THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND ROLE PERCEPTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN ATTICA-GREECE'S MUNICIPAL EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTERS

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Abstract:
Early childhood center is concerned as the first environment of children second to their home, in which they socialize and come into contact with organized learning. Their holistic development and well-being are directly linked to preschool structures that implement high-quality education programs. The role of early childhood education and care educators is crucial in determining the quality provided (Foti & Sidiropoulou, 2019). The purpose is to clarify the frame of the professional habitus and to enrich its understanding. Also, to further investigate if new questions will raise with regards to early childhood education and care educators, extending to students, studies and fellow workers as well as babies, toddlers and their families. All the information collected could be used for decision-making on redefining the aims of the early childhood education sector as well as the early year educators training organizations babies. The followed method was a quantitative approach, using the methodology of questionnaires. The analysis will be descriptive and will include basic descriptive measures (e.g., mean, standard deviation, mode, etc.), as well as frequency tables. Furthermore, we will compare the mean scores by analyzing their variance using One-Way ANOVA. In total, the analyzed questionnaires were 248. From these questionnaires, it appears that early childhood education and care educators select the title that suits their profession

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depending on the school they graduated. The pedagogical part of their profession is influenced by their studies and the interaction among colleagues. The importance of the pedagogical team and cooperation is recognized. Cooperation with parents is sought. Specialized help to manage children with physical issues is required. They stand in favor of all forms of future training. Compared to the past, the educational level is evaluated as higher. They are more interested in the essence of their educational work and not so much for appearances through events. To conclude, early childhood education and care educators love their profession and fully understand the importance of their work. They keep evolving in terms of their educational level and understand the necessity of their professional development. They desire to be educated in various ways. The results of this research are important to be further used by employment agencies and universities. Given that lectures, seminars, workshops and conferences are often held, it is important to emphasize in-service training and interventions within the actual field of action of the early childhood education and care educators, i.e. the early childhood center.

Keywords: early childhood center, early childhood education and care educators, professional development, personal theory

1. Introduction

The early years of children's lives, particularly the first three years, lay the foundation for skill development, shaping their future development (Megalonidou, 2022; Naudeau, Kataoka, Valerio, Neuman, & Kennedy Elder, 2011). Specifically, the brain's sensitivity to emotional control, social skills, language development, and reasoning skills reaches its peak by the age of three and then gradually declines (OECD, 2015). Consequently, educational interventions during the early years are considered more effective and necessary for establishing a solid basis for learning and development in later stages (Bellou-Mylona & Sidiropoulou, 2006). As a result, early childhood education has been a key policy focus in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in the last two decades (Megalonidou, 2022).

Research findings indicate that children's comprehensive development and well-being primarily stem from preschool settings that implement high-quality education and care programs (Hutchins, Frances, & Saggers, 2009). Enhancing the well-being of young children and their early learning serves as a foundation not only for lifelong learning but also for all aspects of an individual's life (Megalonidou, 2022).

The quality of early childhood education is directly linked to the qualifications, knowledge, skills, and competences of the teaching staff in early childhood centers. The special significance given to the role of the educator, who is responsible for shaping the appropriate environment, providing appropriate experiences in order to encourage the natural tendency of children to explore and experiment, and their presence as listeners and correspondents of the ideas, needs and interests of children (Foti & Sidiropoulou, 2019:13).

Formal education encompasses all of these aspects, while professional development offers opportunities for educators already working in the field to update their knowledge and practices. Research has shown that continuous professional development is associated with higher levels of quality (Linberg, Klucziok, Burghardt, & Freund, 2019). Additionally, in-service staff training leads to high-quality educator-child interactions (Schaack, Le, & Setodji, 2017). Furthermore, each educator's personal theory, consisting of their perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values regarding pedagogy's goals, learning approaches, and the nature of childhood (Kagan, 1992), plays a crucial role as it influences their pedagogical work.

Based on the aforementioned points, it can be concluded that the role of the early childhood educator is vital and a key determinant of quality. Adequate initial training, which should be continuous, enables educators to fulfill their role effectively. Simultaneously, supportive working conditions and professional leadership provide opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork, and collaboration with parents (Sidiropoulou & Mousena, 2017).

Considering the above, it was deemed appropriate to conduct a study focusing on early childhood education professionals. The research aims to provide insight into the experiences of working with early childhood educators in professional habitus within early childhood centers, ultimately leading to the redefinition of goals for early childhood center providers and institutions training future educators. Specifically, the study aims to address the following research questions: Do early childhood education and care educators working in municipal early childhood centers in Attica, Greece share common characteristics and a shared vision regarding their desires, attitudes, and practices?

2. Literature review

2.1. Pre-school education in Greece

Early childhood centers, along with kindergartens, are part of preschool education in Greece and no longer have a welfare character as they did before. Professional preschool educators undergo specialized training, either at the post-secondary level (ISCED 4) or higher education (Bachelor's degree, ISCED 6). In 1994, early childhood centers were transferred to the local authorities. This transfer obliges municipalities and communities to assume full responsibility for the organization, management, and integration of these institutions under the supervision of Legal Entities, following internal operating regulations that take into account the "Standard Operating Regulations of Municipal and Community Legal Entities of Public Law for Childcare Centers and Nursery Schools" (EADAP, 2003; Salonides et al., 2008).

