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“I’m a Teacher.” – Preschool Teachers’ Sense of the Professional Self

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Abstract

Preschool education requires articulate, reflective and highly qualified teachers. However, within the teaching profession, it is claimed that preschool teachers have the lowest sense of professional self. Determining the professional status of the preschool teachers is problematic and begins with preschool teacher sense of professionals self. Using a mixed methods research methodology, the study garnered quantitative as well as personal insights into preschool teachers’ sense of professional self. The findings showed that the preschool teachers have an emerging sense of professionalism. The study also highlighted the importance in providing opportunities for collaboration and teamwork practices within supportive learning communities and mentors to support positive outcomes for preschool teachers’ professional learning. Teacher education and professional development programmes, together with statutory and professional organisations have to take the lead in bringing the profession forward. Importantly, the sector must continue to develop preschool leaders for knowledge exchange and generation in a landscape that is evolving quickly.

Keywords: preschool teachers; professional self; learning communities; mentoring



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INTRODUCTION

Preschool education requires highly qualified, articulate and reflective teachers. However, studies have shown that the teaching profession is seen to have a lower status when compared to other professions (Ingersoll & Mitchell, 2011). And within the different groups of teachers, pre-school, primary and secondary teachers, preschool teachers have the lowest standing (Hargreaves & Hopper, 2006). Teachers are at the heart of education, yet teaching does not feature as a high-status profession or occupation. The infamous phrase: “Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach,” disparages the whole teaching profession. Teachers facilitate dozens of interactions with students, parents, administrators, fellow teachers, and community members every day. The teacher’s sense of professional self is critical as s/he manages and meets the needs of a diverse group of people within the community.

The preschool teacher’s sense of professional self is a multi-faceted concept that is cultural, organizational, communal as well as individual. In the past decade, early childhood education received unprecedented attention at both local and international levels from which emerged competing and contradictory discourses of professionalism (Bradbury 2012; Gibson, Cumming & Zollo, 2017). These discourses are also shaped by dominant political and economic flows. In the past years, Singapore’s preschool landscape has evolved with several key changes. Most significant is the introduction of quality preschool standards, the requirements of preschool teachers’ registration, and the Skills Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education. In 2013 a governing body, the Early Childhood and Development Agency (ECDA), was established to integrate the regulation, planning and professional development of preschool teachers. However, despite the various schemes that are targeted at raising the preschool teachers’ quality, the sense of professional self remains “diverse and fragmented” when compared to that of primary and secondary school teachers (Today, 2017). The historical discourses of the profession continues to persist and this is reflected in the poor professional status with low remuneration (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015).

Building upon prior studies that attempted to deconstruct the preschool teacher’s concept of professionalism (Osgood, 2006), this article, which is part of a wider study, examines Singapore preschool teachers’ perception of their professional self. The participants of the study were in-service preschool teachers enrolled in a part time professional development undergraduate programme. Such a study is timely as ECDA together with other government agencies in Singapore have been increasing efforts to elevate the status of teachers in the preschool sector. The efforts to improve preschool teachers’ sense of the professional self is a first step to strengthening the sector. A weak sense of professional self leads to a decline in self-esteem of teachers as professionals as well as a discouragement among those who wish to join or remain in the profession.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The preschool workforce has a complex structure with conflicting and multi-dimensional relationships (Adams, 2008). Oberhuemer (2008) argued that the professional self of a preschool teacher is placed within a ‘situated concept’ (p. 136). This construct is encapsulated within the perceptions of children and childhood in the society. Studies indicated that the preschool teacher’s sense of professional self, is low as preschool teachers grapple with the recognition of their profession (Moloney, 2010; Rhodes & Huston, 2012), and yet on the other hand the same profession is regarded as a key contributor in the development and wellbeing of young children in the society. These contrary discourses of the preschool teacher’s professionalism shift with historical, political, socio-cultural and economic contexts of the society. However, Woodrow (2008) argued that a fixed discourse is futile as “professionalism has always been a changing concept” (p.275). With the “multiple discourses of professionalism and pedagogic practice” (p.57) it is important for preschool teachers to be involved in creating their professional identity and self (Ortlipp, Woodrow & Woodrow, 2011). To be able to do this, preschool teachers will have to be “effective, reflective and reflexive practice” (p.11) as this will enable them to engage and develop their ideas at a deeper level.

