In-service teachers' perceptions on specific aspects of professionalism in Greece

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we investigate how in-service teachers in Greece perceive the concept of professionalism through four aspects of professionalism that are related to their everyday school context. In particular, this study, based on a questionnaire survey, explores teachers' professional knowledge, their freedom to apply suitable teaching methods, their collaboration with parents, pupils, colleagues, and the taking of responsibility for their pupils' achievements. Our data reveals that in-service teachers not only attribute great importance to these aspects but they are also aware and acknowledge the presence of the aforementioned aspects of professionalism by experiencing them in their everyday teaching practice at school.

KEYWORDS

Professionalism, in-service teachers, pre-primary, primary education, perceptions

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent travail vise à repérer comment les enseignants actifs en Grèce perçoivent le concept du professionnalisme au moyen de quatre aspects du professionnalisme liés au contexte scolaire dans lequel ils travaillent. En fait, la présente étude, basée sur une enquête menée chez des enseignants grecs, met en cause leur formation professionnelle, leur liberté de mettre en place des méthodes didactiques convenables, leur collaboration avec des parents, des apprenants, des collègues ainsi que la prise en leur compte des performances de leurs apprenants. Les résultats de notre recherche dévoilent que les enseignants actifs non seulement s'aperçoivent l'importance de ces aspects particuliers du professionnalisme mais ils leur accordent une place considérable dans la pratique didactique quotidienne.

MOTS-CLÉS

Professionnalisme, enseignants actifs, école maternelle, enseignement primaire, perceptions

INTRODUCTION

A considerable part of research focuses on teachers' professionalism. The widespread international approach to this topic reveals researchers' interests and concerns about teachers' professionalism. It is noteworthy that the study of professionalism is a constant process of exploration and investigation due to its continuous adjustment and readjustment to given contexts and the varying conceptual aspects (e.g: Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Whitty, 2006; Yeom & Ginsburg, 2007; Crook, 2008; Evans, 2008; Fenech, Sumsion & Shepherd, 2010; Willemse et al., 2015; Akiyode, 2016; Ifanti, Fotopoulou & Gaziel, 2017).

The educational sector, on the other hand, is subjected to various and extended changes and challenges, which, in turn, affect school work, pupils and teachers. In this context, teachers are expected not only to cope successfully with demanding educational issues but also to become agents of change (Lortie, 1975; Kelchtermans, 2007; Day & Smethem, 2009).

Several researchers highlight the significant role of numerous, rapid and extended social and economic changes, which intensify teachers' work, whereby teachers are expected to support effectively the changes and become their agents so as to cope successfully with new tasks and demands (e.g.: Smyth et al., 2000; Hargreaves, 2001; Webb et al., 2004; Day, Flores & Viana, 2007). The implementation, adjustment, and successful outcome of these changes require teachers' readiness and expertise in administrating the shifting school environment. Teachers' fulfilment of current requirements and needs are closely related to professionalism.

However, defining teachers' professionalism is not considered an easy task and researchers have stressed the difficulty to define this concept due to inherent complexities, such as incomplete usages and varying meanings (Fox, 1992; Helsby, 1995; Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996; Day, 1999; Evans, 2008). Goodson and Hargreaves (1996, p. 4), in particular, referred to the lack of conceptual clarity relating to the description of teachers' professionalism and delineated the latter as "something which defines and articulates the quality and character of people's actions within that group". Similarly, Day (1999, p. 13) interpreted professionalism as a "consensus of the norms, which may apply to being and behaving as a professional within personal, organizational and broader political conditions".

Increasing attention has also been paid to teachers' autonomy, which considerably contributes to their professionalism. Several studies (e.g.: Little, 1990; Webb, 2002; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Demirkasimoglu, 2010; Charteris & Smardon, 2015) have stressed the importance of teachers' autonomy coupled with teachers' professionalism, while other studies (e.g.: Barton et al., 1994; Helsby, 1995; Day, 2002; Webb et al., 2004) underline the collaboration as an important competence on teachers' professionalism in order to respond effectively to current demands and professional needs.

Additionally, increasing attention has been paid to teachers' responsibility and their professionalism. Teachers' responsibility focuses on their involvement in the wider educational system and recognizes teachers' vital commitment to educational improvement. Part of the educational improvement is related to pupils' achievements as well as to their professional improvement by acquiring professional knowledge and skills (e.g.: Barton et al., 1994; Helsby, 1995; Day, 2002; Webb et al., 2004). Moreover, as Day and Gu (2007) explain, teachers' professionalism is closely related to educational policy reforms, which can directly affect it. Such a situation favours the emergence of teachers' professional knowledge, autonomy and collaboration, which support teachers' work and forge professionalism (Hargreaves, 2000; Sachs, 2000, 2001; Evans, 2008; Charteris & Smardon, 2015).