In 2002, a Joint Ministerial Decision (KYA) clarified the purpose of early childhood centers in Article 2. It stated that these centers are places of education and safe accommodation for children, aiming to provide uniform preschool education according to new scientific standards. Early childhood education and care educators are responsible for ensuring the all-round development of children, including their physical, mental,

emotional, and social well-being, while eliminating any disparities arising from the cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds of their parents. Additionally, early childhood centers aim to serve parents and raise their awareness of educational and psychological issues. It is also important to facilitate the smooth transition of children from their family environment to that of the early childhood center, provide daily meals and care, and adhere to hygiene and safety regulations (KYA 16065/2002 - Government Gazette 497/22-4-2002). The most recent model regulation on the operation of early childhood centers, published in 2017, maintains the same objectives, describing them as "*educational and educational structures*" (KYA 41087/2017 - Government Gazette 4249/B/5-12-2017).

Regarding the age of children attending early childhood centers, until 2006, it included infants and toddlers up to 6 years old. However, a law enacted in 2006 (Law 3518/2006, Article 73, paragraph 1a) made kindergarten attendance compulsory for infants, leading to their withdrawal from early childhood centers. Similarly, in 2018, another law (Law 4521/2018, article 33, paragraph 4) mandated the withdrawal of preschoolers from early childhood centers and their enrollment in kindergartens, as it introduced two years of compulsory preschool education without allowing parents to choose between early childhood centers and kindergartens. Currently, early childhood centers serve children up to 4 years old.

Regarding early childhood education and care educators employed by early childhood centers, an important point of reference is the recent renaming of the sector from "TE Infant nursery" to "TE Early Childhood Educators" (Presidential Decree 85/2022 - Government Gazette 232/A/17-12-2022). Since the establishment of early childhood centers, there has been a gradual evolution, particularly in terms of education and care. Nowadays, the role of the pedagogical staff is emphasized, with official documents explicitly assigning them the responsibility of conducting daily educational activities aimed at promoting the smooth and comprehensive development of children.

2.2. Theoretical approach

The quality of education provided in the educational environment is directly related to the professional training of educators, their professionalism, their personal theory, and their continuous professional development to keep up with the new requirements of the times.

The personal theory of teaching of each educator includes personal perceptions, images, beliefs, values, and attitudes that pertain to the purposes of pedagogy, the way of learning, the nature of childhood, the role of the educator, and discipline (Kagan, 1992). Richardson (1994) argues that it encompasses the values, even those that are difficult to express, about what constitutes effective teaching and learning (Tsafos, 2021). This process can be conscious or unconscious, and it is shaped by the individual's experiences as a learner and as an educator, as well as the pedagogical culture.

The role of personal theory is of paramount importance because it enables educators to perceive various pedagogical situations and develop reflections,

interpretations, justifications, and evaluations. This, in turn, helps in determining criteria for planning and implementing pedagogical practices (Matsagouras, 2006). Furthermore, educators' personal theories influence their acceptance or rejection of scientific pedagogical knowledge. Research has shown that educators find it challenging to modify their personal theories, a phenomenon also observed in individuals' established views in general (Tillema & Knol, 1997; Tamir, 1991). When educators are aware of and committed to the development of their personal theories, they create conditions for self-improvement and professional rejuvenation.

Therefore, it is necessary to recognize and systematize the personal theory of educators, enabling them to enrich it, establish connections with pedagogical practice, and redefine it based on new conditions and data (Tillema & Knol, 1997; Matsagouras, 2006).

Professional development refers to a continuous learning process through which educators acquire knowledge and skills related to their profession, as well as the beliefs and abilities necessary to fulfill their professional role. This process is not automatic or collective but personal, involving the formation of professional identity and its connection to self-image, motivation, and perception of the educator's immediate and long-term role (Papanaum, 2014).

Integral to professional development are the educator's ongoing studies, attendance at conferences and professional meetings, structured mentoring, and personal engagement with relevant research and publications (Ganser, 2000). According to Glatthorn, professional improvement is achieved through a process of gaining experience, analysis, and reflection within an educator's own teaching. It encompasses career development throughout the teacher's professional journey (Koulis, 2019).

Building upon the above definitions, Bredeson (2002) emphasizes the importance of learning activities that provide opportunities for acquiring new knowledge and engaging in reflection, integrating that knowledge into existing conditions and practices. Professional development aims to strengthen individual and collective practice.

In subsequent years, Fullan (2007) suggests the term "professional learning" as more appropriate for professional development programs implemented within the educational environment during working hours. These programs address the needs and interests of educators through collaborative and participatory processes (Matsagouras, 2019).

Considering the above and focusing on preschool education, particularly early childhood centers, the training of preschool educators is discussed. The training of educators and teachers, in general, has a direct and reciprocal relationship with teaching and learning practices and their evaluation. It is necessary to refer to methodological competence and ideological orientation in order to report on the qualitative improvement of education and aim for transformative development. Various forms of in-school and out-of-school training are required to create connections between theory and practice through participatory, collective, and reflective processes (Matsagouras, 2019; Evans, 2002).

The most common practice among preschool educators is attending conferences and seminars organized by public or private institutions. However, these activities often fail to fully satisfy them as they tend to focus on general pedagogical issues and modernization. This perpetuates their dissatisfaction with the perceived gap between theory and practice. Continuous training is a primary demand from teachers at all levels. However, adults already possess some knowledge and opinions, perhaps even prejudices. Therefore, new knowledge must be perceived as necessary in order to be effectively assimilated (EADAP, 2003). Professional development that relies solely on predetermined training programs and lectures, without experiential workshops and hands-on approaches, has limited potential (Evans, 2008).

3. Research approach

3.1. Research questions, aim and objectives of the research

According to research, educators in general tend to develop their own profile, which includes a unified set of actions, means, techniques, and types of behavior in their interactions with students (Xochellis, 2007). This profile, teaching style, typology, and classroom management are interconnected. Education theorists suggest that teaching style is influenced by each teacher's personal theory of pedagogical thinking and practice. Studies and personal experiences shape the development of a professional identity with a unique teaching style and behavior.