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Over the past years, attempts were made to improve the preschool teacher as childcare minders to qualified, well-prepared and equitably compensated education professionals (Shpancer et al. 2008). Internationally as well as in Singapore, the efforts included raising the professional status of preschool teachers with requirements of prescribed criteria such as knowledge, expertise and training based on sector-agreed competencies and standards of practice for specific job roles in the field (Feeney and Freeman, 2018). Despite these initiatives, preschool teachers continue to struggle with their lack of professional status.

Oberhuemer (2008) highlighted the need for professional traits such as the professional relationships with students, parents, administrators, fellow teachers, and community members, a strong foundational knowledge and practical skills of preschool teachers’ education and training. These perspectives suggest that the preschool professional’ role to be more complex and multi-dimensional than a list of standards. Day, Kington, Stobart, and Sammons (2006) argued that the teachers’ multi-faceted roles are represented within the many layers of network structures which impact on the sense of professional self of teachers. These structures are embedded within school cultures as well as inter-personal knowledge construction among the teaching community (Day et al., 2006).

The preschool teaching profession is often marked with low remuneration, poor training opportunities with the lack of a career development ladder (Chan, 2018). These factors considerably erode preschool teachers’ perception of professional self (Washington et al. 2015). Skattebol, Adamson, and Woodrow (2016) argues that the preschool teacher’s role is

...marked by struggle –the struggle for recognition of the professional character of the work, the struggle for wage justice – pay and conditions that reflect the importance of caring for children and the complex nature of the work – and the struggle for parity with other sections of the education profession. (Skattebol et al, 2016; p. 117)

A first step to strengthening the profession is to improve preschool teachers’ sense of the professional self. Apart from the common contributing factors toward the development of the professional self, more consideration should be given to the formation of preschool teachers’ professional identity and what it means to them. A weak sense of professional of self leads to a decline in self-esteem. This is indirectly linked to teacher quality issues and has a direct impact on the teaching and learning activities experienced by young children. Societal and political dimensions can impact and transform the professional profile within the society. This expansion of the roles and the positioning of preschool teachers professionally in terms of quality outcomes for children and the nation, shifts from that of maternal care and child-minding, to that of professional frameworks that are tied to reporting structures, training, pedagogy and outcomes for children (Millei & Jones, 2014). Teacher quality has been identified as a key factor in educational reform and quality teaching and learning (Winters, 2008). Extensive literature (OECD, 2012), argue the impact of high-quality teachers on the outcomes for young children.

In Singapore, efforts towards upgrading the professional status and recognition of preschool teachers are being put in place. A Continuing Professional Development (CPD) framework for early childhood educators was published in 2015 by the Ministry of Social and Family Development. This serves as a guide for planning and developing ongoing professional development to support roles more effectively and maintain a high standard of professional competence. In 2016, Minister for Social and Family Development, Mr Chan Chun Sing, announced a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Masterplan for the early childhood sector at ECDA’s inaugural Early Childhood Conference (<https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/Pages/Continuing-Professional-Development-Masterplan.aspx>, December 20, 2016). It aims to provide professional development opportunities to enhance knowledge, skills, competencies and experience. Recommended guidelines on CPD training, incentives and teacher recognition were to be provided by ECDA. ECDA will also work towards developing induction and mentoring resources for professional growth and learning.

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Singapore’s Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Hsien Loong, announced strategic plans to uplift the preschool sector in a 2017 National Day rally (Straits Times, August 20, 2017). One key initiative outlined an enhanced career and professional development pathway within the Early Childhood Manpower Plan. The Early Childhood and Development Agency (ECDA) also embarked on a national campaign to raise awareness on the importance of preschool education supported by quality programmes and professionals. To show a strong commitment towards elevating the quality and status of the sector, the Singapore government announced an increase of spending from \$850 million to \$1.7 billion in the next five years for this sector.

METHODS

A mixed methods research paradigm was used in the overall study. A survey was conducted with 242 preschool teachers followed by semi-structured interviews with 18 of the survey respondents. While the purpose of the overall research study had a wider scope, this article discusses and presents 2A, a subsection of Part 2, of the survey as well as theme A of the interview. There are 3 sections in the survey. Part A of the survey contained items that explored the perceptions of preschool teachers’ perception of professional self within the profession as well as with the preschool communities. There were 5 key areas in the semi-structured interviews. Section A covered the teacher’s perceptions of the profession and her sense of professional self and Section D covered the teacher’s perception of professional development and mastery.

