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Research Article

"A totally new situation that put us into uncharted waters": Preschool teachers negotiate their professional identity in respect to online learning during the Covid-19 lockdowns in Greece.

Katerina Dadatsi[1], Evangelia Koukouriki[2]

1. Department of Early Childhood Education and Care, School of Social Sciences, International Hellenic University, Greece; 2. University of Thessaly, Greece

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic Greece has experienced 3 different lockdown periods, which brought along school closure and the emergence of new hybrid systems of online learning. This paper aims to highlight the ways preschool teachers negotiated aspects of their professional identities during the periods of online learning. 18 preschool teachers, working in public preschools in a medium sized Greek town, were interviewed. For the study's purposes, a semi-structured interview protocol was created and used. A thematic analysis of the data revealed that the periods of Online Learning were perceived as turbulent and that the participants experienced at a professional level a variety of structural changes that challenged existing notions of the professional self. Through constant renegotiations, new versions of professional identities emerged, which included more "professional" characteristics. Findings are also discussed in relation to future countervailing institutional initiatives that could be undertaken henceforward.

1.1. Introduction

Professional identity is of crucial importance for teachers' self-efficacy (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Zee & Koomen 2016), their well-being (Cumming, 2017; Cumming & Wong, 2019; Thorpe et al, 2020) as well as their attitudes toward teaching (e.g., Lee & Quek, 2018; Parua & Bhardwaj, 2012) and their interactions with their students (Hamre et al., 2013; Silver et al.,

2005; Saft & Pianta, 2001). It is therefore evident that professional identity is a core characteristic for teachers and teaching as a process (see for example Hoban, 2007) as it "*shapes their dispositions, where they place their effort, whether and how they seek out professional development opportunities, and what obligations they see as intrinsic to their role*'' (Hammerness, et al., 2005: 383–384).

Although scholars do not agree on a single definition, Beijaard et al. (2004), having systematically reviewed the relevant literature from 1998 to 2000, stand out some widely accepted characteristics of professional identity. More precisely, they highlight its fluidity and its understanding as an ongoing, dynamic process, in which the person has an active role. Furthermore, they acknowledge that a wide variety of factors, both within the individual (e.g., emotions) and external (e.g., the school context) can influence its formation and (re)shape it. This conceptualization lays out a framework in which teachers actively and constantly (re)negotiate their experiences and the sense they made of them (Sachs, 2005) and try to form their own, personal ideas about *'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society.* (Sachs, 2005, p. 15). Yet, despite its dynamic character, there is also a notion of stability in professional identity (Korthagen 2004). The need to resist to change can be better understood if one takes into account that teachers often perceive change as threatening (Richardson & Placier, 2001) and that they need to maintain a sense of a stable professional self in order to position themselves as professionals in the educational context (Beijaard et al., 2004).

1.1.1. Preschool teachers' professional identity

Research on preschool teachers' professional identity is rather limited (e.g., Arndt et al., 2021; Dalli, C. 2008; Harwoodet al., 2013; Moloney, 2010; Thomas, 2012; Woodrow, 2007) and mainly suggests that societal roles and gendered expectations determine to a great extent the ways preschool teachers view themselves as professionals (Barber, 2002; Forde et al., 2006). It has been argued that preschool teachers do not consider themselves as belonging in a coherent professional group. This may be due to the fact that they come from different educational and training backgrounds (Osgood & Stone, 2002) or it could be attributed to a constant swaying between care and education and to understanding preschool as an educational institution fundamentally different from elementary school which is academically oriented and where real learning takes place (Maloney, 2010). It has also been claimed that preschool teachers link their professional identity to the number of skills and qualifications they possess (Moloney, 2010).

However, since preschool teaching is a professional area predominantly occupied by women (Hedlin & Åberg, 2018; Lobman & Ryan, 2007; Rohrmann, 2016; Warin & Gannerud, 2014), nurturing and caring, both core features of women's expected identities, are also significant factors of one's professional identity in preschool (Androusou & Tsafos, 2018; Lobman & Ryan, 2007; Olsen, 2008). This understanding stems from traditional, gendered discourses that see the care of young children as '*natural outgrowth of maternal instincts, a role for which the rewards are intrinsic rather than material*' (Jalongo et al., 2004: 146). Moreover, interacting with the students, forming and maintaining meaningful relationships with them are also significant elements of their professional identities (Rodriguez et al., 2022).

