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Pre-Primary and Lower Primary Teachers' Professional Identity in Primary Schools in Nairobi County, Kenya

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Professional identity is a noteworthy aspect of the teachers' professional lives. This is because it influences the manner in which they do their work, retention and productivity in their places of work. This article presents findings from a PhD study that aimed at establishing the status of pre-primary and lower primary teachers' professional identity and exploring factors influencing it. Fredrick Herzberg's (1950) theory of Satisfaction and Motivation was used to guide the study. The study used concurrent triangulation research design. The dependent variable was early year's education teachers' professional identity, while the independent variable was the type of school. The study was conducted in Kasarani Sub-County in Nairobi County, Kenya. The sample size consisted of 220 teachers and 44 head-teachers in both public and private primary schools. Questionnaires and interview schedules were used to collect data which was then analysed using qualitative and quantitative methods. Findings from the study revealed that pre-primary and lower primary teachers' professional identity was weak. It was recommended that school management, county and national governments, and other key stakeholders should aim at addressing issues that weaken early year's education teachers (EYET) professional identity.

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INTRODUCTION

The professional identity of early year's teachers has over the decades gained interest from educators and researchers globally. In spite of the many years, it has been researched, the construct of teacher professional identity lacks a universally accepted definition (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beijaard *et al.* 2000). Scholars tend to define it based on the psychological, sociological and postmodern perspectives (Karaolis & Phillipou, 2019). Solari and Ortega (2020) describe it as a process that is relational, dynamic and dialogic. During the process, teachers construct discursive meanings about being a teacher and belonging to that profession. Teacher's professional identity has been considered to be a key factor when it comes to early years teachers' professional lives, motivation, insistence in the profession and finally when making decisions regarding their careers (Lasky, 2005). Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) assert that professional identity has an influence on teachers' attitudes towards any educational change. What this means is that teachers' identities affect their teaching practices and the manner in which they interpret policies of education and the implementation of education agendas. Jermolajeva, Bogdanova, and Silchenkova (2018) disclose that teachers' professional identity is a key determinant of how effective they will work. In addition, Ahmad, Latada, Wahab, Shah and Khan (2018) posit that teachers' professional identity is directly linked to student learning outcomes.

Early years teachers are at the heart of the education profession. They form a very important part of our children's education. The roles they assume are unique and they teach the learners in an important phase of their development (Copple & Bredekamp,

2009). These teachers have a big responsibility to take care of the children's physical, emotional and educational needs but are paradoxically accompanied by low pay, low professional status and poor working conditions resulting in the poor perception of self. A growing body of evidence has shown that quite a number of early years teachers have a negative view of the profession (Chong & Lu, 2019). For a long time, the teachers have had to deal with the struggle for recognition of their profession and a low sense of professional self (Moloney, 2010; Rhodes & Houston, 2012).

Early childhood teachers' professional identity has been a topic of concern worldwide. Reason being, the important roles these teachers play in the children's lives. In countries such as the US, Ireland and England, early years educators' professional identity is surrounded with controversies relating to who they are as professionals. Teachers reported that it was challenging for them to develop and maintain their identities. There was disillusionment with their roles and a picture of frustration and discontent regarding their professional identity was noted (Goffin & Washington, 2007; Lightfoot & Frost 2015 and Moloney, 2010). In Australia, Woodrow (2008) reports that EYE teachers' struggle for recognition of their professional status has been a challenging and ongoing process. She further states that factors such as low pay, poor working conditions, and poor perception by the public towards early childhood education contribute to instabilities when it comes to professional identity formation.

In Africa, the literature reviewed has shown that the formation of EYE teachers' professional identity is an issue in many countries. A study conducted by Hartell and Steyn (2015) in South Africa revealed

that ECE (Early Childhood Education) teachers are ranked lowly in their schools. Lack of teachers' motivation was one of the factors contributing to weak professional identity. Teachers' professional identity formation is influenced by lack of materials, programmatic and socio-cultural challenges such as low social status and the public demeaning the profession's value (Kadzamira, 2006; Isotaro, 2017).