The research questions aim to explore whether there are consistent characteristics among educators who choose the profession of early childhood education. It seeks to identify common traits in their views, desires, attitudes, and practices within their profession. The study's purpose is to examine the profile of early childhood educators in terms of their teaching methods, typology, and classroom management within the daily educational process, specifically in the context of early childhood centers. It investigates how the skills and abilities possessed by educators influence their teaching/learning style, practice, behavior, and leadership abilities.

The collected data can be used to inform decisions and redefine the work, goals, and objectives of childcare providers and those involved in training early childhood educators (Cohen et al., 2008; Newby, 2019). The challenge lies in clarifying the professional habitus landscape and enhancing our understanding of it. This understanding may lead to new questions for educators, with implications for students, colleagues, as well as infants, toddlers, and their families.

3.2. Research methodological approach-procedure

Questionnaires are commonly used in social science and educational research as they provide an organized set of questions that can collect a large amount of easily analyzable data (Newby, 2019).

The research was conducted in the prefecture of Attica, during the second half of 2022, without focusing on a specific municipality. It included all municipalities in Attica.

The survey targeted early childhood educators working in municipal early childhood centers in these municipalities, excluding educators from private early childhood centers. This exclusion is due to the different employment regulations that apply to private centers, as they are not governed by the Standard Operating Regulations of municipal early childhood centers. The teaching staff included early childhood education and care educators, kindergarten teachers, and assistant educators. Since official data on the number of educators in municipal early childhood centers in Attica was unavailable, an approximate calculation was made. With the largest municipality in Attica having around 500 educators and a total of 55 municipalities in the region, the estimated total number of educators was approximately 2500. Participation in the questionnaire by educators from municipal early childhood centers was voluntary, and their consent was obtained through an informed consent form at the beginning of the questionnaire. The analysis included 248 completed questionnaires, excluding those from early educators working in rural areas or private nurseries.

Throughout the quantitative research process, the study adhered to a design that prioritized ethical considerations and followed the rules of research methodology (Cohen et al., 2008) as well as the code of ethics and research ethics guidelines of the University of West Attica (Research Ethics Committee, 2020).
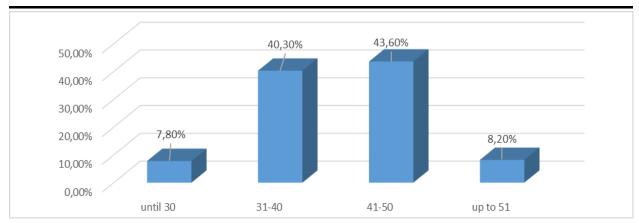
The analysis conducted is descriptive in nature and involves basic descriptive measures such as mean, standard deviation, prevalence, and frequency tables. Additionally, a one-way analysis of variance (One Way ANOVA) was performed to compare means.

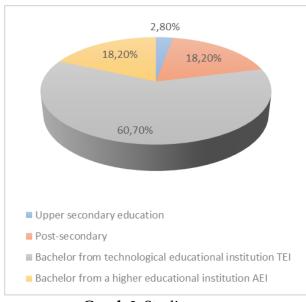## 4. Data - survey results

4.1. Demographic data

Using the SPSS program for analysis, the demographic data of the sample can be examined. The analysis reveals that the majority of the surveyed sample, accounting for 98.4%, consists of women. This finding is expected considering the underrepresentation of men in the early childhood education profession.

In terms of age, the statistical analysis indicates that the average age of the sample is 40.6 years, with the youngest participant being 24 years old and the oldest being 64 years old. To better understand the distribution of ages, the data was organized into appropriate age groups with different intervals. The analysis shows that the age group with the highest representation among the participants is the 31-50 age group, covering 83.9% of the respondents. More specifically, the largest participation comes from the 41-50 age group, accounting for 43.6% (see Graph 1). This finding can be explained by the fact that the questionnaire targets educators working in municipal early childhood centers, and it may take time for younger individuals to complete their studies and secure employment in a municipality.

Graph 1: Age Groups

In terms of educational qualifications, the analysis reveals that the majority of the sample, accounting for 60.5%, are graduates of Technological Educational Institutions (TEI) with a bachelor's degree. Graduates of Higher Education Institutions (AEI) make up 18.2% of the sample, while the same percentage consists of graduates from post-secondary education institutions (see Graph 2). When examining the type of school from which the participants graduated, it is found that 91.1% of them attended public schools, with 75% of the respondents choosing public schools for their education. Furthermore, it is notable that 33.1% of the participants hold a postgraduate degree. This indicates a high percentage of educators who engage in lifelong learning, seeking not only further training but also aiming for positions of responsibility within their profession. It is also worth mentioning that younger bachelor's degree graduates are inclined to acquire multiple formal qualifications to enhance their competitiveness in the job market.

Graph 2: Studies

Graph 3: Additional Studies

The analysis of the length of service of the sample educators reveals an average of approximately 15.5 years of experience. The range of experience is quite wide, ranging

from educators who have just started working (1 year) to those with 38 years of experience. To facilitate the analysis, the educators were grouped into different categories based on their years of experience.

The findings indicate that educators with up to 5 years of experience account for 7.3% of the sample. Those with 6 to 10 years of experience and those with 11 to 15 years of experience each constitute 21.5% of the sample. The largest proportion of the sample, 27.1%, falls into the category of educators with 16 to 20 years of experience. Additionally, 13% of the educators have worked for 21 to 25 years, and 9.7% have more than 25 years of experience.