1.1.2. Crisis and teachers' professional identity

Teachers are the first wave breakers in a crisis (O' Toole & Friesen, 2016) and are asked to deal with its immediate and long-term impacts on the school community. A crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought along major changes in schools and the educational process, is thus believed to have affected teachers' experiences and views of themselves as professionals (Mellon, 2022). The current literature indicates that during the COVID-19 pandemic teaching became a significant stress factor (Eadie et al., 2021; Fukuda & Fukuda, 2022; Quinn et al., 2022; Quinones et al., 2021). Brackett and Cipriano (2020) state that during the first phase of the pandemic a great number of teachers in the USA reported strong negative feelings, such as anxiety, fear, shock and sadness. Many of them seem, in fact, to stem from the new reality that emerged that was full of pressing parameters, such as the scarce technological equipment, the need to upgrade one's digital skills and the need to provide solid and continuous support to both oneself and the school community (Kotowski et al., 2022; Pressley, 2021; Pressley et al., 2021).

Preschool teachers were notably affected by these new demands (Gayatri, 2020); the characteristics of online learning posed a challenge to them, since they had to update their technological skills and adjust their teaching practice by using and adopting more interactive-thus more appropriate for young children- methods (Kim, 2020). They also had to shift from in person learning, that is largely based on playing and interacting with peers (OMEP Executive Committee, 2020), to a more socially detached form of learning. In addition, they had to deal with parental/guardian involvement because of young children's limited technological skills in using an online learning platform (Kim, 2020) as well as with children's discomfort in this new process which

took the form of difficulties in motivation, self-regulation, attention and concentration (Dong et al., 2020; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2020). Moreover, the pioneer study of Rodriguez et al., (2022) suggests that during the COVID-19 pandemic the shift from in-person learning to virtual classes, had a significant impact on preschool teachers, who found themselves mourning the loss of teacher-student relationship and, therefore, a significant part of their professional identity.

1.1.3. Preschool Teachers in the Greek context

Preschool teachers constitute a rather diverse group due to differences in initial training, qualifications and status (Bennett & Neuman, 2004; Osgood & Stone, 2002). Teachers above 55 years of age mostly had a 2-year training in Nursery Teacher Colleges (Academies) while younger teachers are University graduates, with a 4-year training. It has, also, been noted that traditional -gendered-representations about preschool educators are still vivid in Greek society (Dafermou et al., 2006). Androusou & Tsafos (2018) state, in fact, that professional identities among preschool teachers are largely defined both by traditional notions that support the nurturing dimension of the profession and modernist elements, such as the understanding that one should possess work related practical skills and instrumental knowledge.

1.1.4. Covid -19 and the Greek school

The COVID-19 era signified the emergence of teleworking in education, which took the form of e-learning, and most mainly online learning[1]. However, this is achieved under the prerequisite that teachers employ and take advantage of specific teaching methods and strategies that are different from the traditional ones (Kim, 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic teachers in Greece have reportedly faced difficulties similar to those reported worldwide. In Greece the first lockdown was imposed in March 2020 and lasted until May 2020. During that time schools all over the country closed and e learning was introduced as a new form of educational praxis. More specifically, teachers in all school levels were instructed to proceed with hybrid forms of distant asynchronous learning. The next school year (2020-2021) began with open schools and many social distancing rules. However, the epidemiological crisis imposed two more lockdowns during that year. The second lockdown lasted from November 2020 to January 2021 and the third one from March 2021 until May 2021. The second and the third lockdown brought along new changes in the teaching process, which was no longer asynchronous. Almost overnight, teachers in all school levels were asked to use the Cisco Webex

platform, which allows for a synchronous form of online learning. Spyropoulou & Koutroukis (2021) highlighted Greek principals' experiences during school closures; their findings suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic was perceived as an unprecedented crisis, which created tremendous pressure on the Greek educational system and its public servants. A variety of obstacles emerged with implications both on a personal and a professional level. Furthermore, preliminary findings from Foti (2020) suggest that the emerged hybrid forms of teaching led to great changes in Greek preschool teachers' professional lives. The most common ones were the perceived lack of support and training and the reluctance of parents/guardians to provide help and support the new procedure. However, to this date and to the authors knowledge, there are no reports of a systematic and more thorough understanding of preschool teachers' everyday professional reality and its characteristics, as they gradually developed during the period of online learning in Greece.

1 E learning is a broad concept, which can take different forms and types and one can come across different application models (Sangra, Vlachopoulos & Cabrera,2012). Online learning can be conceptualized as a tool which helps the teaching process become more flexible, innovative and student-focused (Dhawan,2020) and which "sits on a continuum of a "partially online" or a "fully online Learning course"" (Mason, 1998).

1.1.5. The present study

This study was designed in order to qualitatively explore and highlight the experiences of Greek preschool teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic with a focus on the process of Online Learning (OL) that was imposed because of the schools' closure. Accepting that one's professional identity is the product of a complex interplay between broader social contexts, institutional policies and a person's experiences (Olsen, 2008), it would be of great value to better understand the possible ways through which unfamiliar and/or adverse experiences may affect teachers and their negotiations of their professional identity (Mellon, 2022). More specifically, it would be of interest to explore how the emergence of Online Learning (OL) in the Greek preschool affected the ways preschool teachers perceived their professional role and identity.