Sample

242 preschool teachers with at least two years of preschool teaching experience who were enrolled in a part time professional development programme participated in the survey. The modular courses of the programme are delivered using a blended learning approach of three face-to-face class sessions and three online sessions. The survey was administered over two of the evening face-to-face sessions of various level two and three modules. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The respondents did not receive any form of remuneration for participating. All the respondents are female. The respondent sample consisted of:

- 141 (58.2%) are less than or equal to 30 years old
- 162 (66.9%) hold at least a diploma, degree or higher qualification
- 94.6% or 229 participants have a relevant Early Childhood Education (ECE) qualification
- 232 (95.9%) are currently working in a kindergarten setting
- 57.4% or 139 have worked in a childcare centre and
- 21.5% or 52 have worked in both childcare centre and kindergarten.

Out of the 242 survey respondents, 18 preschool teachers participated in the interviews.

- 9 interviewees were working in public funded preschool centres while 11 were in private-funded centres.
- 6 interviewees were working in kindergartens while 14 were in childcare centres.
- 14 interviewees had 1 to 6 years of ECE working experience and 6 interviewees had more than 6 years of experience.

Survey

The survey is a multi-domain tool with 3 parts. It consisted of a cluster of survey items on a 5-point Likert scale with three open-ended questions. The survey items were developed based on inputs from existing curriculum and policy documents such as SkillsFuture, Sectorial Manpower Plans (SkillsFuture, 2016), Workforce Skills Qualification System as well as feedback from domain specialists in the University. Part 2 of the survey has two sections – Section 2A *Sense of Professional*

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Self (2A) and Section 2B: *Developing the Child* (2A). This paper reports the analysis and findings of section 2A. *Sense of Professional Self*.

Section 2A of the survey has 27 items on the domain of *Sense of Professional Self*. Three items were removed due to weak loading and the final model has 24 items that were used for analysis. The hypothesized model for preschool teachers’ *Sense of the Professional Self* is a second-order factor model. The second-order confirmatory factor analysis is a statistical method used to confirm the theorized construct into certain number of underlying latent factors (factors that cannot be observed or measured directly).

There are three latent factors in (1) *Self as a Professional* and four latent factors in (2) *Professional Self with Communities*. Figure 1 shows the structure of the part 2A of the survey for the domain *Preschool Teachers’ Sense of Professional Self*. Only factors with loadings of 0.70 or above were considered.

The three latent factors in the Construct 1: *Self as a Professional* are:

- Factor One: Professional Learning and Development;
- Factor Two: Professional Ethics and
- Factor Three: Reflective Teaching Practices.

The three factors in the Construct 2: *Professional Self with Communities* are:

- Factor Four: Professional Initiatives
- Factor Five: Professional Partnerships with Community;
- Factor Six: Professional Practices with Colleagues and
- Factor Seven: Professional Partnerships with Families.