Regarding positions of responsibility, only 13.7% of the respondents hold supervisory roles. Among those in positions of responsibility, 78.8% have held such positions for 1 to 10 years. This distribution may be influenced by the fact that the questionnaire was made available through social media platforms, which tend to attract predominantly younger participants.

4.2. Mean and standard deviation, key questions

Continuing the analysis of the questionnaires with the SPSS program, a descriptive analysis will be carried out based on the mean and frequency tables for each of the key questions. The basic questions used the Likert scale (1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = moderate, 4 = a lot, 5 = very much).
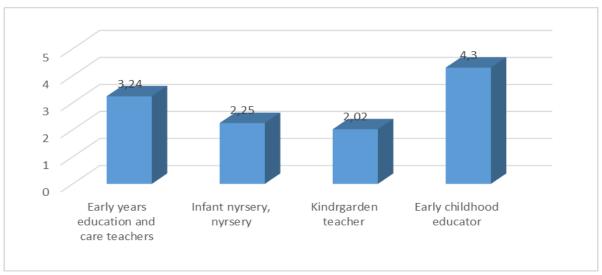
4.2.1. Image of the profession

The analysis of the educators' perceptions regarding the titles that fit their profession provides interesting insights. Based on the mean and standard deviation values, the following observations can be made:

- "Early Childhood Educator" received the highest mean rating of 4.30, indicating that the majority of educators strongly identify with this title. Additionally, 89.9% of the respondents considered it appropriate. This suggests a strong alignment between the educators' professional identity and the title of "Early Childhood Educator."
- "Early Childhood Education and Care Educator" received a lower mean rating of 3.24, indicating a relatively moderate level of agreement among educators regarding its suitability as a title. Approximately 49% of the respondents found this title appropriate.
- "Infant Nursery, Nursery" had a mean rating of 2.25, indicating a relatively low level of agreement among educators. Only 18.5% of the respondents considered this title suitable for their profession.
- "Kindergarten Teacher" received the lowest mean rating of 2.02, suggesting a significant mismatch between the title and the educators' perceived professional role. Only 17.5% of the respondents found this title suitable.

These findings highlight the strong preference for the title of "Early Childhood Educator" among the surveyed educators. The titles related to specific age groups, such

as "Infant Nursery, Nursery" and "Kindergarten Teacher," received less favorable responses. The educators' perceptions of the titles may be influenced by their studies and the name of the graduating school. Further analysis, such as comparing means, can provide additional insights into the relationship between the educators' studies, graduating school, and their perceptions of different titles.

Graph 4: Appropriate tittle of the profession

The pedagogical part of their profession seems to be highly influenced by several factors, such as studies (Mean=4.02, SD=0.989), interaction between colleagues (Mean=3.89, SD=1.046), communication with the supervisor (Mean=3.62, SD=1.076), and less influenced by the working relationship they have with the institution (Mean=2.53, SD=1.348). At this point, it is necessary to mention the concept of professional identity, which indicates the sense that the educator has of his/her professional self and is primarily constituted by elements of identity that change based on experiences and communication with other educators (Frydaki, 2015).

Regarding innovation in the early childhood center setting, no particular variations in the respondents' answers were observed. If they had to be ranked, we would say that the pedagogical team is from moderately to very innovative (Mean=3.61, SD=0.944), followed by all the staff of the kindergarten (Mean=3.35, SD=1.020), then the experienced colleagues (Mean=3.26, SD=1.063), the younger staff (Mean=3.10, SD=0.960), and finally the head of the early childhood center (Mean=2.91, SD=1.197).

The presentation of the pedagogical work of the sample is done in individual meetings with parents (Mean=3.55, SD=1.226), with the events of the nursery (Mean=3.23, SD=1.031), and on a daily basis by informing the parents/guardians from moderately to very (Mean=3.06, SD=1.195). The head of the kindergarten has taken this responsibility to a little to moderately (Mean=2.68, SD=1.133), while they present their work at conferences and workshops less (Mean=2.13, SD=1.268).
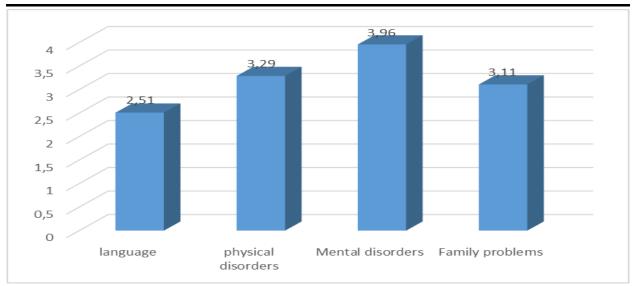
Regarding staying in the professional field, 81.5% of the sample answered that this is related to the satisfaction they get from it, from very to very much. Their desire for

professional development is associated with staying in the daycare sector from moderately to very much (Mean=3.70, SD=1.216), as are benefits (Mean=3.42, SD=1.221), earnings (Mean=3.20, SD=0.895), and the security provided by the working relationship (Mean=3.20, SD=1.393), since the sample is composed of municipal employees. On the contrary, it is evident that they stay in this profession until they find another better one, from not at all to a little (Mean=1.65, SD=1.101). From these findings, we obtain a general mood of satisfaction with the profession of early childhood education and care educators, which is confirmed by the next question.