Adopting a qualitative stance signifies that a researcher's primal scope is to reach a better understanding of the meanings people attach to situations of the psychological and social world and to their experiences within it and not to predict and/or control. In other words, it means to accept the complexity and the active construction of the social world (Banister et al., 1994 as cited in Taylor,

2001). It is, therefore, acknowledged that the researcher doesn't try to get a grasp of a universal truth, but rather to offer a partial and subjective interpretation of specific people's beliefs and experiences (Kidder & Fine, 1997).

In such a context, an important role is ascribed to language and its features, as people make sense of the world through it (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Based on this theoretical premise, the study aimed to explore how a small sample of preschool teachers perceived the emergence of Online Learning, during schools' closure, and its impact on their professional lives. More specifically, the research questions were as follows: a) which, if any, changes occurred in their everyday professional practice during OL, b) how preschool teachers positioned themselves and negotiated their professional selves during OL.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

For the collection of the data the researchers conducted 18 individual interviews with preschool teachers. Qualitative studies usually engage a smaller number of participants. However, in cases in which the research topic is new and/or underrepresented and there is need for a better clarification of the prevailing experiences and patterns of thought, researchers seek to ensure bigger numbers of participants (Coyle, 2007). The participants formed a group which was characterized by both consistencies and inconsistencies. More specifically, all of them were women, who served in public preschools in a medium sized town in Central Greece. The homogeneity in terms of gender and residence served as a way to ensure a more coherent sample (ten Have, 1999 as cited in Taylor, 2001, p. 24). Of course, the collected data cannot be considered representative of the whole population of Greek preschool teachers. On the other hand, there was a variety in their educational and professional background (see table 1). This divergence was sought as a way to explore the various ways in which their educational trajectories and their professional experiences form the various patterns of experiences during OL. The demographics were obtained at the beginning of each interview, as the participants were asked to present themselves and provide specific pieces of information.

No of Interview/ Name	Age	Years of service	Years*	Education/ Basic studies	Further training/studies
1/ Gaia	50-55	15	7	Pedagogical Academy**	No
2/ Lia	50-55	27	8	Pedagogical Academy	No
3/ Kallina	50-55	18	7	4-year- Panepistimio	No
4/ Georgia	55-60	36	17	Pedagogical Academy +2-year Simulation	2-year Didaskalio of General Education
5/ Sotiria	50-55	20	10	4-year -Panepistimio	2-year -Didaskalio of Special Education
6/ Chara	45-50	21	8	4-year- Panepistimio	No
7/ Vasilina	45-50	21	6	4-year- Panepistimio	No
8/ Tzeny	45-50	18	7	4-year- Panepistimio	No
9/ Elektra	45-50	16	12	4-year -Panepistimio	No
10/ Veatriki	45-50	21	12	4-year -Panepistimio	2-year Didaskalio of Special Education
11/ Voula	55-60	38	16	Pedagogical Academy	2-year Didaskalio of General Education
12/ Agapi	45-50	22	13	4-year -Panepistimio	2-year -Didaskalio of Special Education
13/ Eleni	45-50	22	11	4-year -Panepistimio	PESYP & Master

No of Interview/ Name	Age	Years of service	Years*	Education/ Basic studies	Further training/studies
14/ Nicky	60-65	38	13	Pedagogical Academy	No
15/ Kleopatra	45-50	18	7	4-year -Panepistimio	Master in Education
16/ Elpiniki	55-60	34	10	Pedagogical Academy +2-year Simulation	No
17/Konstantina	30-35	8	1	4-year -Panepistimio	Master in Special Education
18/ Maria	30-35	8	1	4-year -Panepistimio	Master in Special Education

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants.

*in the current school/position, **2-year Diploma, ***1 year Diploma in Counseling*