Research has long supported the concept of teachers' professionalism and tracked this concept through many perspectives that highlight its significance, its multidimensional entity coupled with the difficulty to describe teachers' professionalism as well as the possibility of different approaches to teachers' professionalism (e.g.: Fox, 1992; Helsby, 1995; Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996; Day, 1999; Evans, 2008). However, there is a lack of integration of in-service teachers' perceptions regarding specific aspects of professionalism, which provides an important insight into what is important for teachers and represents their professional views that influence their professionalism at school.

The purpose of this study is to adopt an integrated conceptual approach that incorporates specific aspects of professionalism, i.e.: teachers' professional knowledge, their collaboration, responsibility and autonomy, and aspires to reveal in-service teachers' concepts on these issues. We argue that, through this conceptual approach, we can enhance our understanding of teachers' aspirations on these specific aspects, which are crucial to teachers' professionalism and are grounded on teachers' everyday school reality. Through the investigation of in-service pre-primary and primary teachers' perceptions on the aforementioned specific aspects of professionalism, these characteristics of professionalism arising from the current international literature can help acquire new knowledge about teachers' stances on professionalism, gain insights into the educational improvement process now and in the near future and have useful implications for teachers and teachers' professionalism not only in Greece but in other contexts as well.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to gain a comprehensive overview of the specific aspects and elements that make up this concept, a literature review was conducted on teachers' professionalism. The constitution of teachers' professionalism is intimately associated with four significant aspects: i) teachers' professional knowledge, ii) the degree to which the teacher is allowed to apply suitable teaching methods (autonomy), iii) teachers' responsibility and decisions about pupils and their achievements, iv) teachers' collaboration with colleagues, parents, pupils.

Teachers' professional knowledge

Many studies suggest that an important trait that portrays teachers' professionalism is professional knowledge. Teachers have to cope with a variety of complex and often unpredictable situations, which require a specialised body of knowledge (Furlong et al., 2000; Hargreaves, 2000; Furlong, 2001; Day et al., 2007). Furthermore, teachers' involvement in processes that relate to or enhance professional knowledge has also been indicated as contributing positively to pupils' school achievements (Helsby & McCulloch, 1996; Bolam, 2000; Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

It could be argued that professional knowledge constitutes a major component of the new professionalism and incorporates issues related to pupils' educational experiences and needs. Alongside this approach in the educational section, which focuses on pupils, it is crucial to take into account pupils' cultural diversity and accept the plurality of their views, stances and educational and learning requirements (Hargreaves, 2001). Moreover, professional knowledge is related to the argument of autonomy, which concerns teachers' ability to make their own judgment and have control over classroom practices (Barton et al., 1994; Helsby, 1995; Day, 2002; Webb et al., 2004).

Teachers' autonomy

A prominent feature of teachers' professionalism concerns their autonomy (Barton et al., 1994; Hargreaves, 1994, 2000; Helsby, 1995; Webb et al., 2004). Professional autonomy refers to teachers' control over their practices and provides professional space and conditions for teachers to take responsibility for their practices (Day, 2002; Demirkasimoglu, 2010). It is noted that teachers' professional autonomy reinforces their professionalism, as it encourages teachers to reflect on practices through which they could take into account a deeper understanding of pupils' learning (i.e.: Barton et al., 1994; Helsby, 1995; Day, 2002; Webb et al., 2004; Willemse et al., 2015). The considerable and unquestionable involvement of teachers' autonomy in their professionalism has also greatly contributed to the concept of responsibility (Furlong et al., 2000; Leaton-Gray & Whitty, 2010; Xu, 2015; Reeve & Cheon, 2016).

Teachers' responsibility about pupils

Teachers' competence to act with responsibility is essential for their professionalism (Furlong et al., 2000; Leaton-Gray & Whitty, 2010; Meissel, Parr & Timperley, 2016). Hargreaves and Goodson (1996, p. 20-21) referred to the concept of teachers' professionalism in the light of the complex and postmodern times. More specifically, they proposed that teachers have to display great responsibility for discretionary judgment and educational improvement in issues and concerns related to teaching, learning, curriculum and pupil care. The concept of responsibility, which concerns teachers' professionalism, is closely related to pupils' achievements. This trend is certainly reflected by Davies (2013, p. 69), who argued that "the boundaries of professionalism were widened as teachers saw themselves as capable of making good educational decisions about their pupils' learning and also being trusted to make them".

