CURRENT NEEDS OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN GREECE: A FOCUS GROUP STUDY

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Abstract:

This paper presents a brief overview of the literature regarding preschool teachers' careers and professional development. The main purpose of the part of the study presented here was to conduct a needs-assessment exercise to identify the specific needs for professional development of early childhood teachers in Greece. Data were collected through a focus group. Results highlighted the challenges of moving forward in a teaching career and the need for increasing professional development opportunities that match teachers' needs and interests. Professionals indicated that the absence of teacher-parents' collaboration and structured practices for dealing with children's discipline issues are their basic concerns. Implications of the study's results are also discussed.

Keywords:
Professional development; Quality of education; Preschool teachers' needs; Early childhood education and care

Introduction

Research has shown that one of the most important factors of success in education systems is the quality of teaching (OECD, 2020). Teachers are important adults in children's school lives, and there is some evidence that teachers' wellbeing, at least indirectly, has significant effects on children's socioemotional adjustment and academic performance (Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Malmberg & Hagger 2009; Mashburn et al., 2008). However, recruiting and retaining quality teachers is a known challenge for education systems. Surprisingly, teachers' career and professional development is considered as one of the main challenges in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (Eurydice, 2018). Until now, Europe is facing several challenges regarding teachers' demand and supply, particularly teacher shortages and ageing (Eurydice, 2018). Given these challenges, the question of how nations can maintain teachers of high caliber remains one of fundamental significance (Gore et al., 2017). Recent research calls have emphasized the need to support and promote teachers' careers and professional development by cultivating their competences with offering ongoing learning opportunities and focusing on their well-being.

The project Promoting Teachers Wellbeing through Positive Behaviour Support in Early Childhood Education (ProW) is reflecting exactly this need. More specifically, the ProW project is a policy experimentation project aiming to develop evidence-based policies and practices to enhance the teaching profession and elevate teachers' careers and capacities in ECEC settings. The project is based on (1) Positive Psychology interventions focusing on teacher well-being (PERMA) and (2) on the School Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) framework. It draws from a large body of research that posits that building teachers' overall wellbeing and supporting them teaching to children social skills and managing their behaviour, will have a positive impact on their professional competencies, self-efficacy, motivation and career prospects (OECD, 2020; Seligman, 2011). The ultimate goal is that as a consequence of such support, early childhood teachers will have a greater sense of self-efficacy and job satisfaction, as well as lower burnout levels.

The importance of early childhood teachers' careers and professional development

A growing body of literature is recognizing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as one of the most important factors in children's life. The benefits of children's experiences in high-quality ECEC settings form the basis for their later development and lifelong learning (Gregoriadis et al., 2018a; European Commission, 2014; ET2020 Working group, 2021). An extended body of research has focused on how the teacher-child interactions – known as process quality – impact on children's development and learning (Grammatikopoulos et al., 2018; Koivula et al., 2019; Perlman et al., 2016). Several studies indicate that observed high-quality interactions are associated with benefits in academic, social, and emotional domain (Brock & Curby, 2014; Cadima et al., 2016; Mashburn et al., 2008; Sabol et al., 2013). Furthermore, there are empirical evidence showing that affective teacher-child relationship and supportive interactions are important contributors to children's development and learning from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., Vandenbroeck et al., 2008). Research findings suggest that curriculum guidelines, adequate adult-child ratios and group sizes, integrated public policies, appropriate monitoring systems, and a well-trained and motivated workforce are considered as other key aspects of quality in ECEC setting (European Commission, 2014). However, the teachers' professional development is thought to be one of the most salient indicators of ECEC quality in supporting high-quality interactions (European Commission, 2014).

Early childhood teachers' professional development opportunities

Research has indicated that professional development opportunities are crucial for the continuous upgrade of a high-quality preschool settings (e.g., Gregoriadis et al., 2018b; Hamre et al., 2017). Several studies have shown that participation in professional development improves the quality of teacher's

interactions with children (Alamos & Williford, 2020; Early et al., 2017; Williford et al., 2017). Supporting teachers with continuous professional development opportunities can be seen as a key long-term strategy to promote ECEC quality (Gregoriadis et al., 2018b; Hamre et al., 2017; Zachopoulou et al., 2018). It is widely acknowledged that teachers' impersonal relationships with children act as internal rewards and give meaning to their work (Spilt et al., 2011). Teacher–student relationships are often mentioned as one of the core reasons for staying in the profession (O'Connor 2010). Furthermore, the professional development has also been shown to be related to improved teachers' well-being, self-efficacy, sense of autonomy, and reduction in burnout levels (Davis et al., 2021; Sandilos et al., 2020; Wolf et al., 2018). Similarly, research has shown that support provided by the school leadership, is an important defining factor for retention and commitment to the teaching profession (Beltman et al., 2018; Peixoto et al., 2018).