2.1.2. Procedure and interview

International Hellenic University's Committee of Research Ethics approved the study's objectives and methodology prior to the sample recruitment. A second approval on the study's ethics was obtained by the Ethics Committee of the Educational Administration Managers of the region in which the study took place. The second researcher, who conducted the interviews, orally informed the preschool teachers who worked in the town's public schools about the study and its purposes and asked for volunteers. The study was introduced as a discussion about "teachers' professional experiences during the process of Online Learning". During the oral briefing, the researcher noted the study's voluntary character and guaranteed that confidentiality would be kept and that the access to personal data would be restricted to the researchers. All the interviews were conducted at the end of the school year 2020-2021, after the end of OL, at non-working hours via telephone, because of the

pandemic, and were recorded with the participants' consent. Each interview took between 30 and 50 min. and the interviewer assured the participants that they could, at any time, stop the interview process and/or withdraw their participation. Furthermore, in order to keep the participants' anonymity their personal data were not entailed in any file and during the transcriptions each participant was given a code name. The researchers were, also, the only ones with access to the recorded and transcription files. The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview protocol which was created for the study's purposes and which revolved around what Online Learning meant professionally and emotionally for teachers and their evaluations of the process. The first 2 interviews were used as pilots for the appropriateness of the questions. Minor alterations were incorporated in the final interview protocol. Example questions were: "*which were your stronger feelings and thoughts about your profession during the period of OL*", "*During the period of OL was your everyday professional life affected in any way?*", "*How would you evaluate your professional experience from OL?*". In general, the questions served as initiators and facilitators of discussion about the teachers' everyday experiences and the multiple ways they conceptualized their participation in this new form of teaching. Participants, therefore, held an active role and discussions evolved mainly as a result of their argumentations and remarks.

2.1.3. Analyses

All discussions were tape recorded and transcribed by the first researcher, a practice that enables one's familiarization with the collected data (Rapley, 2007). The transcribed texts were sent to the participants for review in order to ensure their final agreement. The transcribed texts were thoroughly reread, in order to identify the recurring themes in the participants' accounts. The data was analyzed on the basis of thematic analysis, a flexible qualitative method, widely used to highlight views and concepts within a group of people (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Occasionally this process had a cyclic character, since there was a continuous back and forth in the texts in order to properly categorize the various extracts (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). In the present study, the analyses followed the 6-steps procedure indicated by Braun & Clarke (2006), in order to ensure a high quality and sustain a methodological rigor. Finding the prevailing themes and subthemes, was based on an abductive process, according to which the researchers treated data in a dynamic way and didn't simply organize them in preexisting thematic categories; on the contrary, they tried to remain alert to the possibility that new parameters could emerge (Kelle, 2005).

It should be noted that both authors contributed to the formation of the data coding structure. The emerged themes and sub-themes, their content and some representative quotes were cataloged in detail. In addition, a fellow scholar working in academia independently analyzed 4 of the transcripted interviews and then thoroughly discussed their suggestions with the authors-analysts. The level of initial agreement was 63% and reached 92% after the discussions that took place between the analysts.

In the next phase, specific and theme-representative extracts were selected. It should be pointed out that the translation of the selected extracts from Greek to English was a delicate procedure, since the researchers had to bear in mind the possibility of item bias (Brislin, 1980). At the same time, one had to ensure that the translated abstracts linguistically matched the original one, in order to avoid possible inappropriate phrasing or alterations in the text's meaning and content that could impact on the final analysis (Berkarovitc 1980). For this reason, the extracts that would be used were subjected to an independent back translation (Brislin, 1980). That is to say, that an independent translator had the selected extracts translated from Greek into English and then back into Greek. Reliability and validity

In the present study great concern was given to all the parameters that enhance the methodological rigor of a qualitative research, namely the detailed literature review, the concrete research goals, the detailed and systematic recording of the data, the detailed and organized analysis and presentation, the reflexive stance of the researchers, the respect to the deontological principles etc. (also see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Bearing this into mind, in the present article, a variety of abstracts is presented, in order to aid the readers, reach a better understanding of the analytical process and its results. The researchers acknowledge the fact that their analytical findings are not self-evident or given (Kidder & Fine, 1997), and they, therefore, try to offer their readers the chance to evaluate these findings and their persuasiveness and/or even offer new, alternative options (Coyle, 2007).

3.1. Findings

All the participants acknowledge that, during the periods of OL, multiple changes occurred in their professional lives that impacted, both directly and indirectly, their practice and their perceptions of themselves as professionals in their workspace. These changes were vast and thorough and introduced new parameters in the content, the structure and even the philosophy of the educational praxis.

Abstract 1

Everything was turned upside down. It was not the same... not the known or the given (Interview 15)

3.1.1. Changes during OL

During OL many changes occurred at a practical level; New demands arose, while others were dismissed. Most of the old everyday school routines were altered, internet connectability and other connection related issues were brought into focus, while at the same time several issues arose regarding the management of the available time and the thematic areas to be taught.

Abstract

[it was different...] because we were not at school, to take a break, to eat our breakfast, to play, to laugh, all that. In half an hour, you just greet the children, ask about the weather and the date etc. then another child belatedly logs in, has connection issues... but we really tried. (Interview 14)

3.1.2. The loss of the physical classroom

However, the participants acknowledged that the most significant change brought during OL was the loss of being and acting in the physical space of the school.

