



**PERCEPTIONS OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS  
ABOUT THEIR ROLE IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT  
(USE OF METAPHORS AND LITERAL LANGUAGE)**

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**Abstract:**

This article examines the perceptions of preschool teachers in reference to their role in the school context. In recent years teachers have been obliged to take on additional roles. Except for solving problems related to the pedagogical process, they should be able to solve general issues related to the operation of the school unit. The qualitative method was followed for the design of the research tool and its analysis. The research involved 47 preschool teachers of public kindergartens in Western Greece. In order to study the perceptions of preschool teachers about their role in the school context we, used an open-ended question. For greater validity of their answers, preschool teachers are asked to answer in two questions. In the first question, the participants describe their role using literal language while in the second question the participants describe their role using metaphors-metaphorical images. The results of the study as far as the first question is concerned, which regarded preschool teachers' perception of the use of literal language, recorded sixteen (16) categories. The second question, regarding the perceptions of preschool teachers about the use of metaphors-metaphorical images resulted in eight (8) categories. The NVivo-8 qualitative analysis software was utilized for data analysis.

**Keywords:** preschool teachers, perceptions, role, school context, metaphor

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## 1. Literature review

### 1.1 The role of teachers

The role of teachers is defined as the set of expectations and expected behavior of the teacher in the various social groups he meets (Androutsou, Kortesi-Dafermou, & Tsafos, 2016; Avgitidou, & Gourgiotou, 2016; Konstantinou, 2015; Ntouskas, 2007). Specific expectations influence teachers' actions and perceptions of their role (Anastasiou, 2017; Adams, 1970; Broeder & Stokmans, 2012; Burke, 1997; Heckscher & Applegate, 1994; Levinson, 1986; Linton, 1936; Makovec, 2018; Mavrogiorgos, 1998; Papaikonomou, 2014; Tsardakis, 1995). Teachers are required to perform many different roles because they interact with different social groups and these groups have different expectations of him (Bates & Harvey 1975: 106; Frydaki, 2015; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Heckscher et al., 1994; Konstantinou, 2015: 121; Lunenberg, Dengerink, & Korthagen, 2014; Xochellis, 2006: 47-48). Except for the expectations of the influencing factors of the school unit as a whole, the role of teachers is also determined by the interpretation that the teacher himself gives about his role (Konstantinou, 2015).

The study of teachers' perceptions of their roles provides information about the image they have of themselves, the way they teach and want to be perceived (Ben-Peretz, Mendelson, & Kron, 2003; Goffman, 1967 as cited in Volkmann, & Anderson, 1998). It also informs us about their goals and values, the quality of their educational work (Arsenijević, & Maljković, 2016), and the way they understand their role (Ntouskas, 2007) and their pedagogical ethics (Sharp & Green as cited in Folerou-Tserouli, & Frederikou, 1993).

Finally, the way in which the teacher will deal with all those obligations, which are a consequence of his role depends on how he perceives his role, himself and the operation of the school as a social organization (Konstantinou, 2015). Teachers who know their role: they know their limits, which they accept in their students (Borich, 1999), they provide children with quality education, they know what they need to do, how to do it and why this is essential (Domović, Vidović Vlasta & Bouillet, 2016) and deal effectively with their obligations. Without awareness of their role teaching will not be effective, will not be based on high skills nor will it be professional. It is possible that in some more technical professions one can work effectively without knowing the name of one's actions, however, in teaching, which is based on communication, this is impossible (Konstantinou, 2015).

### 1.2 The role of teachers in the school context

The teacher today with all the changes that are happening is called to move from practices and mentalities of the past to his role and the role of the school in new roles. The new role of the school requires teachers to be able to solve problems related to the pedagogical process but also general issues in the operation of the school unit (Kossivaki, 2003: 21-23). The role of the teacher should be renewed, to understand the new order of things that prevails and in which the school operates. Also, to get rid of the prejudices he has to be

retrained in order to be able to successfully cope with his role in the new school (Kantas, 2015: 31).

The teacher takes on the role of renewer as he is informed about what is related to the implementation of his role (Konstantinou, 2015: 168). In addition, it takes on the role of organizer not only of the educational process in the classroom but also in the school context as a whole (Konstantinou, 2015: 239). Teachers' roles and responsibilities have expanded. The teacher becomes an "*extended professional*" as he is creative, and innovative which contributes to the development of the school (Lamote, & Engels, 2010).

