"I'm a Teacher." –Preschool Teachers' Perception of Professional Self

Sylvia Chong[1,*] & Theresa Lu

[1]Singapore University of Social Sciences, 461 Clementi Road, Singapore 599491

*Corresponding author: Singapore University of Social Sciences, 461 Clementi Road, Singapore 599491. E-mail: sylviachong@suss.edu.sg

Abstract

Preschool education requires articulate, reflective and highly qualified teachers. However, within the teaching field, it is claimed that preschool teachers have the lowest perception of their own professional status. Determining the preschool teachers' professional standing is problematic and begins with preschool teachers' sense of professionals self. Using a mixed methods research methodology, the study garnered quantitative as well as personal insights into preschool teachers' perception of professional self. The findings showed that the preschool teachers have an emerging perception of professionalism. The study also highlighted the importance in providing opportunities as well as space for teamwork within supportive professional communities. To further enhance professional learning, the study findings also highlighted the role of supportive mentors. Teacher education and professional development programs, together with statutory and professional institutions have to take the lead to improve the profession. Importantly, the preschool community must continue to develop leaders in a landscape that is evolving quickly.

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

1. Introduction

Preschool education requires highly qualified, articulate and reflective teachers. However, studies have shown that the teaching field is seen to have a lower standing when compared to other vocations (Ingersoll & Mitchell, 2011). And within different groups of teachers - preschool, primary and secondary teachers - preschool teachers have the lowest standing (Hargreaves & Hopper, 2006). Teachers drive the pulse of the education systems, yet teaching does not feature as a high-status profession or occupation. The infamous phrase: "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach," disparages the entire teaching field. Every day, teachers communicate and interact with administrators, students, parents, other teachers, as well as other members of the community. The teacher's perception of professional self is critical as s/he manages and facilitates varied groups within the community.

The preschool teacher's perception of professional self is a many-sided concept that is culturally individualist and collectivist, influenced by the organization, the community as well as the individual. In the past decade, preschool education received unprecedented scrutiny at both local and international levels from which emerged competing and contradictory discourses of professionalism (Chong & Lu, 2019; Gibson, Cumming & Zollo, 2017). These discourses are also shaped by dominant political and economic directions. In the past years, Singapore's preschool landscape has evolved with several key changes. Most symbolic is the establishment of quality preschool specifications, the mandatory registration of preschool teachers, and the Skills Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education. In 2013 a supervisory body, the Early Childhood and Development Agency (ECDA), was formed to oversee the regulation, planning and professional development of preschool teachers. In spite of the various schemes that are addressed at improving the preschool teachers' standard, the perception of professional self remains "diverse and fragmented" when in comparison with teachers in primary and secondary schools (Today, 2017). The past discourses of the preschool teaching profession continues to prevail and this is echoed in the low compensation along with the poor professional standing (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015).

Building upon prior studies that attempted to deconstruct the preschool teacher's concept of professionalism, this article examines Singapore preschool teachers' perception of their professional self. The reporting in this article is from an expanded research project. The participants of the study were in-service preschool teachers participating in a part-time undergraduate program. Such a study is opportune as various Singapore government agencies along with ECDA are making efforts to raise the standing of teachers in the preschool sector. The attempts to improve preschool teachers' perception of the professional self is an important initial step to strengthening the profession. A weak perception of the professional self leads to a fall in teachers' confidence as professionals as well as a hurdle among those who wish to join or stay on in the sector.

2. Literature Review

The preschool workforce has a complex structure with conflicting and multi-dimensional

relationships (Gibson, Cumming & Zollo, 2017). Simpson (2010) argued that the professional self of a preschool teacher is established within a situated context and construct. This construct is embedded within the perceptions of children and community's sense of childhood. Studies indicated that the preschool teacher's sense of professional self, is low as preschool teachers grapple with the acknowledgement of their profession (Moloney, 2010; Rhodes & Huston, 2012), and yet on the other hand the same profession is regarded as a key contributor in the development and wellbeing of young children in the society. These contrary discourses of the preschool teacher's professionalism shift with historical, political, socio-cultural and economic contexts of the society. However, Woodrow (2008) argued that a fixed discourse is futile as "professionalism has always been a changing concept". With the "multiple discourses of professionalism and pedagogic practice" (p.57) it is important for preschool teachers to be involved in creating their professional identity and self (Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011). To be able to do this, preschool teachers will need to have "effective, reflective and reflexive practices" (p.11) as this will enable them to engage and develop their ideas at a deeper level.