Abstract

Things have changed...first of all, we lost our working space... we lost our working space. We stayed at home... (Interview 12)

This loss had some implications at a practical level for preschool teachers: the existing status quo was disrupted; their working hours were altered and the educational procedures had to be redesigned. Due to the disturbances in the previously existing balance many teachers were forced to make a number of changes– usually unwelcome– in their family life and their everyday routines, in order to conciliate professional and personal demands. There was, therefore, a perceived invasion of professional life in the private sphere, which stopped being a distinct, private setting.

Abstract

We were 5, in my house [...] at home 5 people could not use Webex at the same time. I have 3 children, who are students, my husband is a teacher, our entire planning was turned upside down. The bigger ones were on the PC in the mornings, we were in the afternoons, I had to leave my house, to work more on the computer. There were many problems here, arguments 'I have a connection, I don't have a connection', the usual, with the internet. Everything was upside down. (Interview 6)

At the same time this loss of the physical classroom also implicated –at a symbolic level– the loss of the familiar; preschool teachers were deprived of the familiarity and the security provided by the classroom space, in which they felt sure of themselves and in control.

Abstract

In the classroom we were totally at ease with the program...we knew everything. (Interview 10)

3.1.3. The loss of physical proximity

The loss of the physical space, signified, however another major loss: that of the *physical proximity* and the ongoing in person interaction with the students. All the participants agree that a most vital part of their professional identity, their '*job as they studied i*t', is the ability to connect at a direct, personal level with the students. During OL, nevertheless, core elements of preschool teaching such as multisensory interaction and communication with the students, teamwork and collectivity were lost. This fact was perceived as a dent in the essence of the educational praxis and signaled the need of a readjustment into new, uncharted professional roles (Dong et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2022).

Abstract

I was saying to myself that this should not last for much longer (laughs). That we should open the schools soon, to be in the classroom, to watch our children, their faces, with the mask, we don't care, to be in person... to be in direct contact with them [....] this is not negotiable for me, I don't trade it with anything. The contact, the direct contact with the children. To be able to do your job the way you studied it, the way you know it. Because it was a new, a totally new situation for us, we were totally put into uncharted waters (Interview 18).

The participants describe OL as a fake educational environment and contradict it with the real, authentic educational process, represented in the form of in person learning. They possibly use this contrast –which is usually presented as a concept encompassed both by teachers and students –as a means to highlight the vast differences between OL and in person learning but also as a way to justify the extent of the newly brought disequilibrium in their perceptions of themselves as professionals. They may also aim to subtly point their antithesis to the acknowledgment of OL as a normalized, legitimized, substantial educational form.

Abstract

During online learning we didn't communicate directly with the children, no, there was a superficial communication, but the children were saying to me:"Mrs....when will we go back to the real school?" and I asked them "Why? What kind of school is this? We have created this new class" And a child said: "this is a fake school". Yes. [..] both me and the children, we really, subconsciously expressed it and we wanted to return to the real school as soon as possible. In person (Interview 16).

3.1.4. The loss of duality in interactions

The absence from the physical space of the classroom and the creation of a virtual classroom altered the teaching environment as well. The participants pointed out that the duality in teacher–student interaction was no longer the case; on the contrary, a new context emerged, in which third parties had the right to observe and/or participate. This new reality, beside its originality and unfamiliarity, was presented as a rather destabilizing factor for teachers who find themselves in a position in which they have to manage this enlarged, heterogeneous audience and accept the fact that some from this audience may potentially hold a different viewpoint or criticize them, their teaching, their viewpoints, the educational materials etc. (Lau & Lee, 2021; Calear et al., 2022; Morse et al., 2022).

Abstract

I was studying quite a lot, to tell you the truth. You will ask me, why? Because when you are in the classroom with the children, something may slip. A minor error, but nobody will point It out or try to correct you. But now I had the students along with their parents [...] There was a family, the mother, the grandmother, the grandfather and the aunt were all watching me. And they liked it. Yes. I had a father, a firefighter, and when I was talking about the forests, I said something about the time period in which the law prohibits putting grass on fire. And he said, 'Mrs....may I say something? The law has changed, it's been some years now." And I replied "thank you very much". Since that day he continued asking, he had questions (laughs). This parental involvement, I didn't like it. But I could not exclude them. Out of civility. (Interview 14)

3.1.5. Renegotiations and new forms of professional selves

The new, unfamiliar era of OL and the psycho emotional upheaval it created didn't remain uncontested and unresolved. All the participants stated that they actively tried to meet the new standards and cope with the unfamiliar and sometimes adverse circumstances that arose. In their

accounts, many of them referred to these periods as "*a challenge*" to (re)invent new practices and create a new form of professional identity.