The aforementioned three dimensions (i.e.: professional knowledge, responsibility and autonomy) appear to be interdependent and to establish the features, nature and composition of teachers' professionalism.

Furlong et al. (2000), as well as Leaton-Gray and Whitty (2010), provide the following statement regarding professionalism: i) The first dimension refers to professional knowledge, which is used in teaching and learning process. ii) The second dimension focuses on teachers' responsibility and authority to improve and achieve pupils' outcomes. The role of teachers' responsibility had already been mentioned as the third trait of professionalism, together with knowledge and autonomy (e.g.: Hoyle & John, 1995). iii) The third dimension refers to teachers' autonomy, which offers teachers the opportunity to have control over their work at schools (Furlong, 2001).

The rationale of the interrelationship of these three dimensions is based on the fact that teachers have to respond effectively to complex and often unpredictable situations, which require a specialised and appropriate body of knowledge in order to be successfully implemented. In turn, autonomy, associated with responsibility, enables the application of teachers' decisions as the coexistence of autonomy and responsibility underpin the main features of the development of professional values (Furlong, 2001, p. 5).

Moreover, the reforms and changes that may affect the nature of these dimensions are the result of marked changes in the nature of teachers' professionalism (Furlong et al., 2000; Smyth et al., 2000; Hargreaves, 2001; Webb et al., 2004; Day et al., 2007).

Teachers' collaboration

Another important trait of teachers' professionalism is intimately associated with collaboration (Little, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994; Nixon, Martin, McKeon & Ranson, 1997; Hargreaves, 2000;

Sachs, 2000, 2001; Day, 2001; Webb et al., 2004; Evans, 2008; Whitty, 2008). Day (2001), in particular, advocates the importance of collaboration and the advantages on educational achievements and teachers' professionalism. The constant changes, reforms and requirements of modern society, which are accompanied by unexpected difficulties and excessive expectations, have resulted in the collaboration of teachers. As teachers faced such reforms in their workplace, they placed greater emphasis on collaboration, in order to be able to overcome and effectively respond to concerns and issues raised by recent reforms (Hargreaves, 1994, 2000; Sachs, 2000, 2001; Evans, 2008; Charteris & Smardon, 2015; Willemse et al., 2015; Van Gasse et al., 2016).

In fact, collaboration nowadays has become more extended and inclusive for teachers and their colleagues as well as parents, pupils and other educational stakeholders. It reinforces the dissemination of information in education, diminishes occupational burnout and pursues teachers' involvement in a lifelong process of learning (Nixon et al., 1997; Whitty, 2008).

Whitty (2006) similarly pointed out the concept of collaboration, in the light of democratic professionalism, which adopts and welcomes a wider sense of collaboration, the development of collaborative cultures. Furthermore, Whitty (2006, p. 14) very fluently and coherently described collaborative cultures concerning teachers within democratic professionalism: "*...the teacher has a responsibility that extends beyond the single classroom – including contributing to the school, other students and the wider educational system, as well as to the collective responsibilities of teachers themselves to a broader social agenda. Indeed, under democratic professionalism, this broader agenda becomes part and parcel of the professional agenda rather than being counterposed to it*".

AIM OF THE STUDY

In this study, we focus on how teachers uphold the aforementioned specific aspects of professionalism (i.e.: teachers' professional knowledge, autonomy, responsibility for pupils' achievements, and collaboration), which are considered as the main characteristics of teachers' professionalism. Although several studies have been conducted on teachers' professionalism so far, not much is known about the extent to which pre-primary and primary in-service teachers perceive these specific aspects of professionalism in practice. More specifically, these aspects are based on teachers' everyday school reality and reflect the concept of professionalism, as integrated in the school environment.

This empirical case study aims at contributing to a better understanding of the extent to which school teachers perceive professionalism associated with the above particular aspects in their everyday school context. It also aims at profiling the in-service teachers in our sample (i.e.: pre-primary and primary teachers), according to their answers, and comparing the answers of pre-primary and primary teachers in order to reveal any convergences or divergences.

