself as a fish out of water… (Gönül; 3)

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In conclusion, preference of being a preschool teacher could be seen as the entry to the long journey of teaching and the profession of being a preschool teacher. There are multiple factors that open path to become a preschool teacher ranging from individual and psychological factors to familial and social factors. Entry phase of the profession appears to be the most challenging time for some of the preschool teachers since this period is associated with the feelings of being incompetent, anxiety and fear in addition to the roadblocks encountered in the path of professionalism due to being a novice teacher (Day and Bakioğlu, 1996; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Furlong and Maynard, 1995; Stokking, Leenders, De Jong, and Van Tartwijk, 2003). The difficulties experienced during this period were related with the feelings of "stress, sense of weariness and vulnerability" (Caires, Almeida, and Vieira, 2012). This study revealed the way how "dream and reality" interplay within the professional lives of teachers. The results of this study seem to be in parallel with the results of Pillen, Beijaard, and Brok's (2013) study on beginning teachers in which professional identity tensions appeared to emerge from an "unbalanced personal and professional side of (becoming) a teacher" (pp.240).

However, some of the preschool teachers survive to constitute and conceptualize a professional identity, putting time and energy for professional development with the aim of being a good teacher. Almost all of the preschool teachers showed feelings of excitement to be a critical person in young children's lives at the beginning of their professional careers. However, in a short while after entering the classroom teachers encounter with the roadblocks. In support of this finding, preschool teachers illustrated their anxiety and fear in the first two years by using various metaphors. They noted the ways in which they learnt how to sail in changing conditions and how to survive in unexpected conditions. The challenges they encountered were mostly related with the profession but there were also other road blocks created by the parents and the school administration. Almost all of the preschool teachers who have been interviewed appears to deal with communication barriers with the parents. Some of them noted that there were times they had to deal with parents (especially mums) more than the children.

Under the second theme of reality of being a preschool teacher, teachers attempted to create their learning communities with the other novice teachers. Half of them mentioned having one or two mentors, who supported them. Most of them used phrases that implies a professional setting in which their lives were surrounded with the idea of "reflective practice". Therefore, the struggle to be an effective teacher was also "a quest for establishing an identity" as a preschool teacher. What struck our attention during the conversations that almost half of them questioned the reason why they chose this profession. The dilemma between what is expected from the profession and the real context one should adopt was seen in the conversations. As it was asserted by Stenberg, Karlsson, Pitkaniemi, and Maaranen (2014), teachers need support mechanisms and networks to meet the demands of the current educational system.

Preschool teachers, who had the opportunity to co-teach with other teachers or with a mentor felt more confident and courageous to try new approaches. Therefore, they were able to pass through the career entry phase in a smooth manner. Their experiences echoed the experiences of Communities of Practice (CoP) by Hacıfazlıoğlu et al. (2017). They noted the ways, which enabled them to create an identity as a preschool teacher by "designing, teaching, collaborating and reflecting" the course together. Their experiences also showed that effective models of mentoring work as long as there is "trust and sincerity". This seems to align with the mentoring scholarship that emphasize the influence of trust in mentoring process (Bakioglu, Hacifazlioglu, and Ozcan, 2010).

Professionalization process is directly related with the idea of professional development and lifelong learning. Preschool teachers appeared to be positive towards practicing innovative approaches in their classrooms. However most of the noted that each time they initiated a novel idea that could be practiced in the class they encountered roadblocks. In addition to structural and organizational constraints in their schools, there were also individual barriers created by the administrators, colleagues, students and parents. Only a limited number of participants (14/42) mentioned having mentors, who gave them support and courage to realize their ideas. However, they were able to follow that path only for a couple of weeks due to heavy load and pressure in their work. In most of the voices they used words and sentences that align with the idea of seeing their classrooms as their own "private spaces". Most of these practices were not in the form of co-teaching or mentor-mentee relationships.

Cheng (2009), Bakioglu, Hacifazlioglu and Ozcan (2010), and Bakioğlu and Hacıfazlıoğlu (2011) noted the importance of creating communities of practice both within faculties of education and after graduation. Theme of "dream versus reality" seems to align with the study conducted on student teachers by Hacıfazlıoğlu, Türktan and Özışık (2017). In the mentioned study, a site visitation to a disadvantaged school led student teachers to be aware of the realities of the teaching profession. In

parallel with the themes emerged in our study, student teachers' thoughts in the mentioned study appeared to fall into the themes of "realistic and idealistic views about the teaching profession".