Over the past years, attempts were made to improve the preschool teacher as childcare minders to qualified, well-prepared and equitably compensated education professionals (Chan, 2018). Internationally as well as in Singapore, the efforts included raising the professional standing of preschool teachers with requirements of recommended benchmarks such as knowledge, skills and professional development formed on sector-agreed criteria of practice for different roles and responsibilities in the sector (Chong & Lu, 2019). Despite these initiatives, preschool teachers continue to struggle with their lack of professional status.

Simpson (2010) highlighted the need for professional traits such as the professional interactions and communication with administrators, students, parents, colleagues as well as other community members. This is complemented with strong essential knowledge and practical skills as part of the preschool teachers' education and training. These views suggest that the development of preschool teaching profession is more complex and multi-dimensional than a list of requirements and standards.

The teachers' multi-faceted responsibilities and roles are embedded within the several layers of network structures which impact on the development of the teachers' professional self (Day, Kington, Stobart & Sammons, 2006). These structures are found within school and society cultures as well as in the inter-personal knowledge development among the preschool teaching community (Day et al., 2006).

The preschool teaching profession is often marked with low compensation, poor professional development opportunities with the absence of a career ladder (Chan, 2018). These circumstances considerably decrease preschool teachers' perception of professional self (Washington, Gadson, & Amel, 2015). Skattebol, Adamson, and Woodrow (2016) argues that the struggle of the preschool teachers are

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

2016; p. 117)

A first step to strengthening the profession is to boost preschool teachers' perception of the professional self. Apart from the common contributing factors toward the development of the professional self, more consideration should be given to the formation of preschool teachers' professional identity and what it means to them. A weak sense of professional of self leads to a decline in self-esteem. This is indirectly linked to the quality of the teacher and this in turn has an impact on the teaching and learning programs and activities for the preschoolers. Social and governmental directions can influence and revamp the professional profile within the community. These extensions of the roles and responsibilities as well as the repositioning of preschool teachers in terms of learning outcomes for children and the nation, moves from that of maternal care and child-minding, to that of competency frames of references that are tied to reporting, training and pedagogy structures (Millei & Jones, 2014). Teacher quality has been recognised as a crucial factor in educational change and quality instructional programs (Winters, 2008). Extensive literature (OECD, 2012), established the effect of high-quality teachers on young children.

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

One key initiative outlined an enhanced career and professional development pathway within the Early Childhood Manpower Plan. In 2017, a national campaign was established to raise awareness on the importance of preschool education supported by quality programs and professionals. To show a strong commitment towards elevating the quality and status of the sector, the Singapore government announced an increase of spending in the next five years for this sector from $850 million to $1.7 billion (Straits Times, August 20, 2017).

3. Methodology

A mixed methods research paradigm was used in the overall study. A survey was conducted with 242 preschool teachers followed by semi-structured interviews with 18 of the survey respondents. There are 3 sections in the survey. There were 5 key areas in the semi-structured interviews. This article presents the first part of the survey (Part A) and Section A of the interviews. Part A of the survey contained statements on the preschool teachers' perception of

professional self. Section A of the interview covered the teacher's perceptions of the profession and her sense of professional self.

3.1 Sample

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

- 141 (58.2%) are less than or equal to 30 years old

- 162 (66.9%) hold at least a diploma, degree or higher qualification

- 94.6% or 229 participants have a relevant Early Childhood Education (ECE) qualification

- 232 (95.9%) are currently working in a kindergarten setting

- 57.4% or 139 have worked in a childcare center and

- 21.5% or 52 have worked in both childcare center and kindergarten.

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

- 9 interviewees were working in public funded preschool centers while 11 were in private-funded centers.

- 6 interviewees were working in kindergartens while 14 were in childcare centers.

- 14 interviewees had 1 to 6 years of ECE working experience and 6 interviewees had more than 6 years of experience.

3.2 Survey

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

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

There were three latent factors in (1) *Self as a Professional* and four latent factors in (2) *Professional Self with Communities* (see Figure 1). The factors had loadings of 0.70 or above.

Construct 1, *Self as a Professional*:

    - Factor 1: Professional Learning and Development;

    - Factor 2: Professional Ethics and

    - Factor 3: Reflective Teaching Practices.