The professional development programs may encompass different topics and social, cognitive and practical strategies co-exist and are co-dependent (Day, 2004). For an effective professional development program, a combination of various methodologies such as courses, workshops, small-group project work or coaching should be used (Gregoriadis et al., 2018a). Still, recent studies have suggested that professional development programs must provide preschool teachers with opportunities to reflect on their work and to evaluate their everyday practices (OECD, 2014). Moreover, the duration of the professional development program is another factor that contribute to the effectiveness of that program (Egert et al., 2018).

In some countries, professional development is obligatory, with a specified requirement of minimum duration, while in others it is optional (ET2020 Working Group, 2021). Nowadays, the importance of monitoring teachers' needs, obstacles to participation and attendance in professional development programs, and the impact of training are highlighted by the European Commission (ET2020 Working Group, 2021). In sum, the professional development can be a powerful tool that could increase the quality of education and care practices in ECEC.

Early childhood teachers' careers and professional development in Greece

The ECEC system in Greece has been characterized as a split system, as it is organized differently for children under and above the age of 4. Early childhood professionals in Greece are distinguished by the type of the ECEC institution they are working in: a) the infant-toddler pedagogues and care providers, which are working with infants and toddlers (usually under 4 years of age) and b) the kindergarten teachers, which are working with children between 4 and 6 years of age. According to the European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2019) report, the country requires teachers to be highly qualified across both ECEC phases. A brief overview of the main characteristics of the Greek ECEC system is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Workforce features in Greece

Minimum qualification requirement for teachers	Bachelor (for both < 4 & > 4)
Continuous Professional Development (CPD)	Mandatory for all staff
Assistants	>4: No assistants <4: ISCED 4 post-secondary non-tertiary education qualification

Note. Based on European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2019).

ECEC staff working in the infant/childcare centers (ICCCs) were trained mainly in a four-year bachelor degree (as infant-toddlers pedagogues and care providers) and in some cases in vocational training centres or vocational high schools (as assistant infant-toddler care takers). According to their training program they follow a consecutive model of training, which provides a general component

of courses in the first 7 semesters (3 years and a half) and follows a professional component by one additional semester of practicum, which takes the form of paid placement in a centre-based day care institution. The expansion of infant-toddlers pedagogues and care providers training and their integration into university education in Greece has been completed during the last two years. These university departments are part of Social Sciences in three universities in Greece. ECEC staff working as teachers in kindergarten schools, are trained in universities following a 4-year Bachelor program since 1983. They follow a concurrent model of initial teacher education, which provides at the same time a general component and a professional component accompanied with practicum. These university departments belong to Schools of Education in 9 Universities in Greece. Thus, the training of infant-toddler pedagogues and care providers and kindergarten teachers in Greece differ from each other regarding their academic and professional identity. There are also differences in employment rights, working hours, and salary between these two ECEC staff workers. Both kindergarten teachers and infant-toddlers pedagogues and care providers may attend postgraduate studies.

More than 95% of kindergarten teachers and almost all of the infant-toddlers pedagogues and care providers in Greece are women. The social status of kindergarten teachers and especially that of infant--toddlers pedagogues and care providers in Greece is low. Research on kindergarten teachers in Greece showed that although they consider their contribution to the development of their students as very important, they agree that their social status is lower than that of other teachers but higher than that of infant-toddlers pedagogues and care providers (Eleftherakis & Oikonomidis, 2013). As incentives for their profession, the kindergarten teachers report mainly their love for children and their profession, as well as the satisfaction that results from this, and as disincentives the unemployment, the low salary, and the difficult conditions of its practice (Eleftherakis et al., 2018; Eleftherakis & Oikonomidis, 2020).

Professional development opportunities for infant--toddler pedagogues and care providers who hold a university bachelor's degree lead to day-care centre directorship positions. Kindergarten teachers have the opportunity to become kindergarten directors or education officers at the local and national level if they pursue postgraduate studies. Interestingly, directors of day-care centres have more demanding financial and personnel management tasks than the respective managerial tasks of directors in kindergarten schools.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of six participants was recruited for the focus group. The majority of the participants were women and only one male was present. Most of the participants reported a long-standing work experience as coordinators of educational planning (n = 3), and all are currently employed and active in the field. One of them was a school advisor/coordinator of educational planning in special education. Two of the participants noted that they are currently serving as preschool teachers. All the participants have work experience in the education ranging from 10 to 30 years. The participants exhibited an impressive zest for knowledge and understanding about the sectors' needs and mentioned an exceptional collection of post-graduate studies (Master and Phd) in education. Two were holding a PhD in educational evaluation and Masters in Education research methods; one had a Master degree in Education and Training; one had a Master degree in Special Education; and two had Master degree in Education Practice and Innovation.