The roles that the teacher takes within the school unit correspond to the social and pedagogical functions of the school (Konstantinou, 2015: 128-129, 178) as the teacher performs a social role under specific conditions (social, economic, space-time, work, professional and individual) and is not just a set of qualities that compose his personality (Konstantinou, & Embalotis, 2001). The pedagogical and social functions performed by the school highlight the dimensions of the role of the teacher (Konstantinou, 2015: 128). These relate to the roles that the teacher takes because of the many different groups that interact in the school context and the part of teaching. After all, according to the literature, teachers' perceptions of their professional roles are created in relation to the social factors that are within the school community, like interaction with children, colleagues, parents and superiors (Ahonen, Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2014; Broeder et al., 2012; Burke, 1997; Konstantinou, 2015). Sixty-eight Finnish primary and secondary school teachers when asked to describe their role in school stated that their role is as a student. They argued that through their daily interaction with colleagues, their students and their students' parents they had the opportunity to learn from them and use their feedback during their reflection on all the problematic situations they face in the school context improving their pedagogical practices and their interactions with them (Ahonen et al., 2014).

Based on the review of the literature presented above, it was chosen to study the perceptions of preschool teachers about their role or roles in the school context.

## **2. The aim of the study**

This research aims to examine the preschool teachers' perceptions of their role in the school context. We tried to explore and answer the following research question:

- 1) What are the perceptions of preschool teachers about their role in the school context using literal language?
- 2) What are the perceptions of preschool teachers about their role in school context using metaphors or metaphorical images?

### 3. Material and methods

#### 3.1 Context and participants

The purpose of this study is part of a larger study. The questionnaire applied was designed and implemented during a doctoral research. A crucial part of it is presented in this paper. The research involved 47 preschool teachers of public kindergartens in Western Greece. All the participants were women and their average age was 38.8 years old. Of the 47 participants, 17 hold a master's degree and two hold a doctorate. They comprise a convenience sample of preschool teachers who volunteered to facilitate our research (Creswell, 2012).

#### 3.2 Data collection tool

##### A. Self-completing open-ended questionnaire (role)

The research tool we used to study the role of preschool teachers in the school context was an open-ended questionnaire. Open-ended questions give unexpected answers that a researcher would not have expected and include in a standardized questionnaire (Bryman, 2017; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2008). Open-ended questions are a method of data collection in qualitative research (Creswell, 2015: 552; Robson, 2010: 541) and are able to capture the authenticity, sincerity, truth and depth of the answers, which are the characteristics of qualitative data (Bryman, 2017; Cohen et al., 2008; Kokkosi, Poulou, Koustourakis, & Chaniotakis, 2021a). For greater validity of their answers' preschool teachers are asked to answer in two questions. In the first question, the participants describe their role using literal language while in the second question the participants describe their role using metaphors-metaphorical images. According to literature, when we attempt to explain and understand something internal and abstract the use of metaphors is the most appropriate research tool. The more abstract something is, the greater the variety of metaphors required to be understood (Collier, 2010, Yob, 2003). Metaphor is a reliable research tool, which supports and helps preschool teachers to understand concepts of their profession that are difficult to understand through the use of literal language. Metaphors act as a tool for explaining complex experiences and subjective beliefs (Carter, 1990; Saban, 2010; Zhao, Coombs, & Zhou, 2010). In addition, metaphors help the preschool teacher to understand their role, the type of relationships with students, and their thoughts, feelings and attitudes during teaching. Also play an important role among others in preschool teachers' professional development (Carter, 1990; Saban, 2010; Zhao et al., 2010). Specifically, the open-ended questions asked the participants to describe their role in the school context: 1<sup>st</sup>: "Please describe and justify what you think is your role in the school context and why?" 2<sup>st</sup>: "If you were asked to describe your role in the school context, what "metaphors" would you use and why?" Their answers were as follows: 1<sup>st</sup>: "My role is...because ...", 2<sup>st</sup>: "The kindergarten teacher is like...because..." (Kokkosi, Poulou, Koustourakis, & Chaniotakis, 2021b).