Construct 2: *Professional Self with Communities*:

    - Factor 4: Professional Initiatives

    - Factor 5: Professional Partnerships with Community;

    - Factor 6: Professional Practices with Colleagues and

    - Factor 7: Professional Partnerships with Families.
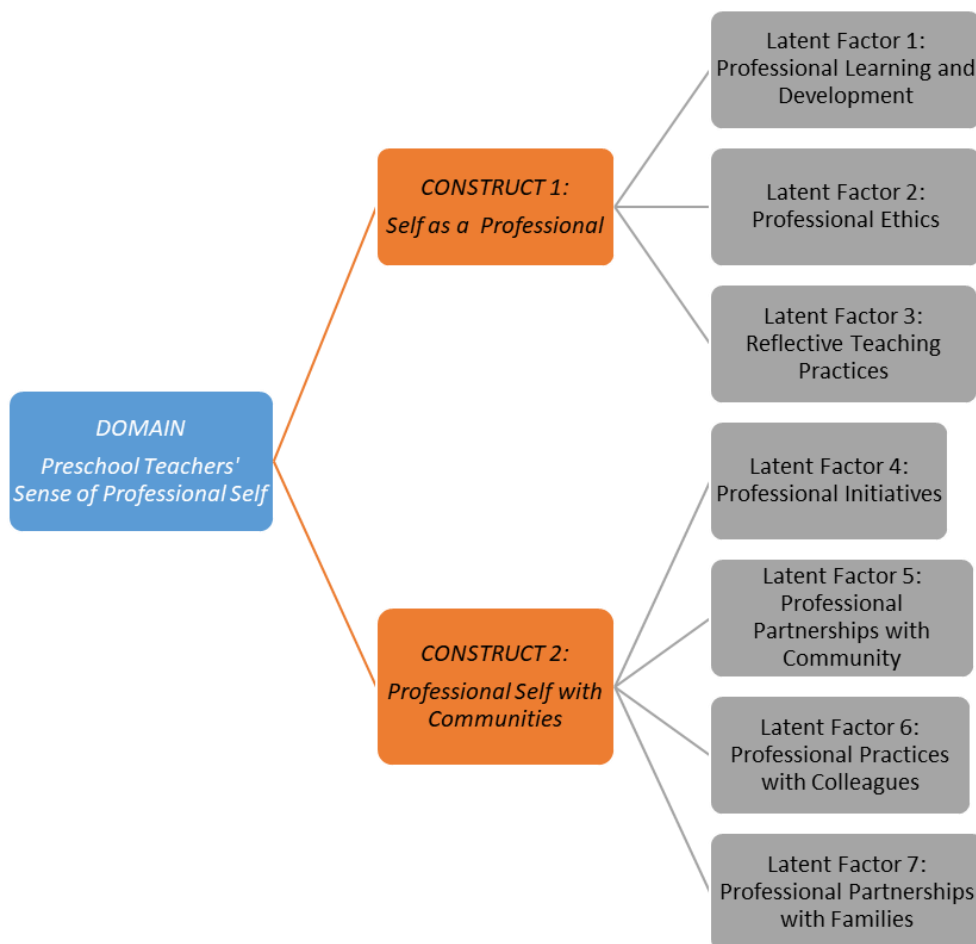
**Figure 1.** Survey Structure with 2 Constructs and 7 Factors

There were two to five statements in each factor. A 5-point Likert rating scale (ranges from 1 - Strongly disagree to 5 - Strongly Agree) to measure respondents' perception of the

Professional Self in each statement. Opinions about the self within as a preschool professional and with the professional community were listed in the statements. Table 2, in the following section of the paper, lists the 7 factors with sample statements along with other analysis.