Abstract

The way we work has changed. We had to create new ways to communicate with the children, to create in our...working space. Of course, this means more work, more study. Eh...on the other hand though... It's also a challenge. Inserting ourselves in a new process and making good use of some other, new means (Interview 1)

The participants described at length various ways of coping with their new realities during OL and creating new meanings for themselves as professionals.

3.1.6. Accepting the necessity of OL

All the participants, at various points of their accounts, remarked on the necessity of OL, because of the epidemiological situation in Greece. Even though they didn't prefer or didn't feel at ease with this turn of events (see for example the description of OL as "an ugly necessity" in the following abstract), they agreed that it could not be avoided. By employing this line of argumentation, they possibly wished to express both their understanding of this turn of events as the dealing of a crisis and their willingness to reclaim some agency, to show that they were not rendered totally helpless but that they rather tried to arise to the new demands and show new forms of competency (Rachmadtullah et al., 2020)

Abstract

It was however necessary. It couldn't have been different. It was an ugly necessity. It had to be done. I don't think someone chose it as the best solution. [..] No. It was a necessary evil. We had to accept it this way and we did. The parents, the children, us... that's the way it should have been. We couldn't have done it any other way. (Interview 3)

3.2. Forming new communities of practice

In most of their accounts, the participants talked about their need to form new collectivities, new communities of practice in order to interact, and mutually help one another (Liu et al., 2022; Vescio et al., 2008; Zhang & Yuan, 2020).

3.2.1. With the families

In such a framework many of them mentioned that OL created a new virtual space which gave them the opportunity to get better acquainted and form more meaningful relationships with their students' families. They, indeed, describe a broadening of their professional horizon, which resulted in a new understanding: that teaching evolves in the community and that they, themselves, as educators may not be limited solely in interactions with the children (Vuorinen et al., 2014).

Abstract

On one hand we bonded...We found out that there are other people beyond school and the children, their parents that is... and...they came closer to us... I mean we formed relationships. (Interview 12)

3.2.2. With the coworkers

Collaboration among the teachers was also highlighted as a commonly occurring and helpful practice. Almost all of the participants talked about a strengthening in their bonding during OL. In their accounts they stated that the adversity of the new reality has acted as a booster for collaboration and enhanced the feeling that all teachers shared a common goal, that they were part of a common effort and that one's success was related to others'.

Abstract

Luckily there was something positive. We have the best cooperation with our colleagues. Eh...Because of this we pulled it through. Otherwise, we couldn't do it, I believe. And this way, each one was helping the others. (Interview 11)

3.2.3. Embracing one's skills

Many participants described a new negotiation of their professional skills and abilities during OL. This was a process initiated by a better understanding and appreciation of in person learning, which was no longer perceived as a fixed, undifferentiated condition, but as an affair with great pedagogical significance, highly dependent on a teacher's competence and skills. In other words, being able to better understand the qualities of the teaching process meant being able to better understand themselves and their role within and, consequently, embrace and enrich it.

Abstract

I believe that now we have appreciated more in person learning. I mean there is no other way to offer the children what we can truly offer, other than in person learning. So, I believe, to me, this thing was a feedback. I mean when I'll be back in the classroom. Before, it was given. We didn't believe that anything different could happen to us. And we had in person learning as a given [..] Now I believe, eh, we have reached the level zero and we appreciate what we had and I believe that we will be better in person. I personally believe that I definitely have to give MORE to the children. I mean as a person and a teacher now. Eh...that's what is important to me. (Interview 13)

Some other times the recognition of one's professional worth and the embracement of one's professional identity originated by an outer source, such as students' families, who were the first to appreciate teachers' efforts and acknowledge their work and value.

Abstract

I understand that my work is splendid. I mean (pause) as I was watching from afar...I compared everything with other projects all this time. And I felt proud of myself. And some parents acknowledge during this period that we do something meaningful. [..] They didn't know it (pause). Because last year and this year it was the first time that we were congratulated by the parents. Because now they see that we work. Before, they disregarded us. (Interview 10)

3.2.4. Broadening one's skills

At the same time the participants drew on broadening their skills and knowledge, in order to create new forms of professional selves. They repeatedly claimed that during OL they tried to expand their educational practices and familiarize themselves with new, technologically advanced, educational tools that could prove helpful in the future and that could enrich their teaching. As a result, they came to new, broader understandings about their professional identity, which in turn evoked new feelings of self-assurance, pride, fulfillment and satisfaction (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012; Van Veen & Lasky, 2005).

Abstract

This whole thing brought something good [..] we incorporated the PC more in our lives and in the educational process. More. Before then, we didn't use it so much. We didn't use the new technologies so much before. Now it's more part of our lives. And I mean it as a good thing. it's there to help us. To make teaching more alive. (Interview 3)

Summing up, it is clear that the participants recognized a positive imprint of OL on themselves. They described these periods and these new processes as a lesson, a doctrine, through which they gained an opportunity to discover more about themselves, personally and professionally, and the world around them. Through their new discoveries they succeeded in reinventing themselves.