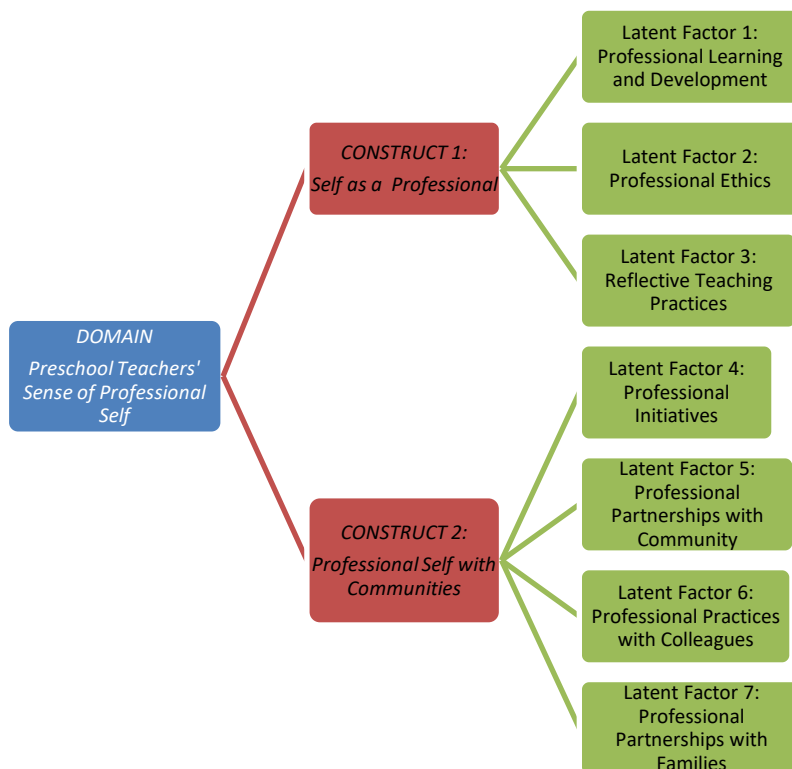


Figure 1: Structure of survey for preschool teachers’ sense of professional self

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Each factor consisted of two to five statements. Each statement had a 5-point Likert rating scale (ranges from 1 - Strongly disagree to 5 - Strongly Agree) to measure respondents’ perception of the *Sense of Professional Self*. The statements expressed beliefs and opinions about the self within as a preschool professional and with the professional community. Table 2, in the following section of the paper, lists the 7 factors with sample items along with other analysis.

Factorial Analysis

After data cleaning and the initial profiling of the 242 responses, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed using IBM SPSS AMOS Software version 25.0 to confirm the factor structure. CFA allows the testing of a hypothesized model between a set of survey items and their underlying latent constructs. Parameter estimates were generated using maximum likelihood (ML) estimation and checked if they were statistically significant. Figure 2 shows the CFA model of the items hypothesized to load on these seven factors after going through a categorical item sorting process.

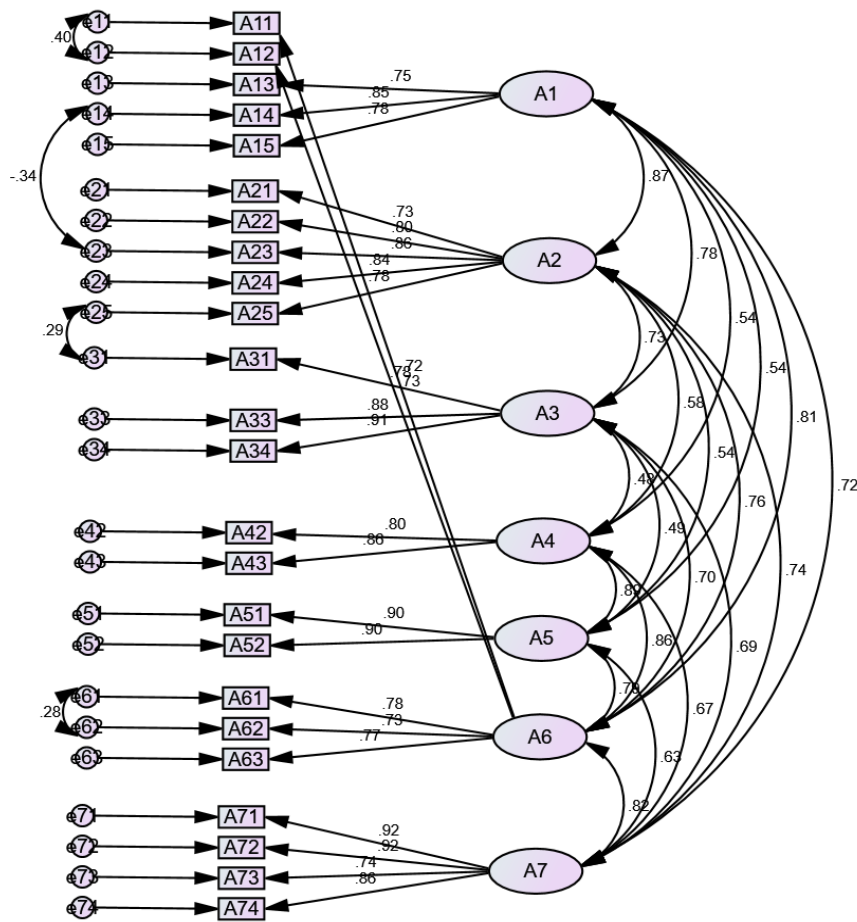


Figure 2: CFA analysis of preschool teachers’ sense of professional self

A range of goodness-of-fit indices were applied to measure the fit of the selected model. To improve the model fit in this study, error covariance modification indices were also examined. The chi square to df ratio or χ^2/df , CFI (Comparative fit index), SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) and RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) were applied to examine the selected model’s goodness-of-fit (See Table 1). Using a set of indices as recommended by O’Rourke, et al. (2013), the model’s fit indices are well within the benchmark range.