3.3 Factor Analysis

After data cleaning and the initial profiling of the 242 responses, analysis was performed using IBM SPSS AMOS Software version 25.0. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was used to confirm the factor structure. CFA tested the hypothesized model between the underlying latent constructs and the list of survey statements. Maximum likelihood (ML) estimation was generated using and checked that the parameter estimates were statistically significant. The CFA model of the statements hypothesized to load on these seven factors is shown in Figure 2
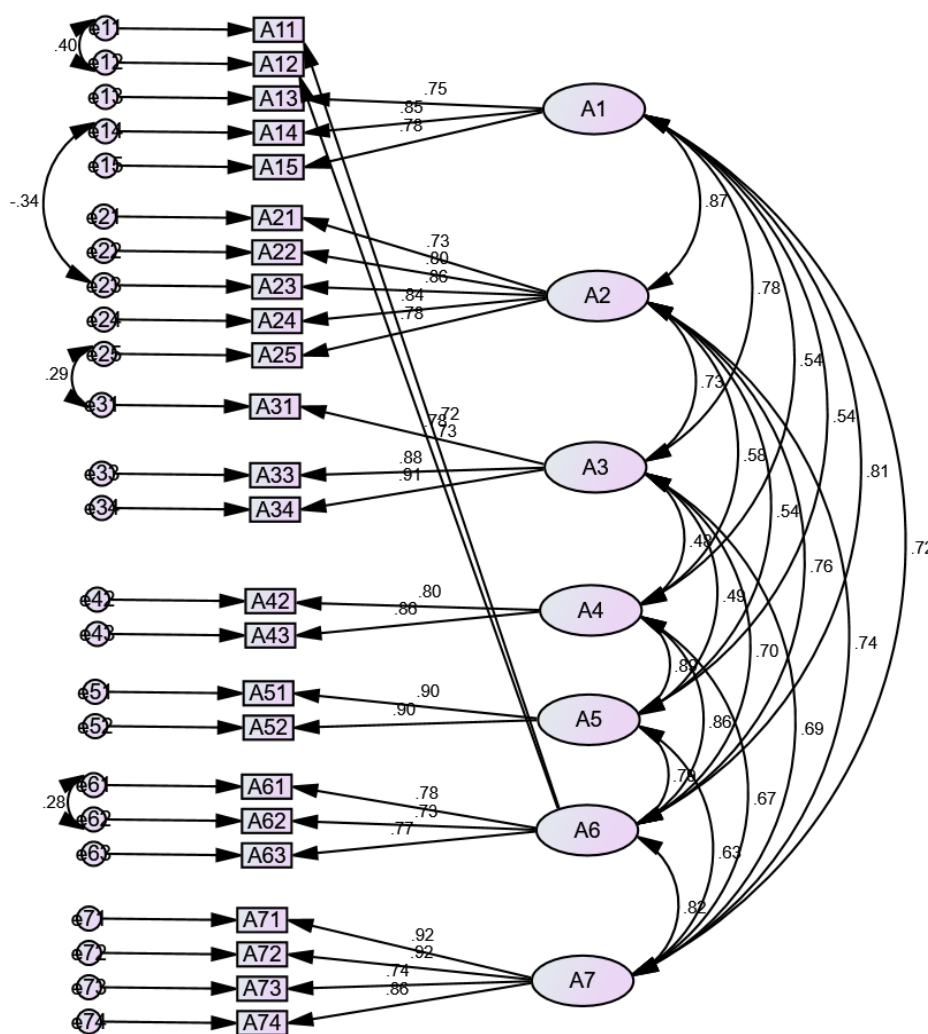
Figure 2. CFA Model to Confirm the Factor Structure

Goodness-of-fit indices such as CFI (Comparative fit index), SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) and RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) were applied to examine the fit of the selected model (see Table 1). To improve the model fit in this study, error

covariance modification indices were also used. This study's model's fit indices are within the benchmark range as recommended by O'Rourke, Psych and Hatcher (2013)

Table 1. Benchmarking of the Goodness-of-fit Indices

Goodness-of-fit indices	O'Rourke, Psych & Hatcher (2013)	hypothesised model
SRMR	<0.09	0.0377
RMSEA	<0.10	0.057
CFI	>0.90	0.961
Cmin/dF	<3.0	1.786
pclose	> 0.05	0.097

Using the parameter estimates, the reliability and validity of the model were measured. All path coefficients were found significant and that they contributed significantly to the related factor. With significant correlation coefficients at .001 and the inter-correlation coefficients ranged from .538 to .864, the survey statements loaded well into the underlying factors.

3.3.1 Sense of Professional Self

The Cronbach Alphas of the seven factors ranged from 0.83 to 0.90, indicating the survey instrument to be fairly reliable. The domain "Professional Self" was significantly higher than the domain "Professional Communities" The factor "Reflective Teaching Practices" had the highest mean (4.39) while the factor "Professional Partnerships with the Community" had the lowest mean (3.71). The domain and factor means, standard deviation and the Cronbach Alphas of the seven factors are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation and Cronbach Alpha

| Constructs (mean, standard deviation)	Latent Factor (mean, standard deviation)	Sample statements	Cronbach Alpha
1. Professional Self (Mean:4.23, SD: 0.64)	Factor 1: Professional Learning and Development (Mean: 4.24, SD: 0.62)	• Analyze professional learning needs • Engage in continuous professional development	0.88
	Factor 2: Professional Ethics (Mean: 4.14, SD: 0.69)	• Maintain respect and confidentiality in work matters • Establish ethical practices in EC education	0.89

|	Factor 3: Reflective Teaching Practices (Mean: 4.30, SD: 0.62)	• Reflect on and improve my teaching practices • Apply an inquiry-based approach in my teaching practices	0.90
2. Professional Self with Communities (Mean 3.77, SD: 0.78)	Factor 5: Professional Initiatives (Mean: 3.72, SD: 0.83)	• Initiate projects with colleagues • Align programs to the center's vision and mission	0.83
	Factor 4: Professional Partnerships with the Community (Mean: 3.68, SD: 0.80)	• Develop partnerships with community stakeholders • Plan collaborative projects with community stakeholders	0.87
	Factor 5: Professional Practices with Colleagues (Mean: 3.71, SD: 0.69)	• Initiate projects with colleagues • Develop structures that support collaboration among colleagues	0.84
	Factor 6: Professional Partnerships with Families (Mean: 3.95, SD: 0.79)	• Involve families in decision-making about their children • Build partnerships with families to support children's development	0.87