## **B. Data analysis**

Preschool teachers' responses to the self-completing open-ended questionnaire were transcribed and prepared for coding in NVivo. Data coding is one of the most important stages of analysis and is the beginning of most forms of qualitative analysis (Bryman, 2017). Through the process of coding the data is given meaning. In addition, different parts of the data are linked through the rendering of the same code. The code contributes data that have the same code to be considered as a whole during the analysis process as it relates to the same idea (Iosifidis, 2017). The coding of the data and then grouping them we lead to the development of theoretical, interpretive and conceptual categories. Data encoding results in the theorization, interpretation and analysis of the data (Iosifidis, 2017). Initially, the codes were assigned to the empirical data and then the data having the same code were taken as a group creating the corresponding category. Through this process we came up with the categories that describe the role of preschool teachers in the school context. In the first phase we codified their answers according to the orientation they had. In this way we want to examine, when preschool teachers are asked to state what their role is in the school context (using literal language and metaphors-metaphorical images), without given any direction, what first comes to their mind, being as unaffected as possible compared to the more targeted questions that followed in the questionnaire. Then, for each orientation that was created, the corresponding categories emerged.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Preschool teachers' perceptions about their role in the school context (using literal language)**

For the question using literal language at the first level, the qualitative data that emerged from the participants' responses were coded and categorized into a total of 16 categories. At the second level, the responses were categorized according to the general orientation of the roles they mentioned, from this process four orientations emerged. The resulting 16 categories were categorized into the following 4 orientations more specific in relation to children, colleagues, parents and overall their role in the school unit. The first orientation "in relation to children" includes the roles of teachers, which concern children. Specifically, there are 5 categories: collaborator, guiding-transmitter of knowledge, caregiver of physical and mental needs, pedagogical and ignorant of theory. The second orientation "overall in the school unit" categorizes roles that generally refer to the role of the teacher in the school unit, 7 categories are included: collaborator, complex, functional, scientific, non-integrated, person-centered and administrative. In the third orientation "in relation to colleagues", roles are classified, which are related to their colleagues, resulting in 2 categories: partner and person-centered. Finally, in the fourth orientation "in relation to parents", the roles of the preschool teachers concerning the parents are included, with 2 categories that have emerged: collaborator and person-centered. The following table describes each category and gives indicative corresponding examples.

**Table 1:** Role categories and examples (using literal language)

| Categories                 |  | Examples of categories   |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Orientation categories     | Role categories                        |  |
| Overall in the school unit | Collaborator                           | eg. "My role is cooperative because I communicate and collaborate with parents, educators-colleagues and the headmistress."  |
|                            | Complex                                | eg. "My role is multiple because there are multiple obligations and requirements."   |
|                            | Functional                             | eg. "My role is catalytic because I contribute to the proper and perfect operation of the school unit by doing what is required."  |
|                            | Scientific                             | eg. "My role is to be a scientist-educator because I have to plan and implement activities, organize the classroom environment, create learning experiences and use methods according to the learning theories and the Kindergarten Curriculum." |
|                            | Non-integrated                         | Includes teachers' answers which are not justified.  |
|                            | Person-centered                        | eg. "My role is coordinator because I coordinate everyone included."   |
|                            | Administrative                         | eg. "My role is an administrator because I often need to trouble yourself with building, financial, operational issues to ensure the safety of children."  |
| In relation to children    | Collaborator                           | eg. "My role is assistant because I am always by the side of the children and I help them in whatever they need."  |
|                            | Guiding-transmitter of knowledge       | eg. "My role is helpful because I am always by the side of the children and I help them in whatever they need."  |
|                            | Caregiver of physical and mental needs | eg. "My role is caregiver because I take care of the students' self-service, food and toilet. My role is a child psychologist because I have to look in depth for any difficulties, they have in order to facilitate them."                      |
|                            | Pedagogical                            | eg. "My role is educational because I try to add something more to what the children have."  |
|                            | Ignorant of theory                     | eg. "My role is guiding because with my guidance I try to make the children discover the solution or the answer to each question on their own."  |
| In relation to colleagues  | Collaborator                           | eg. "My role is supportive because there is collaboration between me and the other teachers and everyone supports the other where needed."   |
|                            | Person-centered                        | eg. "My role is coordinator because I design and assign roles / projects to teachers, related to the operation of the kindergarten."   |
| In relation to parents     | Collaborator                           | eg. "My role is to be a discussant and listener in relation to the parents because I communicate with them and we exchange views for the best result."   |
|                            | Person-centered                        | eg. "My role is guiding because in many cases I guide the parents about the operation of the kindergarten."  |

The majority of teachers mentioned one role in response but there were some teachers who mentioned more than one role in response from two to nine roles. For this reason, the number of participants in Table 3 exceeds the number 47 which is the number of participants.