Table 1. Goodness-of-fit indices for the hypothesised CFA model

	Benchmarks	Model Fit Indices
SRMR	<0.09	0.0377
RMSEA	<0.10	0.057
CFI	>0.90	0.961
Cmin/df	<3.0	1.786
pclose	> 0.05	0.097

Using the parameter estimates, the reliability and validity of the model were measured. All path coefficients were found significant and that they contribute significantly to the related factor. The values of the inter-correlation coefficients range from moderate .538 to high .864 and all the correlation coefficients are significant at the .001 level. This indicated the 7 factors selected to formulate the survey items load into one underlying construct of

Sense of Professional Self.

The Cronbach alphas show the instrument to be fairly reliable with the seven factors having reliability, ranging from 0.83 to 0.90. The domain “Professional Self” is significantly higher than the domain “Professional Communities” The factor with the highest mean is “Reflective Teaching Practices” with a mean of 4.39 and the factor with lowest mean is “Professional Partnerships with the Community” with a mean of 3.71. Table 2 shows the domain and factor means, standard deviation and the reliabilities of the seven factors.

Table 2: Variables and factors with mean, standard deviation and Cronbach Alpha

Constructs (mean, standard deviation)	Latent Factor (mean, standard deviation)	Sample items	Cronbach Alpha
1. Professional Self (Mean:4.23, SD: 0.64)	Factor 1: Professional Learning and Development (Mean: 4.24, SD: 0.62)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Analyse professional learning needs ● Engage in continuous professional development 	0.88
	Factor 2: Professional Ethics (Mean: 4.14, SD: 0.69)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Maintain respect and confidentiality in work matters ● Establish ethical practices in EC education 	0.89
	Factor 3: Reflective Teaching Practices (Mean: 4.30, SD: 0.62)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflect on and improve my teaching practices ● Apply an inquiry-based approach in my teaching practices 	0.90

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2. Professional Self with Communities (Mean 3.77, SD: 0.78)	Factor 5: Professional Initiatives (Mean: 3.72, SD: 0.83)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate projects with colleagues • Align programmes to the centre's vision and mission 	0.83
	Factor 4: Professional Partnerships with the Community (Mean: 3.68, SD: 0.80)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop partnerships with community stakeholders • Plan collaborative projects with community stakeholders 	0.87
	Factor 5: Professional Practices with Colleagues (Mean: 3.71, SD: 0.69)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate projects with colleagues • Develop structures that support collaboration among colleagues 	0.84
	Factor 6: Professional Partnerships with Families (Mean: 3.95, SD: 0.79)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve families in decision-making about their children • Build partnerships with families to support children's development 	0.87

Analysis by “Years of Experience”

Further subgroup analysis was conducted to see if there were differences among groups of preschool teachers with different years of experience. T-test was conducted and significant differences ($p \leq 0.05$) were found for all items between the less experienced preschool teacher (less or equal to 6 years) and the more experienced preschool teachers (more or equal to 7 years of experience). Figure 3 shows the differences for the items in the *Professional Self* and Figure 4 shows the differences in the items in *Professional Self with Communities*.