3.3.2 Analysis by "Years of Experience"

Further subgroup analysis was conducted to see if there were differences among groups of preschool teachers with different years of experience. The t-test ($p \leq 0.05$) showed significant differences for all statements between the less experienced preschool teacher (less or equal to 6 years) and the more experienced preschool teachers (more or equal to 7 years of experience). This can be seen in Figure 3 (*Professional Self*) and Figure 4 (*Professional Self with Communities)*.
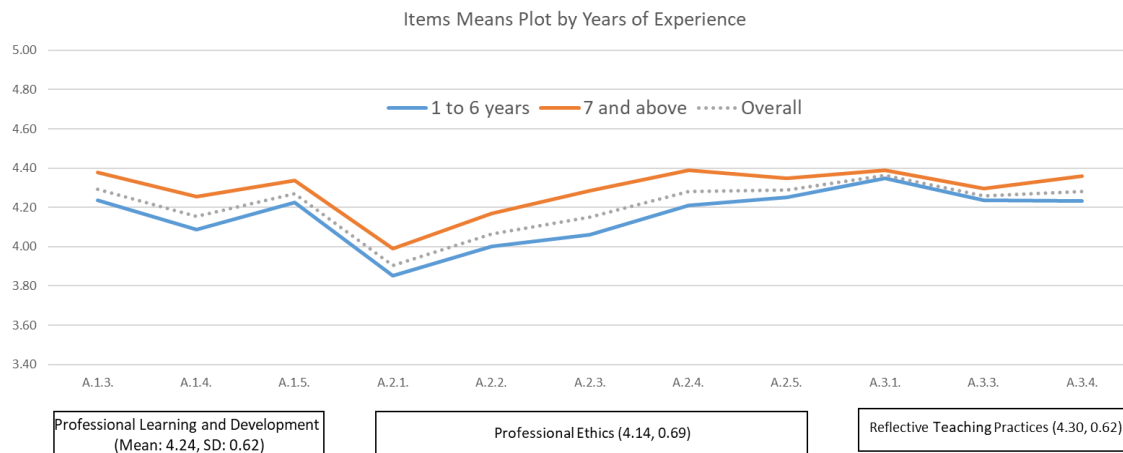
Figure 3. Differences for Professional Self (Years of Experience)
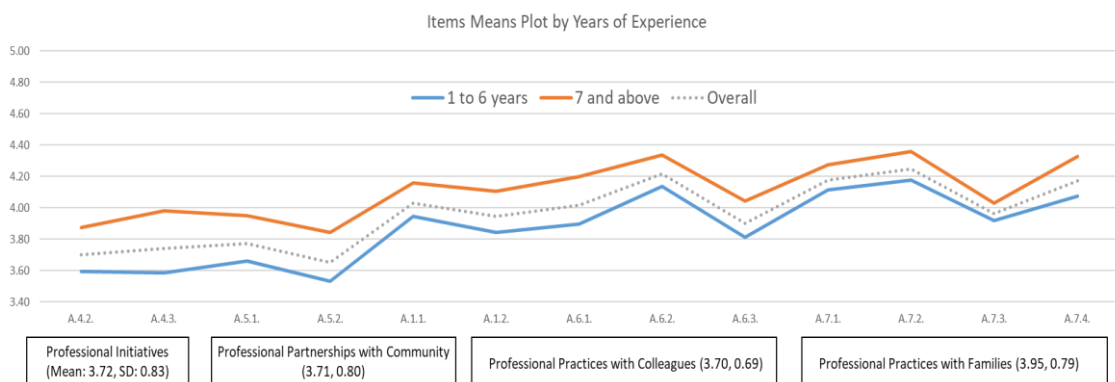
Figure 4. Differences for Professional Self with Communities (Years of Experience)

3.4 Interviews

The semi-structured interviews elicited a range of responses on topics related to personal perceptions of the profession, roles and responsibilities, personal motivation, program feedback as well as professional development and mastery. This qualitative inquiry was structured as a follow up on the findings from the survey. The qualitative findings for this paper is based on a Section A (preschool teachers' perceptions of the profession) in the interviews. The interviews, lasting from 45 minutes to approximately hour, were audio recorded and transcribed. A community-based research team was formed to ensure a broad-based but valid approach to the data preparation and analysis. The team consisted of the researcher, interviewer and 2 transcribers. Section A was coded based on the following categories:

• Preschool teacher's characteristics,

    • Roles and responsibilities, and

    • Requisite skills and knowledge.