**Table 2:** Number of participants and roles categories (using literal language)

| Orientation categories     | Participants | Role categories                        |
|----------------------------|--------------|--|
| Overall in the school unit | 8            | <b>Collaborator</b>                    |
|                            | 7            | Complex                                |
|                            | 5            | Functional                             |
|                            | 3            | Scientific                             |
|                            | 3            | Non-integrated                         |
|                            | 2            | Person-centered                        |
|                            | 2            | Administrative                         |
| In relation to children    | 20           | <b>Collaborator</b>                    |
|                            | 7            | Guiding-transmitter of knowledge       |
|                            | 2            | Caregiver of physical and mental needs |
|                            | 4            | Pedagogical                            |
|                            | 4            | Ignorant of theory                     |
| In relation to colleagues  | 13           | <b>Collaborator</b>                    |
|                            | 1            | Person-centered                        |
| In relation to parents     | 2            | <b>Collaborator</b>                    |
|                            | 1            | Person-centered                        |

For each orientation that emerged, a coding scheme was created with the role categories. In more detail, in orientation “overall in the school unit” 8 participants stated that their role is collaborator, 7 participants stated that their role is complex, 5 participants stated that their role is functional, 3 participants stated that their role is scientific, 3 participants stated roles included in the category not-integrated, 2 participants reported that their role is person-centered and 2 more participants reported that their role is administrative. In orientation “in relation to children”, 20 participants reported that their roles in relation to children are collaborator, 7 reported guiding-transmitter of knowledge, 2 reported caregiver of physical and mental needs, 4 reported that their role is pedagogical and 4 reported roles that were not in line with the bibliography and were included in the category ignorant of theory.

Furthermore, in orientation “in relation to colleagues”, 13 participants stated that their role is collaborator and 1 stated that her role is person-centered. The corresponding coding is also found for orientation “in relation to parents”, 2 participants stated that their role is collaborator and 1 stated that her role is person-centered.

We conclude that the majority of teachers in all four orientations (overall in the school unit, in relation to children, colleagues and parents) state that their role is collaborator.

#### 4.2 Preschool teachers’ perceptions about their role in the school context (using metaphors-metaphorical images)

As shown in Table 3 below, the teachers' answers to the question: “If you were asked to describe your role in the school context, what "metaphors" would you use and why?” (2nd question) were categorized into two levels. At the first level, the qualitative data that

emerged from the participants' responses were coded and categorized into a total of 8 categories.

At the second level, the answers were categorized according to the general orientation of the roles they mentioned, from this process two orientations emerged. The 3 categories that emerged: self-referential, mediator between children and the world of knowledge and provider of love and protection were categorized in the orientation "in relation to children" as they related to roles related to preschool children. The other 5 categories that emerged from the coding of the qualitative data: complex- set of skills, person-centered, collaborator, flexible and acceptor of all negatives are classified in the orientation "overall in the school unit", because the roles they mentioned relate to their role in the school unit. The following table describes each category and gives indicative corresponding examples.

**Table 3:** Role categories and examples (using metaphors-metaphorical images)

| Categories                 |  | Examples of categories   |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Orientation categories     | Role categories                                      |  |
| In relation to children    | Self-referential                                     | eg. <i>"The kindergarten teacher is like a sponge because the students can draw from- suck out what they need."</i>  |
|                            | Mediator between children and the world of knowledge | eg. <i>"The kindergarten teacher is like a bridge of communication between the student and the world and knowledge because she never stops supporting the child in this endeavor"</i> .            |
|                            | Provider of love and protection                      | eg. <i>"The kindergarten teacher is like mom, grandma, teacher, nurse because she has a big hug that fits all the children."</i>   |
| Overall in the school unit | Complex-set of skills                                | eg. <i>"The kindergarten teacher is like a multi-machine because on a daily basis she is called to do many different things."</i>  |
|                            | Person-centered                                      | eg. <i>"The kindergarten teacher is like a worker bee because she distributes the responsibilities so that her team works in the best possible way and achieves the best possible result."</i>     |
|                            | Collaborator   | eg. <i>"The kindergarten teacher is like a book because every page of it is the students, the parents, the teachers who all come together - they are bound like a book to achieve the result."</i> |
|                            | Flexible   | eg. <i>"The kindergarten teacher is like a rubber band because she stretches as much as she needs in order to cope with the obligations and situations that belong to her."</i>                    |
|                            | Acceptor of all negatives                            | eg. <i>"The kindergarten teacher is like a shock absorber because it absorbs the vibrations created by any tensions in the school unit."</i>   |

The majority of teachers mentioned one role in response but there were some teachers who mentioned more than one role in response from two to three roles. For this reason, the number of participants in Table 4 exceeds the number 47 which is the number of participants.