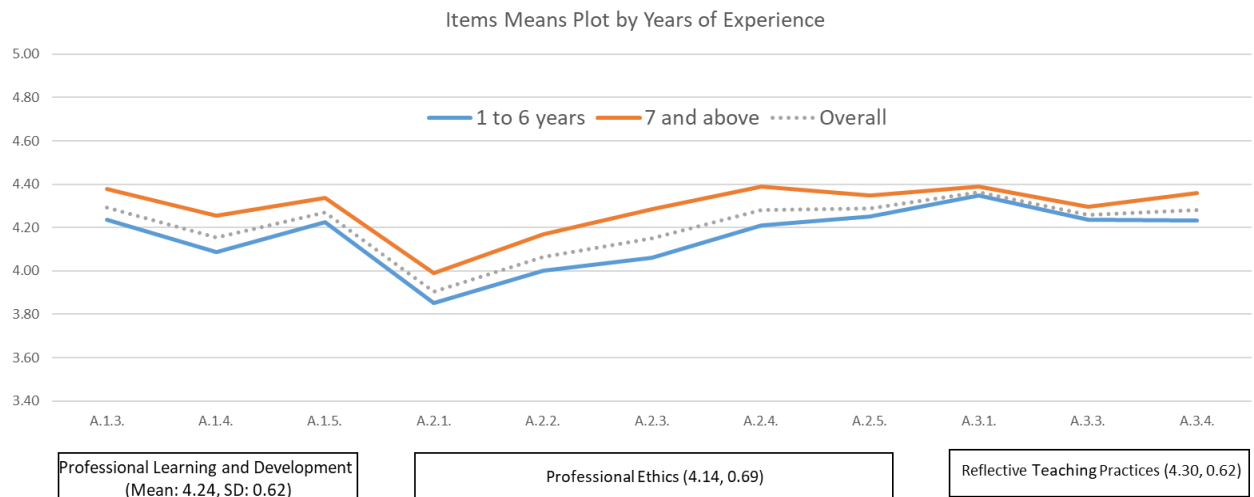


Figure 3: Subgroup (Years of Experience) differences for Professional Self

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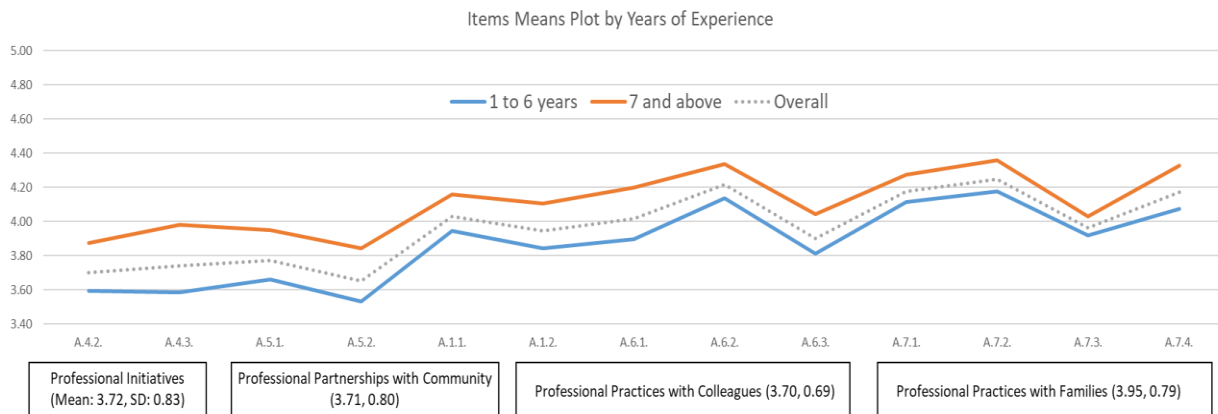


Figure 4: Subgroup (Years of Experience) differences for Professional Self with Communities

Interviews

The semi-structured interviews elicited a range of responses on topics related to personal perceptions of the profession, roles and responsibilities, personal motivation, programme feedback as well as professional development and mastery. This qualitative inquiry was structured as a follow up on the findings from the survey. The qualitative findings for this paper is based on a two key sections in the interviews. The sections are Section A, the teacher’s perceptions of the profession, and section D, professional development and mastery. The interview, lasting from 45 minutes to approximately hour, were audio recorded and transcribed. A community-based research team was formed to ensure a broad-based but valid approach to the data preparation and analysis. The team consisted of the researcher, interviewer and 2 transcribers. As interview data was coded, themes emerged. While the themes became more refined through ongoing engagement with the data, quotes were extracted for each theme. The quotes and themes were verified by a preschool domain specialist. Triangulation is utilized in qualitative inquiries to corroborate data, and the conclusions drawn from it together with other perspectives to verify the validity of the findings (O’Toole & Beckett, 2014; Hughes, 2010).

Themes from the Interviews

Three main themes were extracted from the coding of sections A and D of the interviews.

Theme 1: Emerging sense of professional identity

Deeply rooted in the preschool sector are discourses of mothering and women’s work that bring to light how the mostly female workforce are understood and valued (O’Connor, et al., 2015; Osgood, 2011). The absence of clear boundaries for the preschool teacher makes it difficult for the teachers to forge a clear sense of professional self. This can affect how teachers perceive their image and sense of professional identity which can translate into their practice. The interviewees articulated an emerging sense of professional identity and that being a preschool teacher is more than minding and caregiving.

... I am a teacher—not there just to care and see to the safety of children. I have to purposefully, plan certain programmes so that children are able to meet objectives. ... to get the child to be able to get there (meet the objectives), it is very important to be trained,...to patiently hone the child’s skills and take the child through that process. (1300_Stu11)

Several of the interviewees see themselves as role models for children, especially in their use of language, in their interactions with the children and other people.

We are role models. What we show the children actually matters. Children will be seeing our actions and listening to what we say. So, we shouldn’t be giving contradicting message to the

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children.” (1830_Stu2)

They also view preschool education to go beyond supporting the child academically to nurturing them holistically. The interviewees see themselves supporting in the child’s character building, in developing social resilience through inculcating good life values and in providing the necessary stimuli for the child to learn.