This might help in-service teachers to become better aware of the specific aspects and parameters that constitute teachers' professionalism. It also makes it easier for teachers to recognise such parameters or aspects in their work at school. Insights into teachers' perceptions on certain issues of professionalism would provide useful information to educational stakeholders, who are responsible for supporting in-service teachers through educational policy planning. Moreover, the exploration of these specific aspects of professionalism could motivate teachers to enhance their professional entity as teachers as well as their adaption to the current and urgent educational demands and improve their professional skills at school.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Background

The Greek educational system has three consecutive levels, i.e.: primary, secondary and tertiary, and each level provides free education. Regarding school education, primary and secondary education is compulsory for all children (European Commission, 2016). Primary education, which is the main focus of this study, comprises the pre-primary and primary level. Pre-school education is offered in the pre-primary school ("Nipiagogeio"). Pre-primary schools accept children at the age of four and five years; attendance is compulsory only for children at the age of five years (1 year compulsory education) (European Commission, 2016). Pre-school education is followed by primary education ("Demotiko"). Primary education has a six-year duration and includes six grades (European Commission, 2016).

FIGURE 1
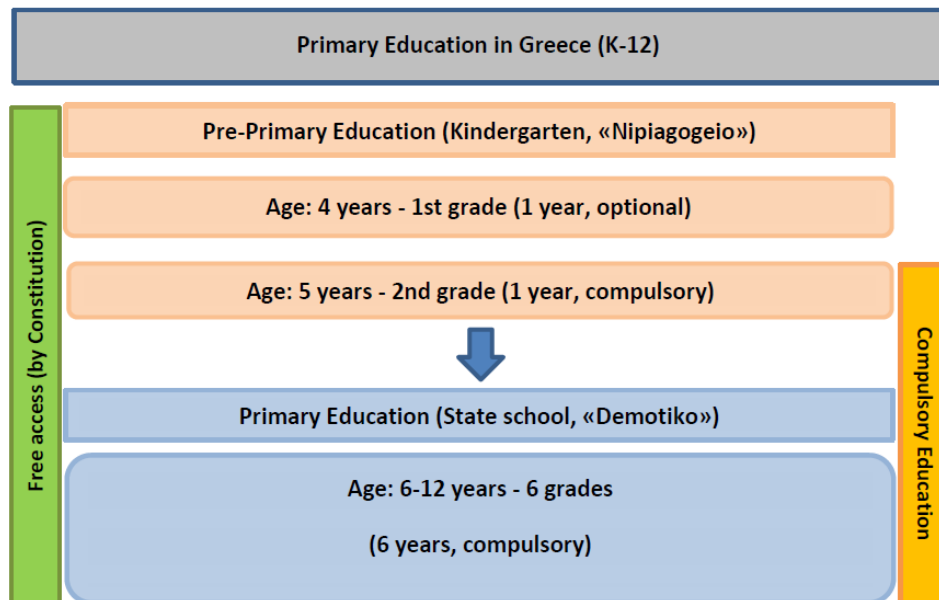
Structure of Primary Education in Greece (K-12)

Making a quick reference to the politics of the Greek education system, it could be argued that it is highly centralised. However, within the framework of the country's adaptation to international standards, some attempts have been made towards decentralisation (European Commission, 2015; 2016). The Ministry of Education has the main responsibility for all levels and sectors of education. This responsibility extends beyond education, including the formulation and implementation of national laws and legislative acts (e.g.: decrees and ministerial decisions), the coordination and evaluation of regional services, coupled with the collective responsibilities of administration and financial support, the approval of curricula (for both primary and secondary education) and the appointment of teaching staff (European Commission, 2016). The curricula are centrally designed and developed by the Ministry of Education and their application is compulsory for all schools in the country (in the private sector as well). They provide the specification of schooling principles and practices as well as the determination of timetables, teaching materials and textbooks for the primary and secondary level through prescribed content.

However, teachers may choose their own teaching methods (European Commission, 2016; Ifanti, 1995, 2007).

As regards the teaching staff, primary education teachers are public servants and are subject to the Employees' Code for matters not regulated by special provisions. Both the appointment of permanent teachers and the provisional employment of substitute teachers are planned and carried out at the central level. Teaching hours at state schools are laid down by regulatory documents, which are common for all teachers throughout the country. Teachers' advancement, promotion or dismissal fall under the regional service councils' authority. Additionally, their salary grids, retirement rights, and statutory leaves are subject to the legal framework governing the entire body of public servants (European Commission, 2016; Katsigianni & Ifanti, 2016).