Measures

This study used a qualitative approach to explore participants' views concerning preschool teachers' needs for professional development. During the focus group a semi structured questionnaire with a set of four open-ended questions, three of which were selected for presentation in this paper were used to elicit data. These questions referred to: a) the main challenges for early childhood teachers in the workplace environment (item 2), b) the main priority and school needs for promoting positive and preventative learning environments (item 2), and c) the existing practices on teachers' wellbeing, career development and supporting positive students' behaviour (item 3).

Procedure

The focus group was conducted by the first author and two other members of the research team were also present. Due to COVID19 restrictive measures the focus group was conducted online via the zoom platform, to protect the health and safety of all parties involved. All the participants have been informed about the overall aim of the project and they have agreed to participate. Consent forms of all participants were collected, along with all other relevant information. The focus group's discussion lasted an hour.

Results

Main challenges for early childhood teachers (Item 1)

All participants agreed that the main challenge that preschool teachers are currently facing is children's challenging behaviour and not their academic performance. A list of all-important points mentioned during the discussion is presented below:

- Emphasis is given mostly on academic knowledge; participants suggest that the holistic development of children should be taken into consideration, i.e. socio-emotional development and not just academic performance.
- Lack of knowledge regarding classroom management and children's behaviour acts as a stressor factor for preschool teachers, especially for preschool teachers with limited work experience.
- Curriculum is not in line with the needs of the children and teachers. It is knowledge-centred and addressed to a specific type of child; it does not take into account children's diverse needs.
- Lack of cooperation between teachers in general education and teachers in special education. Lack of programs, lack of didactic materials, etc.
- Lack of knowledge regarding the home learning environment. The lack of cooperation between teachers and parents also causes stress to preschool teachers.
- Heterogeneity of children per classroom/educator, in terms of socioeconomic and cultural background of each child, in terms of cognitive and emotional development stage of each child, in terms of specific limitations (e.g., special needs in speech and language development, learning), which require new skills and knowledge regarding classroom management and more attention/intervention from the preschool educator to manage children in their class efficiently.
- Occupational insecurity also causes stress to teachers as there is no stable professional framework in relation to their work.
- Lack of space and the safety in preschools settings, such as materials and equipment.
- Responsibilities regarding the school administration that teachers are called upon to take on also cause anxiety and stress.

Such responses show preschool teachers desires to build a socio-emotional professional framework, which among other things, would include methods for cooperation with parents and other colleagues and practices regarding children's behaviours.

In the early educational field, there are many challenges. I am in a preschool centre that has only one class. Sometimes I don't know how to react in a challenging behaviour expressed by a specific child. It's important parents listen teachers and together find a solution. I would like to gain greater confidence in my abilities regarding children's behaviours.

Describe the main priority and school needs for promoting positive and preventative learning environments (Item 2)

Main priorities
All participants agreed that the main priority for promoting positive and preventative learning environments is the development of a positive school climate. Creating a supportive learning environment requires time, reflection and planning. Also, participants noted that collaboration between teachers and parents is crucial for the beginning of the preschool year because parents give important information to teachers regarding children's interests, behaviour and needs. Finally, one of the participants stated that the development of an effective pedagogical framework which consists of an appropriate space learning environment, materials and equipment and inclusive practices may prevent negative behaviours in schools.

My biggest desire is to develop positive relationships every school year. Teacher-parent collaboration for me means an opportunity to know better my children in classroom.

School needs for positive and preventative school environment
All participants suggested that a positive classroom environment helps and prepares children for learning and may be especially important for children at-risk who may not have high-quality relationships outside of the preschool environment. Moreover, teachers' inclusive and discipline practices (e.g., setting rules and boundaries) may foster children's self-regulation regarding children' behaviour. Results from the focus group interview indicated that a school-family cooperation and a common framework regarding rules and children's behaviour and enable children to have a smooth school adjustment and learn how to be members of their social environment. However, all participants agreed that the biggest challenge/barrier in promoting school-wide prevention of negative behaviours and stronger social-emotional support for children, is the lack of teachers' training and professional development in issues about negative behaviours, as well as being well-equipped in a supportive context. Another barrier that should be regulated is the school -

family partnership. Results from the focus group interview indicated that parents sometimes denying recognizing that their children exhibit challenging behaviours and consequently they refuse to establish rules and boundaries to their children.

While teachers want to promote student's socio-emotional learning, they don't know how to do it and parallel they feel pressure by parents to help students with academic tasks (e.g., writing child's name).