As interview data was coded, themes emerged. While the themes became more refined through ongoing engagement with the data, quotes were extracted for each theme. The quotes and themes were verified by a preschool domain specialist. Triangulation is utilized in qualitative inquiries to corroborate data, and the conclusions drawn from it together with other perspectives to verify the validity of the findings (O'Toole & Beckett, 2014; Hughes, 2010).

3.4.1 Themes for the Interviews

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

Theme 1: Emerging sense of professional identity

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

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

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

> *We are role models. What we show the children actually matters. Children will be seeing our actions and listening to what we say. So, we shouldn't be giving contradicting message to the children."* (1830_Stu2)

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

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

Theme 2: Professional learning communities to support teaching and learning

McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) defined professional learning communities as "teachers work collaboratively to reflect on their practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the

particular students in their classes" (pp. 3–4). The interviews highlighted that the preschool teachers value more platforms for professional learning communities to promote collegial cultures and provide capacity building that sustains relationships and open dialogue (Damjanovic, 2015).

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

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

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

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

> *"come together and get to know each other better and then we can support each other even though we're from different centers, but like, as a big family so we can discuss like strategies or… strategies for problems that we might face at our centers and then if we need help in the center we can even like, ... ask for help, 'cause we have this big network."* (1730_Stu1)

Theme 3: Mentoring as a key part of professional development

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

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

One interviewee highlighted the vital role of a nurturing mentor who creates an environment where the beginning teachers feel supported. Effective mentoring is able to increase beginning teachers' confidence and comfort as well as ease their transition into the profession (Koerner, 2017). Within this environment, the beginning preschool teacher can freely reflect and explore.

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

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

"… if I'm going to be a center leader, I have to have the qualifications to back it up, … and I am qualified to share the knowledge or qualified to mentor and guide new teachers." (1200_Grad9)

4. Results and Discussion

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

1. When comparing the two constructs, Construct Two: *Professional Self with Communities* (factor mean: Mean 3.77, SD: 0.78) were rated significantly lower.

2. *Professional Partnerships with Community* (Factor 4 in Construct 2) was rated the lowest ((Mean: 3.68, SD: 0.80) among all the factors.

3. The more experienced preschool teachers (equal or more than seven years of preschool experience) rated themselves significantly higher.

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

4. The interviewees have an emerging sense of professional identity

5. Professional learning communities are perceived as positive platforms to support teaching and learning.

6. Mentoring can support training and development.

Historically teachers in the preschool sector have a low professional status and within the teaching fraternity they face the biggest challenge in establishing a professional identity (Hoyle, 2008). However, in the past decade, there have been shifts in governments and policy rhetoric of many nations regarding the professionalization of the preschool sector and its teachers (OECD, 2012; Phillips, Austin & Whitebook, 2016). Improving the standing of preschool teachers and respecting the value of preschool education are the first key steps to strengthening the sector (Tukonic & Harwood, 2015). In Singapore, the introduction of the preschool standards and requirements together with the formation of a regulatory and developmental agency for the preschool sector signaled a strategic national shift in the reconceptualization of the expert identities of preschool teachers. Developing a culture, which defines their beliefs and values, would serve to enhance the professional identity of early childhood educators through education, sharing of experiences and mentoring practices (Bredekamp, 2017).

The findings in this study also highlighted the importance in providing opportunities for

collaboration and teamwork practices. The findings also highlighted the role of learning communities and mentors to support positive outcomes for preschool teachers' professional learning.

Developing strong collaborative and team cultures within professional learning communities with preschool teachers can impact teacher retention, professional learning and improved teaching and learning interactions (Ratner, Bocknek, Miller, Elliott & Weathington, 2017). These learning communities are key platform for teachers to share knowledge, skills and values. Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner (2017) identified group learning with these learning communities as an effective strategy for professional development. The team culture within the community also provides the preschool teachers with opportunities to endorse, strengthen and extend their professional practices, all of which will enhance the preschool teachers' perception of professional self. The support of a team can empower teachers in their roles and help them develop confidence in their professional ability (Gracey, 2015). Preschool teachers' pre and in-service programs can encourage and facilitate communities to develop professional partnerships and collaboration.