Regionally, (Tanzania, Rwanda) school teachers working environment was poor and this affected the teachers' professional identity formation (Bennell & Ntaragamba, 2008). The climate in schools has been linked to teacher attrition (Maku & Begi, 2017). In Nairobi County, Mwoma, Murungi, and Begi (2018) found that pre-primary schools lacked conducive learning environment due to inadequate physical facilities. The study found that the environment in schools was not suitable for teaching and learning, considering that professional identity is a sense of self that emanates from the environment therefore, there was need to investigate what the early years' education teachers' professional identity could be in such school environments.

Objectives of the Study

This study sought to:

- To establish pre-primary and lower primary school teachers' professional identity.
- To find out the difference in teachers' professional identity by type of school.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study used a concurrent research design. Involving, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data at the same time (Terrell, 2012). Through the use of this design, the researcher was able to address pre-primary and lower primary teachers' professional identities both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Location of the Study and Variables

This study was conducted in Kasarani Sub-County in Nairobi City County, Kenya. The independent variable was the type of school (public or private), while the dependent variable was EYE teachers' professional identity. It was measured using a five-point Likert scale whereby teachers were required to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the identified facets of career satisfaction, professional competence, and professional socialization.

Target Population, Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

The target population was pre-primary and lower primary teachers and headteachers. There were 145 public and private primary schools with attached pre-primary schools whose teachers were targeted for participation in the study. Purposive sampling method was used to select Nairobi City County and Kasarani Sub-County. Stratified random sampling method was used to select 30% of the schools to be involved in the study. This was because the population was stratified into public and private schools. Teachers who participated in the study were randomly sampled. The sample size consisted of 44 schools, 44 head teachers and 220 teachers.

Research Instruments and Pilot Study

Questionnaires and interview schedules were used for data collection. Questionnaires enabled the researcher to measure EYE teachers' professional identity, whereas interviews were used to explore EYE teachers' professional identity and the factors influencing it in depth.

Prior to data collection, instruments were piloted in two schools randomly sampled from the Sub-County; one public and the other private which were excluded from the main study. To ensure that the research tools measured what they were intended to measure, content validity was used. Internal consistency reliability method was used to test the reliability of the questionnaire.

Logistical and Ethical Considerations, Data Collection and analysis

Permission from all relevant authorities was sought and the research permit was obtained. Participants signed the consent form. To protect participants' confidentiality, they were identified using codes instead of their real names and anonymity of the data they were to give was assured. Data were collected in three stages. In stage one, questionnaire were administered to early years teachers. In stage two early years teachers were interviewed, while in stage three headteachers were interviewed. Data was analysed using qualitative and quantitative methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Pre-primary and Lower Primary School Teachers' Professional Identity

Objective one sought to establish pre-primary and lower primary teachers' professional identity. This objective was achieved using questionnaires and through interviews conducted on pre-primary and lower primary teachers. The questionnaires had 17 items each which were subjected to a five-item Likert scale response whereby teachers chose by ticking the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statements. Teachers' professional identity was gauged using overall mean scores whereby teachers whose mean scores were between 1-2.49 were considered to have a weak professional identity, while teachers whose mean scores were from 2.5-5 were regarded as having a strong sense of professional identity. Table 1 presents the findings.

Table 1: Mean Scores in Teachers' Professional Identity by Level of Teaching

Professional Identity	Pre-primary school		Lower Primary School	
	Mean	Std-Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. Able to motivate learners in class to learn	4.27	.867	4.32	.911
2. Shares new teaching ideas with colleagues	4.26	.809	4.22	.952
3. Able to create a conducive learning environment for learners	4.24	.922	4.39	.897
4. Able to assess pupils and use the results to improve learning	4.22	.928	4.32	.999
5. Able to select and use appropriate teaching and learning methods and strategies	4.18	.891	4.30	.947
6. I have adequate knowledge, skills and understanding of my profession	4.11	.940	4.17	1.057
7. Able to support diverse learning needs of learners	4.09	.980	4.16	.972
8. Being a member of teaching the profession is important to him/her	4.02	.994	4.32	.952
9. Able to identify with members of the teaching profession	3.99	.928	4.14	.909
10. Pursuing a career in early years education is important	3.15	1.180	3.46	1.207
11. Member of profession network	2.17	.950	2.14	.982
12. There is career progression in my school	2.11	1.179	1.91	1.066
13. The work I do in school helps me to grow in my profession	1.97	1.236	1.80	1.170
14. Happy to be a teacher	1.74	.577	3.26	.986
15. Participates in early years educators in-service training courses	1.67	.738	1.77	.837
16. My job has a professional status	1.23	.673	1.16	.459
17. My job is respected by society	1.16	.398	1.17	.448
Overall Mean	3.11	.893	3.24	.864