“We... essential support for the child’s growth... before they move on to primary school... These few years determines what kind of character or what kind of personality they’re going to grow up into... I think it’s very important for early childhood professionals to be there to be like the stepping stone for them to move forward.” (1700_Stu6)

Theme 2: Professional learning communities to support teaching and learning

DuFour, DuFour and Eaker (2008) defined *Professional learning communities* (PLCs) as educators collaborating in the processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve improved teaching and learning for their students. The interviews highlighted that the preschool teachers value more platforms for professional learning communities to promote collegial cultures and provide capacity building that sustains relationships and open dialogue (Lieberman & Miller, 2008).

“...because of those sharing sessions during our discussions in the course, I learned from my course mates. And when I come back to school I can also do the same, you know, continue, continue the sharing sessions back in school with the other teachers.” (1745_Grad9)

Parkay (2013) highlighted that the hallmark of a professional teacher is to be able to engage in reflective practices of classroom experiences. The teachers are also looking for occasions to share their reflective practices.

“The course has encouraged us to be reflective...and we fill up a reflection form during the course...back at the centre (school), if there is a platform where the teachers can meet and discuss teachers we can surface our reflections ...what are the challenges, what works, from the challenges, we want to surface from there to how to improve and learn from each other.” (1300_Stu10)

Supportive relationships with opportunities to share and learn can contribute towards professional development and build the sense of professionalism among teachers (Ammentrop & Smith, 2011). The interviewees also highlighted that collaborative clusters that perform as PLCs can be formed where interpersonal development is directly linked to shared goals, which will allow a variety of strategies to flourish in a supportive environment

“come together and get to know each other better and then we can support each other even though we’re from different centres, but like, as a big family so we can discuss like strategies or... strategies for problems that we might face at our centres and then if we need help in the centre we can even like, ... ask for help, ‘cause we have this big network.” (1730_Stu1)

Theme 3: Mentoring as a key part of professional development

Several interviewees highlighted mentoring as a promising platform to provide professional support for beginning preschool teachers. Mentoring also plays a vital role in establishing a professional relationship between the beginning (mentees) and experienced preschool teachers (mentors) that can empower and enhance professional practises (Koerner, 2017).

“I had to do planning, I had no idea how to start ... so when the more experienced teachers mentor me, I ask them like, how you do .., then I sit in how they do their planning, and with their help I’ll try to implement my plans.” (1300_Stu5)

One interviewee highlighted the vital role of a nurturing mentor who creates an environment in which the beginning teachers feel supported. Effective mentoring is able to increase beginning

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teachers’ confidence and comfort as well as ease their transition into the profession (Koerner, 2017). Within this environment, the beginning preschool teacher can freely reflect and explore.

“... it’s good to be under a caring mentor who nurtures ...allows you to go and explore, like you can go and teach, y’know, whether or not you teach right or wrong, that’s where the mentor steps in to give you feedback.” (1100_Grad8)

Another interviewee shares about her aspiration to be a qualified mentor, with the knowledge and skills, to be able to support beginning teachers. This also highlights the emerging concept of teacher leadership in preschool profession to bring about improvement in the sector.

“... if I’m going to be a centre leader, I have to have the qualifications to back it up, ... and I am qualified to share the knowledge or qualified to mentor and guide new teachers.” (1200_Grad9)

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The analysis of Section 2A of the survey, *Self as a Professional*, has three key findings. This section consists of two constructs - Construct One: *Self as a Professional* and Construct Two: *Professional Self with Communities*. The two constructs have a total of 7 factors.

1. The survey respondents rated themselves significantly lower in Construct Two: *Professional Self with Communities* (factor mean: Mean 3.77, SD: 0.78).
2. Factor 4 in Construct 2: *Professional Partnerships with Community* was rated the lowest ((Mean: 3.68, SD: 0.80).
3. The more experienced EC teachers with equal or more than seven years of preschool experience rated themselves significantly higher than those with less preschool experience in both constructs.

The coding analysis of Sections A and D of the interviews highlighted the following themes

1. The interviewees have an emerging sense of professional identity
2. Professional learning communities are perceived as positive platforms to support teaching and learning.
3. Mentoring can support training and development.