This gradual regaining of control over their professional lives also led to a de-escalation of negative feelings. There were, in fact, various relevant references in their accounts, in which the participants described how they re- found the faith in themselves and their professional capacities.

Abstract

Eh...at the beginning I was so stressed, so stressed, that I couldn't sleep at night. but then...I found my tempo...progressively and eh.... I can say that I kind of liked it. (Interview 2)

As a result, new positive feelings emerged, such as pride -both for oneself and the group of teachers as a whole- for successfully rising to the demands, joy and relief. As time went by and teachers grew accustomed to the new process, everything was perceived under a new, more positive lens and, therefore, new, positive aspects were acknowledged.

Abstract

We were so stressed. mostly at the beginning. As time flew by all this was softened (laughs) [it was difficult] until we sorted everything through. I mean. I'm telling you this with pride. Not for myself. For all of us. That's why I'm telling you this. With pride. That we made it. And very, very well. Based on our own strength. (Interview 11)

It should be noted, though, that this evolutionary course, this subsequent development from disequilibrium to the reinstatement of control and homeostasis, did not apply to all the participants. For a few of them, the younger, less experienced ones, the period of OL remained difficult and unmanageable until the end. During it they had to constantly struggle and deal with an overwhelming negativity. In their descriptions the participants evidently depicted their inability to remain in control, since they felt inadequate, restricted and incapable of making any adjusting changes. These described difficulties may, indeed, be linked to a more fragile professional identity; since they were at the beginning of their professional career, their professional identities could be still uncertain, still in a process of taking shape. Therefore, the younger teachers didn't have a wide repertoire of available professional resources upon which they could draw in order to successfully meet the new demands.

Abstract

All this was a huge.... I can't describe it. for all the years that I'm working this was the most difficult period. That was what I'd say. Very difficult period. Disappointment, negativity, I felt a negativity I didn't want to do... I mean...eh...negativity. I didn't want to engage myself once more. I mean, every morning, I woke up and I was saying to myself "'I'm tired....". And.... a great negativity. I don't know. Just negative feelings. There was nothing to make me happy (laughs)......Neither was I feeling ...eh...as a creative teacher...because all this, it is kind of restrictive. Because it doesn't let you... I was feeling that...I don't know (laughs) that I'm not doing my job properly (laughs) (Interview 19)

4.1. Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the various ways preschool teachers viewed and negotiated, with respect to their professional identity, the emergence of OL during the COVID-19 lockdowns in Greece. More specifically, the analysis revealed that there was an ongoing process of reviewing one's professional skills, abilities and role within the educational system. Overall, the participants' standpoints suggest that OL was a journey to the unknown. To a large extent, the emergence of OL and the absence from the physical classroom signified the loss of the nurturing character of teacher-student interaction, a fact that emotionally distressed teachers and challenged their sense of professional identity (see also Rodriquez et al., 2022). Literature suggests that preschool teachers' personal and professional identity cohere (Nias, 1989) and that the professional self is largely defined by affective components and by teachers' relationship with their students (Botkin & Twardosz, 1988; Roorda et al., 2011; Zanolli et al., 1997).

On the other hand, they had no say in their new educational reality and they were unfamiliar with the advanced ICT skills that were required of them. There was, indeed, a thorough and ongoing reference to their obliviousness and cluelessness with respect to a number of factors, and most importantly, the new procedure, the maneuvering and handling of technical and educational issues that repeatedly arose (Kim, 2020).

However, and despite all these challenges, the participants' accounts revealed their constant effort to carry on and normalize their professional lives, in an unfamiliar context, a finding which is consistent with other studies (Kuntz et al., 2013). The participants described how they drew on available resources in order to create new, meaningful professional selves. More specifically, they emphasized the strengthening of their bonding with their coworkers and the emergence of new forms of collaboration and new 'communities of practice' (Liu et al., 2022; Vescio et al., 2008; Zhang & Yuan,

2020), which seem of crucial importance to the formation of a professional identity (Sachs, 2001). They also stressed their continuous effort to familiarize themselves with more advanced ICT skills and to meaningfully incorporate them in their everyday teaching praxis. These new paths seemed to enhance, consequently, the sense of one's own professional skills, resilience and ingenuity. The recognition of their efforts and work value by their students' families was an adding factor to their sense of professional self-worth (Demulder & Stribling, 2012; Merideth et al., 2021). As a result, the participants presented themselves as more self-assured, recognized in themselves new aspects of professional growth and described new professional selves, which entailed more 'professional' characteristics and went beyond the until then dominant assumption that 'anyone can mind children' (Moloney, 2010).