Table 1 clearly shows that overall mean scores for pre-primary teachers' professional identity was 3.11 (SD=.893), while that of lower primary teachers was 3.24(SD=.864). Lower primary teachers' professional identity was slightly higher than that of pre-primary teachers. Further inspection of the questionnaire results revealed that individual mean scores for the following indicators of professional identity; teachers' professional status, respect of the job by the society, career progression in the school, work helping teachers to grow in the profession, participating in early years in-service training courses, being a member of the professional network were scored lowly.

Analysis of the interviews conducted revealed that teachers' professional identity was weak. Teachers voiced various factors that influenced their professional identity. The teachers reported that people take their work as a low-skilled profession that does not require serious education and pay. They also lamented of low salaries, inadequate teaching and learning materials and lack of motivation.

The researcher also inquired from teachers whether they felt they were acknowledged for the role they played, were satisfied working as early year teachers, and whether they will continue working as early years teachers for the next ten years. Interview findings of the study revealed that quite a number of the teachers disclosed that they were not recognized by parents, school management and society. However, there are a few teachers who reported that they got recognized, and stated forms of recognition as having parents going to class to appreciate the work they were doing; getting positive remarks from both parents and school management; involvement in decision making; receiving gifts during school annual meetings and closing days, and lastly being sponsored to attend seminars.

Further inquiry to know whether teachers were contented working as early years teachers revealed that most of them were not contented. Some of the reasons they gave for their dissatisfaction included; inadequate remuneration, lack of recognition by the national government and failure to be ranked in any job group. They lamented that their salaries did not commensurate with their qualifications. In addition, they claimed that they were being looked down upon by society.

Although a majority felt not satisfied there were a few who felt satisfied. Teachers in this category had sentiments such as getting satisfaction from the fulfilment of laying a foundation for their young children and witnessing the success of older pupils who had passed through their hands. Head teachers' interviews also confirmed that pre-primary and lower primary teachers were not respected as other professionals. They purported that these teachers were viewed as academic failures and that their work was perceived as inferior, undervalued and was generally underappreciated.

After the above revelations, the researcher also sought to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in professional identity between pre-primary and lower primary school teachers.

To establish this, the following null hypothesis was generated and tested:

H₀I: There is no significant difference in teachers' professional identity between pre-primary and lower primary school teachers.

An independent samples t-test was used to determine the significance level and the results have been presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Independent Samples t-test for Equality of Means

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Average Professional Identity	Equal variances assumed	.906	.342	218	.045	-.126	.063	-.245	-.003
	Equal variances not assumed			174	.049	-.126	.063	-.251	-.001

Table 2 shows that there was a significant difference in professional identity between pre-primary (M=3.11; SD=.479) and lower primary (M=3.24; SD=.437); $t(218) = -2.02, p = .045$, two-tailed teachers. The mean difference was $-.126$. The difference between the two means was significant at $p = .045$. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected meaning that pre-primary and lower primary school teachers' professional identity was not similar.

Findings from interviews conducted in this study indicated that early years teachers' professional identity was weak because the society was not viewing them as teachers, not recognized by parents, job not respected by society, low professional status, no career progression in schools, considered low-class persons and taken as academic failures. The findings concur with those from Boyd (2013) who in an in-depth interview with early childhood educators found that the teachers' professional identity was weak. Many of the educators had expressed their frustration on the society's perception as child caregivers rather than teachers. Recognition for them was also a problem since they said it was little or none at all. Although they saw their work as important the society didn't give them any respect for the work they do and as a result, they intended to leave the early year's education field results which are in compliance with the findings of this study.