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

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

Mentoring is not only an important strategy to support and nurture beginning teachers, it is also an effective approach to develop leaders in the profession. Those who mentor others can benefit from the mentoring process. Mentoring relationships promote professional learning and

encourage leadership. Advocating collaborative and mentoring approaches for beginning teachers needs competent preschool leaders who are able to connect theory to practice, enhance professional capacity and proficiency, and strengthen team culture to recognize the importance of relationship building and quality frameworks. Thornton (2015) highlighted the benefits for mentors and that include the development of new understandings and insights, the advancement of professional competence and reflective practices, and the enhancement of professionalism and the professional self. To keep abreast with the expanding challenges of preschool teachers and to improve the standing of the profession, robust constructs and discourses of preschool leadership as well as improved professionalism are crucial issues to address. Teacher education and professional development programs, together with statutory and professional institutions and organizations have to take the lead in bringing the profession forward. Importantly, the sector must continue to develop preschool leaders for knowledge exchange and generation in a landscape that is evolving quickly.

The survey and interview respondents (all female) of the study are limited to preschool practitioners enrolled in a part-time undergraduate program in Singapore. The set of circumstances offered insights, the generalizability of the findings is based on the sample population and methodology applied.

5. Conclusions

There is considerable research that highlight that quality preschool education can make a significant difference to young children's lives and overall wellbeing. Teacher quality is a key factor impacting quality educational directions and student outcomes. In turn, preschool teachers' sense of professionalism is a key construct towards teacher quality. The advancement of the professional self in the preschool sector impacts the continued progress in preschool education. Therefore as the preschool landscape develops, enhancing the teachers' sense of professionalism is paramount (Tukonic & Harwood, 2015).

Acknowledgments

References

Ammentorp, L., & Smith, T. B. (2011). The Connect Formation model of teacher development: Creating connections and transforming practice. *Young Children*, *66*(3), 38-46.

Bradley-Levine, J., Smith, J., & Carr, K. (2009). The Role of Action Research in Empowering Teachers to Change Their Practice. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, *3*(3).

Bredekamp, S. (2017). *Effective practices in early childhood education: Building a foundation*.

New Jersey: Pearson Education.

Chan, W. L. (2018). Challenges to the infant care profession: practitioners' perspectives. *Early Child Development and Care*, 1-13.

Chong, S., & Lu, T. (2019). Early childhood teachers' perception of the professional self and in relation to early childhood communities. Australian Journal of Teacher Education (Online)*, 44*(7), 53. https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2019v44n7.4

Chu, M. (2014). *Developing mentoring and coaching relationships in early care and education: A reflective approach.* New Jersey: Pearson Education.

Damjanovic, V. J. (2015). A case study of teachers' in professional learning communities in a campus preschool. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations.* Retrieved 25 September, 2020 from https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/5468

Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

Day, C., Kington, A., Stobart, G., & Sammons, P. (2006). The personal and professional selves of teachers: stable and unstable identities. *British Educational Research Journal, 32*(4), 601-616. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920600775316

Gibson, M., Cumming, T., & Zollo, L. (2017). Re-thinking discourse of teacher professionalism in early childhood education: An Australian perspective. In *Contemporary issues and challenge in early childhood education in the Asia-Pacific region* (pp. 203-219). Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2207-4_12

Gracey, J. (2015). The challenge of change. In C. Ritchie (Eds.), *Challenge and change for the early years workforce: Working with children from birth to 8* (pp. 21-36) Abington, Oxon: Routledge.

Hargreaves, L., & Hopper, B. (2006). Early Years, Low Status? Early Years Teachers' Perceptions of Their Occupational Status. *Early Years, 26*(2), 171-186. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575140600759971

Hoyle, E. (2008). Changing conceptions of teaching as a profession: Personal reflections. In *Teaching: Professionalization, development and leadership* (pp. 285-304). Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8186-6_19

Hughes, P. (2010). Paradigms, methods and knowledge. In G. MacNaughton, I. Siraj-Blatchford, & S. A. Rolf (Eds.), *Doing early childhood research: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice* (2nd ed., pp. 35-62). Crows Nest, NWS: Allen & Unwin.

Ingersoll, R. M., & Mitchell, E. (2011). The status of teaching as a profession. In J. Ballantine & J. Spade (Eds.), *Schools and society: A sociological approach to education* (4th ed., pp. 185-189). Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press/Sage Publications.

Koerner, B. D. (2017). *Beginning music teacher mentoring: Impact on reflective practice, teaching efficacy, and professional commitment*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder.