As far as their initial training is concerned, all in-service teachers in Greece hold a University degree. Pre-primary and primary teachers, in particular, are educated at the University Departments of Early Childhood Education and Primary Education respectively; their undergraduate studies extend to four (4) years (European Commission, 2016).

Sample

The sample consisted of 310 in-service pre-primary and primary school teachers, working in state schools in Achaia, Greece. More specifically, 76 out of 310 were pre-primary teachers and 234 were primary teachers.

Achaia is located in the western part of Greece and is the third largest city in terms of population in the country. Moreover, according to the Hellenic Statistical Authority (2011), the population of pre-primary and primary state school teachers in this region is a representative proportion of the population of teachers in this sector at a national level (1.831 out of 58.891 teachers).

The sample selection was based on the fact that it provides three major advantages; firstly, it consists of teachers whose professional stratification (in terms of gender, years of teaching experience and any further qualification they might have acquired) is representative of Achaia's teacher population (response rate: 19% and 17% respectively of the sampling frame). Secondly, it includes two groups of teachers (pre-primary and primary teachers), who share common professional education, as all they hold a University degree, which is a prerequisite for their work at school. Thirdly, it consists of in-service teachers, who work in state schools; hence, they share common experiences regarding the centralised educational policy. The aforementioned points enabled us to compare the two groups of teachers (i.e.: pre-primary and primary) as to their perceptions on professionalism.

Data collection

Research data were collected using anonymously self-reported questionnaires, addressed to both groups of teachers in our sample. The deployed questionnaire was based on, inspired, and developed by utilising existing literature on teachers' professionalism (i.e.: Barton et al., 1994; Helsby, 1995; Furlong et al., 2000; Whitty, 2001; Day, 2002; Evetts, 2003; Sachs, 2003; Crook, 2008; Evans, 2008; Malm, 2009) coupled with the experience we gained from the pilot study.

Before the questionnaire was conducted, a pilot study was carried out in a small but representative sample, in order to comment on the appropriateness and readability of the questions in relation to the research objectives. We also encouraged respondents not only to complete the questionnaire but also to provide any further comments and suggestions for its

improvement. After minor modifications and changes regarding the ambiguity and readability of the questionnaire, we distributed it to the research population.

The questionnaires were distributed to teachers during school work days. We had initially taken permission by the school principals for conducting the survey.

Data analysis

The structured questionnaire mainly included closed questions covering different aspects relating to teachers' professionalism. The questionnaire had two parts. The first part included general questions about the background variables of the teachers' sample, i.e.: gender, first degree (pre-primary, primary education), additional qualifications (i.e.: a second University degree, Master's degree, Ph.D.), and years of teaching experience.

In the second part of the questionnaire, teachers were asked to present their perceptions on professionalism through four main factors: i) *Teachers' perception on professional knowledge*, ii) *Teachers' freedom to apply suitable teaching methods*, iii) *Teachers' collaboration with parents, pupils, colleagues*, iv) *Teachers' responsibility for pupils' achievements*).

Questions were closed-response and included a number of Likert scale questions that allowed for an exploration of the strength and direction of responses. The questions were developed using a Likert scaling technique and each question had a number of Likert items that could be analysed quantitatively. Specifically, in-service teachers were asked to indicate their degree of importance on a five-point scale (from 1= not at all, to 5= a lot).

All questions were analysed descriptively. A systematic quantitative approach was employed in data analysis and the data were analysed with IBM SPSS (version 20). The comparison between pre-primary and primary school teachers referring to the four questions coupled with the background variables were conducted by Mann-Whitney (U) and Kruskal-Wallis (H) Tests. All findings reported were statistically significant at least at 5%.

RESULTS

Background variables

Regarding the background variables, the percentages approximate the average of the in-service teachers' population. Due to the small ratio of male pre-primary teachers and Ph.D. holders in both groups, we excluded these factors from our analysis. Table 1 provides a descriptive overview of the sample's background variables.

Associated factors of professionalism across pre-primary teachers

According to our data, it is significant to note that, regarding the first parameter of professionalism (*Teachers' perception on professional knowledge*), the majority of pre-primary teachers (48.7%) noted the importance of this aspect.

Regarding the second aspect of professionalism (*Teachers' freedom to apply suitable teaching methods*), a high percentage of pre-primary teachers (56.6%) underlined its importance. This factor did not reveal any statistical correlation compared to the background variables of pre-primary teachers.