**Table 4:** Number of participants and roles categories (using metaphors-metaphorical images)

| Orientation categories     | Participants | Role categories   |
|----------------------------|--------------|---|
| In relation to children    | 5            | <b>Self-referential</b>                                     |
|                            | 6            | <b>Mediator between children and the world of knowledge</b> |
|                            | 2            | Provider of love and protection                             |
| Overall in the school unit | 24           | <b>Complex- set of skills</b>                               |
|                            | 8            | Person-centered   |
|                            | 6            | Collaborator  |
|                            | 3            | Flexible  |
|                            | 1            | Acceptor of all negatives                                   |

As shown in the table above, 10 teachers chose child-centered roles with their answers sorted by orientation “in relation to children”. More specifically, 5 teachers mentioned roles that are categorized in the **self-referential** category. Also, 6 teachers mentioned roles categorized in the category mediator between children and the world of knowledge and 2 teachers mentioned roles categorized in the category Provider of Love and protection.

In addition, in orientation “overall in the school unit” 24 participants reported roles categorized in the complex-set of skills category. Also, 8 preschool teachers reported roles categorized in the person-centered category, 6 participants reported roles in the Collaborator category, 3 participants reported roles categorized in the flexible category and 1 participant reported roles belonging to the category acceptor of all negatives.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Preschool teachers’ perceptions about their role in the school context

The analysis of the data identifies differences between the perceptions of preschool teachers about their role in the school context using literal language and metaphors or metaphorical images-language. Regarding the examples given using literal language, the majority of teachers (about a little less than  $\frac{3}{4}$ ) mentioned child-oriented roles and roles that concern overall in the school unit. Following are roles in relation to their peers (approximately  $\frac{1}{4}$  of teachers) and few teachers reported roles in relation to their students' parents.

On the other hand, when using metaphors or metaphorical images-language, we identify only two of the four orientations mentioned in the question they answer using literal use of language (in relation to children, overall, in the school unit) while we also notice some changes in the role categories created in each orientation.

In detail, the categories of roles mentioned by the majority of teachers and concerning overall in the school unit (literal use of language) are those of the collaborator and the complex. The second role is found in the literature according to which in recent years the role of the teacher has expanded and has become an "extended professional" (Lamote et al., 2010) who is called to fulfill many different responsibilities. The following

are the roles of functional, scientific, person-centered and administrative with small differences in the frequency of selection.

Regarding the functional role mentioned, we find that teachers are now called, among other things, to resolve issues and problems in total for the operation of the school unit and not only for those related to the pedagogical process (Kossivaki, 2003: 21-23). The scientific and administrative role as mentioned comes in agreement with the obligations and duties of the teacher today who, among other things, is assigned a range of official and scientific responsibilities (Matsaggouras, 1996) which he is called upon to carry out.

The preschool teacher should be trained and informed about the scientific positions and developments of his subject. Also, the preschool teacher should contribute to the research and be also the object of study and analysis for the improvement of the educational reality while at the same time following the behavior that is appropriate for an employee (Kalouri-Antonopoulou et al., 2006: 42; Karras, 2011: 172). Especially, the preschool teachers who are also the heads of the school unit, in addition to their daily teaching work, are called upon to fulfill a huge administrative task for the proper function of the school unit. Finally, a group of participants mentioned roles that fall into the Non-integrated category as they do not justify the roles they performed.

The categories of roles mentioned by the majority of teachers and which are oriented in relation to children (literal use of language) are that of the collaborator with a big difference from the next category of guiding-transmitter of knowledge. Following with small differences in the number of roles are the categories pedagogical, caregiver of physical and mental needs and ignorant of theory in which roles were included that were not in accordance with the literature. In the roles mentioned and oriented in relation to colleagues and parents (literal use of language), there is an identification of roles with almost all participants stating that their role is collaborator and a few of them stating that it is person-centered in both orientations. As it turned out, the majority of teachers in all four orientations (overall in the school unit, in relation to the children, in relation to the colleagues and in relation to the parents) mention roles that belong to the category collaborator.

Regarding their perceptions of their role using metaphors or metaphorical images, the majority of preschool teachers (36 teachers) mentioned roles that are included in the orientation overall in the school unit. Most participants assigned roles belonging to the complex-set of skills category followed by the person-centered and collaborator categories reported by a small group of teachers while a few participants reported roles belonging to the categories flexible and acceptor of all negatives. The first three categories are also found in the results that emerged from the literal use of language. In contrast, the role categories reported by teachers and which are child-centered are not found in the role categories created by the literal use of language. The majority of them mentioned roles that fall into the categories of **self-referential** and mediator between children and the world of knowledge, while few described roles that fall into the category of provider of love and protection.

### Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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