The findings of the present study showed that most early years teachers had low esteem due to being undervalued and underappreciated by society members and that low self-esteem resulted in weak professional identity. The result concurs with those from other studies for instance Motallebzadeh and Kazemi (2018) found that self-esteem positively predicted professional identity. Correspondingly, Moloney and Pope (2013) found that a weak or poor professional identity was associated with a lack of a positive self-image and belief that one's work is not valued and was being underestimated by the society and government. Similarly, in Sweden, Dronnesmund (2015) established how early years' teachers' profession was understood and perceived by society, greatly impacted the professional identity and self-esteem among the teachers.

Type of School and Teachers' Professional Identity

Objective two explored the difference in professional identity between pre-primary and lower primary school teachers in public and private schools. To accomplish this objective, the means of teachers' professional identity were categorized by type of school (public and private). The outcome was as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Teachers' Professional Identity by Type of School

	Type of School	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Average Professional Identity	Public	40	3.25	.566
	Private	180	3.18	.430
	Total	220	3.22	0.498

As depicted in Table 3, the overall mean scores in professional identity for teachers in public schools was (M=3.25, SD=.566) whereas those teaching in private schools was (M=3.18, SD=.430). These results show that professional identity for teachers in public primary schools was a little high than that of their counter-parts in private primary schools. Scrutiny of data from the interviews with teachers revealed factors contributing to the situation which included teachers in public schools have better terms of employment; they are employed by TSC, have job security and are more respected by society. Teachers in public schools do less work compared to their colleagues in private schools and lastly, they are permitted to be members of a workers' union.

Further analysis was done to find out whether the mean difference in professional identity between teachers in public and private primary schools was significant. The subsequent null hypothesis was stated and tested:

H₀₂: There is no significant difference in professional identity between pre-primary and lower primary teachers in public and private primary schools.

The researcher used independent samples t-test to determine the significance of the difference in teachers' professional identity between teachers in public and private schools. Results have been presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Independent Samples t-test of Equality of Means

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Average professional Identity	Equal variances assumed	7.058	.008	.936	218	.351	.075	.0799	-.0828	.232
	Equal variances not assumed			.787	49.5	.435	.075	.095	-.116	.266

As portrayed in Table 4, the difference in professional identity between teachers in public (M=3.25; SD=.566) and teachers in private (M=3.18; SD=.430); $t(218) = .936, p = .035$, two-tailed) schools was not significant. The mean difference in professional identity was .075. The results imply that the variance between the two means were insignificant at the .05 alpha level. The null hypothesis was therefore accepted meaning that the professional identity of teachers in both public and private primary schools was similar.

Malik (2010) as cited in Tabassum and Malik (2017) had compared teachers' professional identity in both public and private schools. Results showed that teachers in the private sector were more trained and more aware of their professional identity. Those findings are contrary to the current study findings which had found that professional identity for teachers in public primary schools was higher than that of their counterparts teaching in private primary schools.

The findings of the present study revealed several contextual factors which affected pre-primary and

lower school teachers' professional identity. These included the employment of only P1 teachers by TSC, employment of pre-primary school teachers by the county government as caregivers instead of teachers, low professional status and stakeholders' negative attitudes. The disclosures are similar to those of Kao and Chen (2017) who established that professional identities of public preschools teachers in Taiwan conducted were affected by contextual factors such as one's background in education, the staffing process, titles held, job assignments and dispositions of shareholders towards the teachers.

Findings of the current study illustrated that professional identity for early year's education teachers in public schools was higher than that of their counterparts in private schools. The results further revealed that the type of school did not influence teachers' professional identity. These results differ from those of Erdiller and Doğan (2015) who examined EYE teachers' professional identity in public and private preschools in Turkey and found that there was a link between type school and preschool teachers professional identity.

CONCLUSION

The study established that pre-primary and lower primary teachers' professional identity was weak due to many factors. With a weak professional identity, teachers' psychological well-being and self-esteem are affected. This leads to low productivity and ineffective implementation of the curriculum.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study made recommendations for various stakeholders using findings obtained from the research.

School Management

It was recommended that management of schools improve pre-primary and lower primary teachers professional identity by appreciating them, involving them in decision making and improving the climate in schools.

County Government

It was suggested that county governments develop the teachers' professional identity by improving their terms of employment. County governments should develop a remuneration policy for the teachers. They were being employed as caregivers instead of teachers and they lacked proper terms and conditions of service when employed. Majority of the teachers felt undervalued and underappreciated by the county government.

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