4.1.1. Limitations

One has to acknowledge, however, that the participants' standpoints could be influenced by the process of the interview and the interaction between them and the interviewer. It is widely accepted that in a qualitative study, participants usually respond according to the various identities of the interviewers (gender, race, professional status etc.) (Miller & Glassner, 2004). In this study the interviewer was also a former preschool teacher, who worked at an administrative post. The common experience from the school setting, thus, probably served as a common basis on which the participants could rely in order to feel appreciated and 'seen'. It was evident, in their responses, that they relied on a mutually shared communication code and that they were willing to share their personal views. On the other hand, the fact that the researcher was serving at an administrative level in their region possibly enhanced their cautiousness. Furthermore, it was evident, in various parts of their accounts, that they actively tried to present a positive version of themselves or express opinions according to what they believed the researcher would expect to hear (also see Miller & Turnbull, 1986). This was, in fact, one of the most important aspects that made the researcher herself actively try to remain as neutral and non-directive as possible and reduce her 'Otherness'.

4.1.2. Implications for policy

A final point concerns the participants' absence of remarks about formal institutional policies during that period; There was, indeed, no mention of any kind of help, training or guidance at an administrative and institutional level. On the contrary, the participants talked about their own initiatives in order to create new professional frameworks. During the lockdown periods in Greece

there were, indeed, no systematic long term administrative interventions that would ensure a smooth transition from in person learning to OL. It would be, therefore, beneficial to consider undertaking initiative actions that would strengthen teachers' sense of security and offer them a framework of guidance and reference. Such actions include, for example, professional mentoring, a practice widely applied worldwide (Richter et al., 2013; Shank, 2005) which however is not widely known in the Greek context. Organizing and systematizing a more coherent network of mental health professionals in the educational system would also serve towards the same scope. More specifically, mental health professionals could work with teachers in ways that would enhance their resilience and sense of self-efficacy and empower them (Beltman et al., 2016). Seeing and understanding school life in an ecological framework, means creating and sustaining a positive, emotionally secure professional context, which values a teacher's sense of professional self and commitment (Dorman, 2003) and enables the educational praxis to evolve purposefully and uninhibitedly (Westheimer, 2008).

4.1.3. Conclusions

During the pandemic education as an institution went through a lot of changes (Ellis et al., 2020). The study's participants talked about these changes' multilayered impact on their professional selves and their attempts to reconstruct themselves during that turbulent period with the high demands. Their accounts highlighted in length their various positions and negotiations within this framework suggesting that developing feelings of belonging and experiencing feelings of acceptance by peers and parents may help the shaping of the professional self. They indicated, thus, that professional identity is indeed a personalized construct largely shaped by one's feelings (Forde et al.,2006) in constant interplay with the contextual dimensions of teaching (Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999).

Appendix A

Theme	Subthemes	Sub subthemes	Examples
1. changes during OL	a. the loss of the physical classroom		"We lost our working space. We stayed at home"
	b. the loss of physical proximity		"This is not negotiable for me; I don't trade it with anything. The contact, the direct contact with the children. To be able to do your job the way you studied it, the way you know it."
	b. the loss of duality in interactions		"I was so anxious because of their parents who were listening…eh…next to them…and not just their parents, anyone could be present. The uncle, the aunt, anyone"
2. renegotiations and new forms of professional selves	a. accepting the necessity of OL		"It was necessary. It couldn't have been different. "
	b. forming new communities of practice	i. with the families	"We found out that there are other people beyond school and the children, their parents that is… and…they came closer to us"
		ii. with the coworkers	"We have the best cooperation with our colleagues. Eh…Because of this we pulled it through. Otherwise, we couldn't do it, I believe."
	c. embracing one's skills		"I understand that my work is splendid"

Theme	Subthemes	Sub subthemes	Examples
	d. broadening one's skills		"We didn't use the new technologies so much before. Now it's more part of our lives. And I mean it as a good thing. To help us. To make teaching more alive. Like a tool."

Appendix B

Transcription Example

Interviewer: With respect to your profession, which were your main feelings and thoughts during those periods of OL?

When we organized a feast day, for Christmas, and mostly during the feast on the 25th of March, which was the celebration of the 200 years of the Greek Revolution..eh...then...i didn't want to.. I mean I was touching the screen and tears came into my eyes. I wanted to be in person for this celebration. and I was feeling like.. 'Why should schools be closed now?'. In such a celebration . I wanted... I couldn't bear it, not being in person, not discussing in person, not having the opportunity to make the children understand exactly.... for all the children to be able to attend and be part of it . (1b) (Interview 18)

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Declarations