Regarding the main problems perceived as moderate to very important, the existence of "different" children without parallel support from qualified staff is considered a problem (Mean=3.63, SD=1.211). In most municipalities, due to bureaucratic procedures, it is not provided, even though the standard regulations for municipal early childhood centers require the employment of special educators to accommodate these children. Furthermore, the low appreciation of society for their work is considered to be an equally important problem (Mean=3.58, SD=1.262), as they are not part of the Ministry of Education, and as a result, many consider that no pedagogical work is produced in kindergartens. At the same time, physical fatigue is perceived as a moderate to very significant problem (Mean=3.44, SD=1.068) in this profession, as dealing with young children requires a lot of energy and reserves. Professional stagnation, since in many cases there is no possibility of advancement depending on the studies, or in other cases, many years of experience are required to take up a position of responsibility, is a moderate to very problematic issue (Mean=3.27, SD=1.147). Similarly, the excessive demands of the municipality's administration are an additional problem from moderately to very significant (Mean=3.20, SD=1.205), while the absence of men from the profession is considered somewhat to moderately problematic (Mean=2.11, SD=1.170).

When asked whether they would like specialized help to manage children with mental health conditions, educators answered to a great extent (Mean=3.96, SD=0.970), which is evident from the previous question. They responded moderately to very much (Mean=3.29, SD=1.093) for children with physical conditions, moderately (Mean=3.11, SD=1.094) for those with family problems, and somewhat to moderately (Mean=2.51, SD=1.076) for children who do not speak the same language.

Communication with parents is highly valued by educators, as indicated by a mean score of almost very much (Mean=3.69, SD=0.963). It is also described as moderately scheduled as part of their daily routine (Mean=3.33, SD=1.276). There are only a few educators who face challenges in communicating with foreign parents (Mean=2.33, SD=1.119), and an even smaller number find it problematic and lacking in trust (Mean=1.90, SD=1.053).
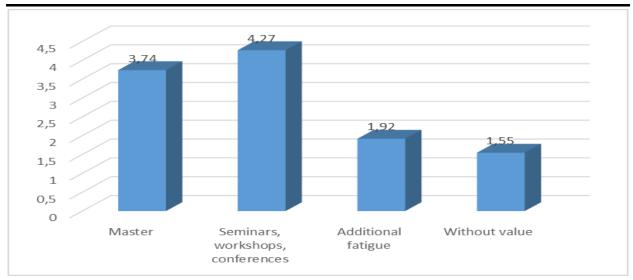
Graph 5: Specialised assistance

The way in which educators treat their students, parents, and colleagues, and how they perform their role, carry out their pedagogical work, manage changes, and develop professionally, as well as the level of satisfaction they derive from their profession, are factors that contribute to shaping their professional identity (Matsagouras, 2019; Day, 2009).

4.2.2. Expectations of the profession

If we were to rank the desired positive characteristics of classroom workers, the sample considers the following attributes as important, Ability to cooperate (Mean=4.56, SD=0.710), Calmness (Mean=4.34, SD=0.710), Experience (Mean=4.13, SD=0.802), Scientific knowledge (Mean=4.06, SD=0.853), Taking initiatives (Mean=4.02, SD=0.885), Moderate talent in craft activities (Mean=3.33, SD=1.058). Similarly, for supervisors, the desired positive attributes are: Responsible tactfulness (Mean=4.41, SD=0.869), Calmness (Mean=4.40, SD=0.908), Ability to control all areas of the early childhood center operation (Mean=4.34, SD=0.888), Experience (Mean=4.29, SD=0.842), Ability to motivate others (Mean=4.24, SD=1.006).

When it comes to training, the educators perceive it as a need for renewal through seminars, workshops, and conferences, indicating their desire for professional development (Mean=4.27, SD=0.897). They also desire postgraduate studies to a moderate to a high degree (Mean=3.74, SD=1.231). However, some consider training as an additional burden on their life (Mean=1.92, SD=1.109) and of little value for their profession (Mean=1.55, SD=1.000).
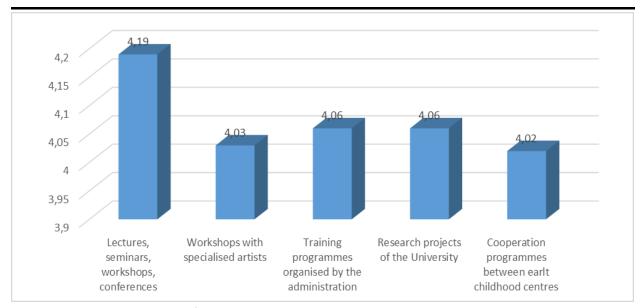
Graph 6: Perceptions of further education

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that educators recognize the importance of their role and acknowledge the need for continuous training and information on pedagogical issues. Their preferences for various initiatives, such as lectures, seminars, workshops, conferences, training programs, university research programs, workshops with special artists, and cooperation programs between early childhood centers, further highlight their commitment to enhancing the quality of their work (Mean scores ranging from 4.02 to 4.19, with SD values indicating relatively low variation).

Regarding the possible initiative on the part of parents on issues related to the early childhood center, the sample responses indicate a moderate to very accepting attitude, as long as the terms are agreed upon (Mean=3.34, SD=1.066). The educators are also willing to support the parents' involvement as they consider it necessary (Mean=3.32, SD=1.056) and trust their sense of responsibility (Mean=3.06, SD=0.936).

According to the respondents, the quality of services can be improved by providing the following: Psychological diagnosis and parallel support for children (Mean=4.51, SD=0.716), First aid (Mean=4.50, SD=0.709), Puppet theatre, music, visual arts by experts (Mean=4.32, SD=0.868), Psychological support to employees (Mean=4.16, SD=0.940), Use of new technologies (Mean=4.11, SD=0.968). These initiatives are considered very important by the sample. However, only a few respondents (Mean=2.11, SD=1.122) believe that foreign language skills are necessary to improve the services provided, as early childhood centers typically accommodate very young children.