McLaughlin, M. W., & Talbert, J. E. (2006). *Building school-based teacher learning communities: Professional strategies to improve student achievement*, 45. Teachers College Press.

Millei, Z., & Jones, A. (2014). The Australian early childhood curriculum and a cosmopolitan imaginary. International Journal of Early Childhood, *46*(1), 63-79. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-014-0100-2

Ministry of Social and Family Development (2015). *Achieving excellence through continuing professional development: A CPD framework for early childhood educators.* Singapore: Ministry of Social and Family Development.

Mo Moloney, M. (2010). Professional identity in early childhood care and education: perspectives of pre-school and infant teachers. *Irish educational studies, 29*(2), 167-187. https://doi.org/10.1080/03323311003779068

O'Connor, D., McGunnigle, C., Treasure, T., & Davie, S. (2015). Educator identities. Emerging issues within personal and professional identities: changes experienced by Australian pre-service teachers following professional exposure to educational practice within childcare settings. *Early Child Development and Care, 185*(8), 1331-1342. Doi: 10.1080/03004430.2014.993626 https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2014.993626

OECD (2012). *Starting Strong III: A quality toolbox for early childhood education and care.* Paris, France, Organisation for economic co-operation and development. Doi: 10.1787/9789264123564-en https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264123564-en

Onchwari, G., & Keengwe, J. (2008). The impact of a mentor-coaching model on teacher professional development. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 36*(1), 19-24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-007-0233-0

O'Rourke, N., Psych, R., & Hatcher, L. (2013). *A step-by-step approach to using SAS for factor analysis and structural equation modeling*. Sas Institute.

Ortlipp, M., Arthur, L., & Woodrow, C. (2011). Discourses of the early years learning framework: Constructing the early childhood professional. Contemporary issues in early childhood, *12*(1), 56-70. https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2011.12.1.56

O'Toole, J., & Beckett, D. (2014). *Educational research: Creative thinking and doing* (2nd ed.). South Melbourne, Victoria: Oxford University Press.

Parkay, F. W. (2013). *Becoming a teacher* (9th ed.). Singapore: Pearson Education.

Phillips, D., Austin, L. J. E., & Whitebook, M. (2016). The early care and education workforce. *The future of children, 26*(2), 139-158. https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2016.0016

Ratner, H. H., Bocknek, E. L., Miller, A. G., Elliott, S. L., & Weathington, B. (2017). Creating

communities: a consortium model for early childhood leaders. *Teacher Development,* 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2017.1367718

Rhodes, H., & Huston, A. (2012). Building the Workforce Our Youngest Children Deserve. *Social Policy Report, 26*(1). Society for Research in Child Development. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2379-3988.2012.tb00070.x

Simpson, D. (2010). Being professional? Conceptualising early years professionalism in England. *European early childhood education research journal, 18*(1), 5-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930903520009

Sims, M., & Waniganayake, M. (2015). The role of staff quality improvement in early childhood. *Journal of Education and Training Studies, 3*(5), 187-193. https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v3i5.942

Skattebol, J., Adamson, E., & Woodrow, C. (2016), 'Revisioning professionalism from the periphery'. *Early Years, 36*(2), 116-131. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2015.1121975

Skillsfuture Singapore (2016). *Skills Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education: A Guide on Occupations and Skills*. Retrieved 25 September, 2020 from http://www.skillsfuture.sg/skills-framework/ecce

Straits Times (2017). National Day Rally 2017: More childcare places and MOE kindergartens; new institute for pre-school teachers. Retrieved 9 December, 2020 from http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/national-day-rally-2017-more-childcare-places-and-moe-kindergartens-new-institute-for-pre

Thornton, K. (2015). The impact of mentoring on leadership capacity and professional learning. *Mentoring in early childhood education: A compilation of thinking, pedagogy and practice*, 1-13.

Today (2017). Experts' wish for pre-schools: Higher teaching standards. Retrieved 9 December, 2020 from https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/experts-wish-pre-schools-higher-teaching-standards

Tukonic, S., & Harwood, D. (2015). The Glass Ceiling Effect: Mediating Influences on Early Years' Educators Sense of Professionalism. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Young Children, 40*(1), 36-54. https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs.v40i1.15210

Washington, V., Gadson, B., & Amel, K. L. (2015). *The new early childhood professional: A step-by-step guide to overcoming Goliath*. Teachers College Press.

Winters, M. (2008). Qualified teachers wanted. *The Washington Times*. Retrieved 25 September, 2020 from https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/aug/15/qualified-teachers-wanted/

Woodrow, C. (2008). Discourses of professional identity in early childhood: Movements in Australia. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 16*(2), 269-280. https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930802141675