Identify current practices for supporting teacher's well-being, careers, career development, schoolwide discipline prevention and positive learning environments (Item 3)

Participants noticed a small number of programs that are offered for the psychological empowerment of teachers such as the RESCUE, a European resilience-focused curriculum; the Resilience and Positive psychology during COVID19 program by the Smile of the Child1. A number of conferences and training about teachers' resilience and well-being was also offered by the Regional Centres for Educational Planning in Greece (PEKES).
Regarding existing opportunities for teachers' career progression, preschool teachers mentioned that come from the training that takes place within the official school framework. One of the coordinators of educational planning suggested that preschool teachers have the opportunity to teach in schools abroad.
Furthermore, all participants notice the importance of discipline prevention and positive learning environments and agreed that the most important practice on this topic is to develop sensitive and supportive teacher-child relationships. All the points that were raised are summarized below:
- A supportive and well-organized environment with a variety of activities around children's interests.
- Rules and boundaries developed and accepted by all children and teachers.
- A learning environment with many interest areas to suit children's development.
- Establishment of a communication system among teachers, parents and children.
- Establishment of daily routines regarding rules and expected positive behaviours.
- A positive reward system for children's specific behaviours.
- Teachers acting as a positive role model.

1 – https://www.hamogelo.gr/gr/el/ta-nea-mas/ipostiriksi-paidion-kai-oikogeneion-prosfigon-metanaston-se-athina-kai-thessaloniki-meso-tis-parochis-koinonikis-kai-psichologikis-ipostiriksis-meta-to-ksespasma-tou-covid-19-stin-ellada-apo-to-chamogelo-tou-paidiou/

Discussion

The main purpose of this part of the study was to investigate the views of Greek preschool teachers and educational stakeholders about teachers' needs for professional development in early childhood education. The findings of this study presented a variety of needs that emerged from the participants' responses shared by teachers and stakeholders participated in the focus group. Members of the focus group identified several needs for staff working in ECEC settings and highlighted their concerns for their professional development on topics such as school-family partnerships, classroom management and supporting positive classroom climate. Additionally, managing stress and developing positive and respectful relationships among professionals, parents, and children were pointed out in the open questions by respondents.

The results of this part of the study showed that most of the participants raised the issue of collaboration with parents and teachers in their school and highlighted the need for building fruitful relationships that will reduce the stress in their work. Interestingly school-family partnerships have been raised as a challenging issue by both teachers and stakeholders that it is needed to be improved for supporting both teachers' well-being and teacher's work in the classroom. Positive relationships between teachers and parents benefit children and allow both to gain valuable information about a child's current stage of development and ways that it is supported (e.g., home learning environment) (Lang et al., 2020). Poor school-family partnerships may contribute to teacher's burnout, add significantly stress at work, increase anxiety and workload. On the other hand, a mutual positive parent-teacher relationship can reduce the stress and teachers may feel more valued and supported (Prilleltensky et al., 2016).

The results of the focus group underlined the teachers' need to develop skills for classroom management and develop a supportive environment for all children to promote their socio-emotional development beyond the growth of academic skills. It seems that SWPBS framework may act as a relevant tool to address current needs and challenges with regard to children's challenging behaviours. Also, findings showed that professionals are open to learning opportunities through professional development on this topic.

In addition, the findings of this part of the study have also shown that the effectiveness of professional development depends on features of the workplace. Most participants were concerned about their work status, their job insecurity and instability. This finding is in line with the recent OECD TALIS Starting Strong survey (2020) that asked professionals the extent to which they perceived that they were valued in their profession. The results showed that teachers did not feel valued by society. Despite the increasing research evidence of the crucial role of ECEC for children's learning and development for many years, ECEC provision has been traditionally seen as a service that supports parents' participation in the labour market (ET2020 Working group, 2021). Furthermore, there are empirical evidence showed that teachers' wellbeing is influenced by the condition of their work in ECCE settings such as the job insecurity and instability, workload which interferes with their personal and family life needs. This finding is in line with research evidence about ECEC workforce in Europe which showed that, while ECEC professionals are one of the most important drivers of high-quality ECEC, most countries face issues related to staff shortages, turnover, and an overall low status of the profession (OECD, 2020, ET2020 Working group, 2021).

Participants raised many other important factors that influence the discipline practices and social-emotional support for students. According to two of the coordinators of educational planning it is crucial the existing educational policies to be reformed and enriched with parameters, which support teachers, children and families in issues related to discipline practices and socio-emotional support. The educational policies need to assist and support teachers to apply an official educational framework for promoting positive and preventative learning environments. Finally, other important factors may be the teachers' evaluation and policies regarding inclusive education.

In conclusion, it appears that professional development opportunities can be a powerful tool to increase the quality of ECEC practices and raise the status of the ECEC profession. Actions are needed to be taken for supporting teachers' professional empowerment regarding their well-being both as individuals as well as personnel in preschool settings.

Conflict of Interest Statement

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