Graph 7: Initiaves that enhance quality in work

4.3. Comparison of means – ANOVA

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) test is a powerful test. It utilizes the variance, which is the square of the standard deviation, and because it utilizes data that includes the mean, we classify it as parametric. It examines differences between means by comparing variances among more than two datasets at a time. We use One-Way ANOVA to test for differences in case there is only one variable (Newby, 2019). In the main questions, we used the Likert scale, in which 1 corresponds to 'not at all,' 2 to 'a little,' 3 to 'moderate,' 4 to 'a lot,' and 5 to 'very much.

4.3.1. Age

The presentation of pedagogical work at conferences and workshops in the younger age group is moderately marginal (Mean=2.95, SD=1.393), whereas, for the 41-50 age group, it is almost minimal (Mean=1.86, SD=1.155). Younger individuals have a greater need to enhance their resumes with presentations in order to enter the job market with more skills. Additionally, younger individuals appear to be more acquainted with and have greater trust in research, possibly due to its increased emphasis on new curricula.

Table 1: Statistically significant differences by age

	Age				Homogeneity of Variances Assumed		
	Mean Scores				ANOVA		
	Up to 30 (N=19)	31-40 (N=98)	41-50 (N=106)	51 and over (N=20)	F	Sig.	Post-hoc
24. The presentation of your pedagogical work is done: [At conferences, workshops]	2,95	2,23	1,86	2,12	4,613	0,004	Up to 30 & 41-50

4.3.2. Studies

Continuing, the next table presents statistically significant differences in the means of key questions regarding the studies of educators working in primary early childhood centers in the prefecture of Attica. It is evident that post-secondary graduates prefer the title "Infant Nurse - Nursery Worker" (Mean=3.21, SD=1.341) in contrast to those with a bachelor's degree from a technological educational institute (TEI) (Mean=2.05, SD=1.213) and those with a bachelor's degree from a university (AEI) (Mean=1.97, SD=1.124), who consider it less suitable as a title for their profession. The same question clearly shows the preference of university graduates (AEI) to be called "Kindergarten teachers" (Mean=3.31, SD=1.625), which is also the name of the schools from which they graduated. At the same time, TEI graduates prefer the title "Early Childhood Educator" to a significant extent (Mean=4.48, SD=0.921), and their preference shows a statistically significant difference with post-secondary graduates (Mean=3.79, SD=1.361). This result can also be attributed to the name of the faculty from which TEI graduates graduated, which until recently was Pre-school Education.

Regarding the pedagogical aspect of the profession, university graduates place a lot of emphasis on their studies (Mean=4.20, SD=0.944) compared to post-secondary graduates who consider their studies to have a moderate to high influence on the pedagogical aspect of their profession (Mean=3.56, SD=1.165). This fact is clearly shown in the results of the question regarding whether scientific knowledge is a desirable positive characteristic of classroom workers. Post-secondary graduates place special emphasis on artistic activities (Mean=3.79, SD=1.048) compared to TEI graduates (Mean=3.20, SD=1.041). In conclusion, it appears that graduates of higher education institutions (AEI-TEI) place significant emphasis on their theoretical studies and scientific knowledge, not solely on practical knowledge, considering their graduation from higher education institutions with a longer duration of study.

To conclude the statistically significant differences regarding studies, it is observed that post-secondary graduates have a moderate willingness to further educate themselves by attending a postgraduate course (Mean=3.00, SD=1.325), while TEI graduates have a very high willingness (Mean=3.90, SD=1.173), and AEI graduates have a high willingness (Mean=4.00, SD=1.034). Pursuing postgraduate studies requires an undergraduate degree from a university faculty, which explains the observed difference in the desire for postgraduate studies, always based on the initial studies.

Table 2: Statistically significant differences by studies

	Studies				Homogeneity of Variances Assumed			Homogeneity of Variances not Assumed		
	Mean Scores				ANOVA			Welch ANOVA		
	Upper secondary *(N=7)*	Post-secondary- IEK (N=45)	Bachelor from technological educational institute-TEI (N=150)	Bachelor from higher educational institute-AEI (N=45)	F	Sig.	Post-hoc	Statistic	Sig.	Post-hoc
21. The title you think is appropriate for your profession is [Nursery -Infant nursery]	3,2	3,21	2,05	1,97				9,039	0,001	IEK & TEI IEK& AEI
21. The title you think fits your profession is [Kindergarten teacher]	1,4	2,11	1,61	3,31				12,568	0,001	AEI & all
21. The title you think fits your profession is [Early Childhood Educator]	4,2	3,79	4,48	4,2				3,098	0,005	IEK & TEI
22. The pedagogical part of your profession is influenced by [Studies]	3,5	3,56	4,11	4,2				3,488	0,005	IEK & AEI
32. Do you perceive your training as: [Desire for postgraduate studies-master]	2,83	3	3,9	4	8,35	0,001	IEK &TEI IEK & AEI			

4.3.3. Studies by choice

For the question on why they chose these studies, the possible answers included: by choice, because they could not get into another school with higher grade requirements, for financial reasons, professional rehabilitation, and other. To explore this question in relation to the main questions, the responses were divided into two categories: by choice and for other reasons.

The One-Way ANOVA analysis revealed statistically significant differences. The table above indicates that individuals who chose to study in the field believe that the title "Early Childhood Educator" fits their profession very much to very much (Mean=4.38, SD=0.965), whereas those who pursued the studies for other reasons indicated a slightly lower level of agreement, but still very much (Mean=4.02, SD=1.367).