This study confirmed Wenger's (2009) views that communities of practice are part of broader social systems that involve other communities and individuals live and learn across a multiplicity of practices in the social world. As in the scholarship of teacher education (Clark, 2001; Hacıfazlıoğlu, Türktan and Özışık, 2017; Schön, 1987; Toran, 2019), this study also showed that the notion of reflective practice should be infused in the school culture and be practiced in a way that includes all teachers, administrators and parents. The views of preschool teachers echoed Wenger's (2009) views on modes of "engagement, imagination and alignment" to describe the professionalization and the identification process. Although the term "modes of belonging" was used in 1980s, it was used as "mode of identification" to highlight the critical functions in an individual's professional career path. "All three modes function both inside practices and across boundaries". Engagement is typical of participation in the communities that a teacher belongs but it can also be path to explore a limitation if he or she can have enough access to the practice. Imagination also functions "inside a community" as teachers get to know each other and share their present and future practices. This sharing could also be a path for self-identification by means of reflective practice. Learning in this journey is seen as a process of "realignment between socially defined competence and the personal experience, whichever is leading the other" (pp.4).

Everywhere in the world faculties of teacher education need to encourage preschool student teachers and preschool teachers take responsibility for their life-long professional development and take helpful action in their classes. The quest for developing an identity as a teacher starts during pre-service and continues throughout one's career. There will always be roadblocks on this long journey. Teachers should always be aware of the fact that each experience is a lived experience that brings cumulative and valuable insights. It is at the point that "thoughtful teaching" (Clark, 2001) should be infused in the veins of preschool teachers. With this strategy, preschool teachers may become the advocate for reflective practice and open paths both for their own careers and their peers. They also emphasized the importance of commitment and passion to be a better teacher to open career paths for their children.

This study highlights the importance of collaborative professionalism in ways of being the active advocates of "reciprocal learning" (Craig, 2018), no matter how they may be occupied with hyperactive and managerial professionalism in their social, cultural and economic contexts. In support of this finding, Hargreaves (2000) questions the ways how positive new partnerships could be created beyond the school that will enhance the individual and collective work-lives of teachers. He also investigates whether this may lead teachers to the de-professionalization stage in their careers. He warns the risks that teachers undertake under conditions of uncertainty, multiple pressures and

intensified work demands, in which the idea of professionalism becomes a site of struggle between various interest groups and stakeholders. This also aligns with the results of the theme of this study "dream versus reality".

This study opens paths for further studies in ways of narrating the lived preschool teachers' experiences in the professionalization process (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). In focusing on the details of individual lives, a major concern in narrative inquiry is the construction and enacting of identities. Individual cases and narratives can in this way enable teachers to understand complex inter-relationships (Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Lieblich, Tuval- Maschiach and Tamar, 1998; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001; Toran, 2019). As it was proposed by Riessman (2008), preschool teachers should also be encouraged to tell their narratives allowing themselves to negotiate their identities to make meaning of their experiences. This study revealed a general perspective of preschool teachers' professionalization process. Narrative stories could be collected in follow up studies.

Preschool teachers' views and experiences shared in this study reminded us the value of "teaching- learning relationship" and "researcher-practitioner relationship" proposed by Noddings (1986). As it was noted by Connelly and Clandinin (1990), these two relationships enable teachers to "situate themselves to the other teachers and individuals with whom they work, to the ways in which they practice in a collaborative way and to the ways all participants model, in their practices, a valuing and confirmation of each other" (pp.6). Further studies could investigate the ways in which preschool teachers could embody the qualities of a researcher-teacher and researcher-learner relationship through "action research". It appeared during the dialogues that preschool teachers are in need of "action research" but they do not know how they will learn and transfer it in their professional lives. This study is expected to start a discussion on how recent developments in teacher education could be incorporated in teacher professionalism.

It should also be noted that every preschool and the local context has its own special qualities, strengths, culture and history. The reflections shared in the study could be applied in locally appropriate ways in schools as well as to strengthen pre-service and in-service preschool teacher education programs.

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