Historically teachers in the preschool sector have a low professional status and within the teaching fraternity they face the biggest challenge in establishing a professional identity (Hoyle, 2008). However, in the past decade, there have been shifts in governments and policy rhetoric of many nations regarding the professionalisation of the preschool sector and its teachers (OECD, 2012; Phillips, Austin & Whitebook, 2016). Raising the status of preschool teachers and respecting the value of early childhood education as an important issue in its own right, are the first key steps to strengthening the sector (Urban, 2014; Warren, 2014). In Singapore, the introduction of the preschool standards and requirements together with the formation of a regulatory and developmental agency for the preschool sector signaled a strategic national shift in the reconceptualisation of the expert identities of preschool teachers. Developing a culture, which defines their beliefs and values, would serve to enhance the professional identity of early childhood educators through education, sharing of experiences and mentoring practices (Bredenkamp, 2017). The findings in this study highlighted the importance in providing opportunities for collaboration and teamwork practices within supportive learning communities and mentors to support positive outcomes for preschool teachers' professional learning.

Developing strong collaborative and team cultures within professional learning communities with preschool teachers can support teacher retention, professional learning and improved teaching and learning interactions (Ratner, Bocknek, Miller, Elliott & Weathington, 2017). These learning

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communities are key platform for teachers to share knowledge, skills and values. Darling-Hammond, Hylar & Gardner (2017) identified group learning with these learning communities as an effective strategy for professional development. The team culture within the community also provides the preschool teachers with opportunities to validate, strengthen and expand their professional practices, all of which will enhance the preschool teachers’ sense of professional self. The support of a team can empower teachers in their roles and help them develop confidence in their professional ability (Gracey, 2015). Preschool teachers’ pre and in-service programmes can encourage and facilitate communities to develop professional partnerships and collaboration.

“Much of the professional development offered in schools comes from the outside, is one-time only, and lacks connection to the culture of the school and its teachers and students” (Bradley-Levine, Smith, & Carr, 2009, p. 152). Deliberate and well-planned efforts, particularly in school settings, community forums and professional learning programmes are platforms of opportunities to develop professional learning communities. Strong and effective preschool leaders play a critical role in establishing and mentoring these community of learners and team culture. Professional learning communities offers a useful platform for shared and supportive leadership, collective learning, shared practices and supportive relationships.

In the survey, the more experienced preschool teachers with equal or more than seven years of EC experience rated themselves significantly higher than those with less teaching experience in both constructs. Preschool teachers can serve as mentors. Mentoring can serve as a professional-development strategy to connect professional vision with actual practices (Chu, 2014). Successful mentoring can result in a culture of learning. Mentoring can be a viable mode of professional development and situated learning for preschool teachers. It provides an avenue for improving practice, functions as a strategy for retaining the teachers, and also acts as a catalyst for social change in schools (Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008). Done within community, with others, beginning preschool teachers make sense and meaning as they take action within a context. Mentors and mentees can benefit from a structured mentoring programme, where development and training increase innovation and improve quality from professional development activities. Mentoring supports collaboration among the teachers. Teachers can share and observe practices, work together to plan, design, evaluate curriculum, and teach each other what they know about teaching and learning. This sense of collegiality provided in mentoring provides a safe environment for less experienced teachers to experiment and to study themselves.

Mentoring is not only an important strategy to support and nurture beginning teachers, it is also an effective approach to develop leaders in the profession. Those who mentor others can benefit from the mentoring process. Mentoring relationships promote professional learning and encourage leadership. Advocating collaborative and mentoring models for beginning teachers requires effective preschool leaders who are able to connect theory to practice, build professional capacity and capability, and encourage team culture to recognise the importance of relationship building and quality infrastructure. Rodd (2013) highlighted the benefits for mentors and that include the development of new understandings and insights, the advancement of professional competence and reflective practices, and the enhancement of professionalism and the professional self. To keep pace with the expanding challenges of preschool teachers and to improve the status of the profession, robust constructs and discourses of preschool leadership as well as improved professionalism are crucial issues to address. Teacher education and professional development programmes, together with statutory and professional organisations have to take the lead in bringing the profession forward. Importantly, the sector must continue to develop preschool leaders for knowledge exchange and generation in a landscape that is evolving quickly.

CONCLUSION

There is considerable research to show that quality preschool education can make a significant difference to young children’s lives and overall wellbeing. Teacher quality is a key factor impacting

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quality educational reform and student achievement. In turn, preschool teachers’ sense of professionalism is a key construct towards teacher quality. The development of the professional self in the preschool sector impacts the continued improvement in preschool education. Therefore as the preschool landscape evolves and changes, enhancing the teachers’ sense of professionalism is necessary (Tukonic & Harwood, 2015).

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