A similar trend can be observed in the question regarding the relationship between job satisfaction and staying in the profession. Those who chose to study in the field expressed a high level of agreement that job satisfaction is closely related to remaining in the profession, responding with very much to very much (Mean=4.29, SD=0.859), while those who pursued the studies for other reasons also agreed, but to a slightly lesser extent, with a mean of very much (Mean=4.02, SD=0.975). Conversely, when asked about their intention to stay in the profession until a better opportunity arises, those who chose to study in the field responded with not at all to a little (Mean=1.54, SD=1.015), indicating a lower likelihood of leaving, whereas those who pursued the studies for other reasons indicated a slightly higher level of agreement, but still almost a little (Mean=1.92, SD=1.286) in terms of staying in the profession until a better opportunity arises. These findings suggest that individuals who chose to study in the field have a stronger belief in the suitability of their chosen profession, perceive a stronger link between job satisfaction

and remaining in the profession, and have a lower intention to leave for better opportunities compared to those who pursued the studies for other reasons.

Table 3: Statistically significant differences based on the choice of specific studies

	Studies by choice		Homogeneity of Variances Assumed		Homogeneity of Variances not Assumed	
	Mean Scores		ANOVA		Welch ANOVA	
	Yes (N=186)	Other reasons (N=62)	F	Sig.	Statistic	Sig.
21. The title you think fits your profession is [Early Childhood Educator]	4,38	4,02			3,356	0,029
25. Your remaining in the profession is connected: [The satisfaction you get from your job]	4,29	4,02	4,364	0,038		
25. Your remaining in the profession is connected: [Staying until a better job is found for you]	1,54	1,97			5,386	0,010

4.3.4. Position of responsibility – supervisors

Continuing the statistical analysis by comparing means, it is necessary to investigate the statistically significant differences between the responses of the supervisors of the early childhood centers compared to the opinions of the classroom educators. From the relevant table, it can be observed that in the question regarding the extent to which the pedagogical part of the profession is influenced by communication with the head of the early childhood center, the heads themselves consider it to be moderately influenced (Mean=3.06, SD=1.059), while the early childhood educators consider it to be moderately to very influenced (Mean=3.71, SD=1.053). It is evident that educators place more emphasis on their communication with their supervisor and believe that it can affect their pedagogical work.

Furthermore, it can be observed that supervisors consider themselves to be innovating in the early childhood center from moderate to a lot (Mean=3.44, SD=1.106), while educators did not respond in the same way to the same question, on average answering that supervisors innovate from a little to moderate (Mean=2.83, SD=1.191). Perhaps the role of supervisors itself is a source of self-esteem. The cooperation and recognition of their work by parents are liked very much to very much by those in charge (Mean=4.27, SD=0.801), as they enjoy the prestige that comes from the position of responsibility they hold, while educators responded from moderate to very much (Mean=3.61, SD=1.094).

Regarding whether it is the supervisor's responsibility to communicate with parents, educators believe it is somewhat to moderately (Mean=2.73, SD=1.199), in contrast to supervisors who believe it is their responsibility moderately to very much (Mean=3.22, SD=1.099). On the other hand, it is observed that for educators, contact with

parents is scheduled by appointment from moderate to a lot (Mean=3.42, SD=1.274), while for supervisors, it is from a little to moderate (Mean=2.82, SD=1.185). For educators, it is not feasible to leave their classroom unannounced to make an appointment with a parent, which is not the case for supervisors who primarily work in an office setting.

Supervisors of early childhood centers have high expectations from classroom workers in terms of innovation and taking initiatives, from very much to very much (Mean=4.33, SD=0.692). On the other hand, educators working in classrooms prioritize the smooth outcome of their pedagogical work and may be somewhat reluctant to take initiatives, considering it as a desirable positive attribute almost too much (Mean=3.97, SD=0.903).

Table 4: Statistically significant differences by supervisor position

	Head of		Homogeneity of Variances Assumed	
	Mean Scores		ANOVA	
	Yes (N=34)	No (N=214)	F	Sig.
22. The pedagogical part of your profession is influenced by [Contact the person in charge of the early childhood center]	3,06	3,71	10,915	0,001
23. Innovate in the nursery area: [The head of the early childhood center]	3,44	2,83	7,919	0,005
26. What do you like about your profession? [The cooperation and recognition of my work by parents]	4,27	3,61	11,289	0,001
29. Communication with parents is: [Responsibility of the head of the early childhood center]	3,22	2,73	4,735	0,031
29. Communication with parents is: [Scheduled, by appointment, on request]	2,82	3,42	6,373	0,012
30. Desirable positive characteristics of classroom workers [Taking initiatives]	4,33	3,97	4,980	0,027

5. Discussion of results – Conclusions

Based on the quantitative and qualitative results of the study, the image of educators is outlined. They are portrayed as individuals and professionals in the broader social context, with demographic data, information, and opinions regarding their perception of their profession, self-perception, views on colleagues, supervisors, leadership, and expectations of their workplace.

5.1. Characteristics of educators
Moving on to answer the research questions, let's first describe the characteristics of the educators working in the municipal early childhood centers in Attica. Based on the demographic results, it is evident that the majority of educators are female and fall within the age range of 31 to 50 years. The chosen field of study is predominantly the former Technological Educational Institute (TEI), and approximately one-third of them hold a

master's degree. It is noteworthy that only a few of them do not know at least one language. More than half of the educators are married and have children, with their spouses' educational level being equal to or higher than their own in most cases. The majority of educators originate from Attica, and most of them report a moderate level of satisfaction with their economic situation. In terms of work experience, the majority of educators have been working in their profession for a period ranging from 6 to 20 years.

5.2. Attitudes of educators

Regarding their attitudes, educators working in the municipal early childhood centers in Attica hold different educational backgrounds, and their choice of professional title reflects this. Post-secondary graduates tend to prefer the titles of 'Infant nursery-nursery'. Graduates of the former Technological Educational Institute (TEI) may be unfamiliar with the updated name of the institution, which has now become a university school known as the Department of Early Childhood Education and Care. As a result, they still prefer the title 'Early Childhood Educator'. It is worth mentioning that the renaming of the discipline from TE nursery nurses to TE Early Childhood Educators and Care occurred through Presidential Decree 85/2022 - Government Gazette 232/A/17-12-2022, which was issued after the data collection for this study. Therefore, the educators' responses were unaffected by the new sectoral code introduced in December 2022. On the other hand, university graduates employed in municipal early childhood centers prefer the title of "Kindergarten teacher" due to the name of the school from which they graduated. Hence, it can be observed that the professional identity of educators is primarily defined by the institution where they completed their studies.

5.3. Practices used

However, the influence of studies goes beyond determining the professional title and also extends to the pedagogical aspect of their profession. Interaction with colleagues and communication with the head of the early childhood center are significant factors that affect the pedagogical aspect of their work. The culture within the early childhood center is shaped by qualitative elements of the pedagogical staff and the supervisor who establishes goals and supports their development. The head educator should possess not only scientific knowledge but also administrative skills. They must be knowledgeable in management and human resources management techniques, as well as possess interpersonal and professional skills. In conclusion, a strong personality with enhanced skills and abilities to execute and make decisions, whether planned or unplanned, is necessary (Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz & Pahiardis, 2011; Argyropoulou & Simeonidis, 2017).

The responses regarding innovation in their professional field confirm the importance of the pedagogical team and collaboration among all staff members. Being part of a pedagogical team characterized by support, trust, affirmation, and constructive criticism fosters analysis, evaluation, and quality. Meetings among early childhood educators with diverse perspectives are inspiring and challenging (Elm & Nordqvist,

2019). Additionally, the ability to collaborate is considered the primary positive characteristic of educators working in the classroom. Experiences and communication with other educators contribute to the development of the educator's professional self and, consequently, their professional identity (Frydaki, 2015).

Communication with parents occurs on a daily basis, especially during routine reception and drop-off times, given that the children are very young. Additionally, communication with parents is scheduled by appointment when necessary. Educators express positivity towards parents taking the initiative on matters related to the early childhood center as long as the terms are agreed upon, and they are willing to provide support, recognizing the essential role of parental involvement. Collaboration between educators and parents can work together for the benefit of the children. Recognizing the role of educators, parents gain confidence and often seek their advice on various issues concerning their children. Educators now understand the need for cooperation from parents to provide a better education for the children. Therefore, the necessity of collaboration and agreement between educators and parents on a common educational approach is evident (Sidiropoulou, 2002).

Traditional events no longer serve as the sole indicators of the quality of pedagogical work, as occasional presentations no longer meet the expectations of both educators and parents. Nowadays, due to better-informed educators and the conditions that limited in-person meetings (such as the COVID-19 era), alternative ways of effective communication and presentation of pedagogical work have emerged.

Family issues manifest in children's behavior. Today's parents are more sensitive to such issues and seek the assistance of specialists. Consequently, these children are better equipped to manage their problems, resulting in fewer behavioral issues within the early childhood center.

5.4. The wishes of early educators

The main challenge in the childcare profession is considered to be the presence of children who lack parallel support, and in some cases, it is deemed necessary. Educators recognize the need for specialized assistance in managing children with mental illnesses, physical illnesses, and family problems. This attitude highlights both their struggle in handling these situations and their desire for specialists to join them and provide training within their field of work. Additionally, despite the difficulties these children may present, educators express great satisfaction when they successfully integrate them into the group.

The professional identity of educators is also shaped by their feelings toward their students (Day, 2009). In this study, almost all educators mentioned the love and joy they derive from working with children.

The way educators interact with their students, parents, and colleagues, as well as how they carry out their pedagogical work and manage changes and professional development, and the level of satisfaction they derive from their profession, all contribute to their professional identity (Matsagouras, 2019; Day, 2009).

Regarding the continuing education of educators working in municipal early childhood centers in Attica, it is evident that they perceive a significant need for renewal through seminars, lectures, conferences, and workshops. AEI and TEI graduates express a clear desire for postgraduate studies. They consider training programs organized by the administration, university research programs, workshops with special artists, and collaboration programs between early childhood centers as suitable methods for enhancing the quality of their work. Networking through partnerships, whether organized by universities, institutions, or between early childhood centers, is seen as an important method of learning. Through networking, educators can meet, exchange ideas and opinions, and address various issues related to their work. This influence enhances their self-confidence and professionalism (Sidiropoulou & Tsaoula, 2008). Networking between early childhood centers highlights the diversity of settings and groups, with continuous support in expressing this diversity. This fosters interactive influences on pedagogical work and the development of critical thinking, leading to a climate of acceptance and recognition of others (Sidiropoulou & Tsaoula, 2008).

With the recognition of new scientific data and the importance of early diagnosis and intervention, modern-day educators express a greater desire for the possibility of psychological diagnosis and parallel support in their workplace compared to the past. They also propose psychological support for employees within the early childhood center to improve the services provided.

In conclusion, educators exhibit a deep love for their work and recognize its importance. They are committed to evolving and improving their educational qualifications, and they are aware of the need for professional development. They express a strong desire for various forms of training. It is crucial for the results of this survey to be utilized by employment agencies and universities. Given the frequent occurrence of lectures, seminars, workshops, and conferences, emphasis should be placed on in-service training, "accompanying" training, and interventions within the early childhood center, the educators' field of action.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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