The third aspect of teachers' professionalism was related to *Teachers' collaboration with parents, pupils, colleagues*. A high percentage of pre-primary teachers (47.9%) underlined the importance of this aspect of professionalism. However, their answers did not reveal any statistical

correlation with the background variables, according to the Mann-Whitney (U) and Kruskal-Wallis (H) Tests.

The fourth aspect of professionalism (*Teachers' responsibility for their pupils' achievements*) was evaluated as very important issue by most pre-primary teachers (71.1%) in our sample. Comparing this parameter with the background variables, no statistically significant differences were revealed according to the Mann-Whitney (U) and Kruskal-Wallis (H) tests.

TABLE 1

Background characteristics of the sample (%)

In-service teachers		Pre-primary teachers	Primary teachers
		(%)	**(%)**
Gender	Male	.0	29.9
	Female	100	70.1
Additional qualifications	Second University degree	15.8	15
	Master's degree	6.6	6.4
	Ph.D. degree	.0	0.9
Teaching experience (in years)	Less than 5	17.1	10.7
	5+ to 15	42.1	46.6
	15+ to 25	25	27.7
	More than 25	14.5	15

Associated factors of professionalism across primary teachers

According to our data, it is significant to note that regarding the first parameter of professionalism (*Teachers' perception on professional knowledge*), a high percentage of primary teachers (44%) noted its importance. A significant association was found between primary education teachers and the second University degree variable, since teachers who held a second University degree (Mdn=5.00) were more likely to attribute greater importance to this factor than primary teachers holding only a first degree (Mdn=4.00) (U=2748.5, $p<0.05$, r=-0.14).

For the second aspect of professionalism (*Teachers' freedom to apply suitable teaching methods*), a high percentage of primary teachers (43.6%) underlined its importance. Comparing this parameter with the background variables, primary teachers holding a second University degree (Mdn=5.00) tended to evaluate this aspect of professionalism as more important than their counterparts (Mdn=4.00) (U=2794.5, $p<0.05$, r=-0.13).

The third aspect of teachers' professionalism related to *Teachers' collaboration with parents, pupils, colleagues*. A high percentage of primary teachers (56.6%) underlined the importance of this aspect of professionalism. However, their answers did not reveal any statistical correlation with the background variables according to the Mann-Whitney (U) and Kruskal-Wallis (H) tests.

The fourth aspect of professionalism (*Teachers' responsibility for their pupils' achievements*) was evaluated as a very important issue by the majority of primary teachers (67.5%). Comparing this parameter with the background variables, no statistically significant

differences were revealed, according to the Mann-Whitney (U) and Kruskal-Wallis (H) tests. Table 2 shows the responses to the questionnaire.

TABLE 2

Distribution of the responses given by the total sample (%)

Item Question: How do you evaluate each of these specific aspects of professionalism?	Teachers	Not at all (%)	Total	Slightly (%)	Total	Moderate (%)	Total	Fairly (%)	Total	A lot (%)	Total	(Empty) (%)	Total
Teachers' perception on professional knowledge	Pre-primary	.0	.0	2.6	1.3	3.9	8.1	43.4	45.2	48.7	45.2	1.3	.3
	Primary	.0		.9		9.4		45.7		44		.0	
Teachers' allowance to apply suitable teaching methods	Pre-primary	.0	.0	1.3	.6	2.6	7.1	38.2	45.2	56.6	46.8	1.3	.3
	Primary	.0		.4		8.5		47.4		43.6		.0	
Teachers' collaboration with parents, students, colleagues	Pre-primary	.0	.3	.0	1	2.6	7.4	39.5	40.6	56.6	50	1.3	.6
	Primary	.4		1.3		9		41		47.9		.4	
Teachers' responsibility through students' achievements	Pre-primary	.0	.0	1.3	.3	.0	3.9	26.3	27.1	71.1	68.4	1.3	.3
	Primary	.0		.0		5.1		27.4		67.5		.0	

Pre-primary and primary teachers' appraisals of professionalism

Regarding the first parameter of professionalism (*Teachers' perception on professional knowledge*), the answers of both groups of teachers did not reveal statistically significant differences between them, according to the application of the Mann-Whitney (U) Test.

In the second aspect of professionalism (*Teachers' freedom to apply suitable teaching methods*), pre-primary teachers (Mdn=5.00) rated this factor of professionalism higher than primary teachers (Mdn=4.00) in our sample. This difference was statistically significant, according to the Mann-Whitney test (U=7674, $p<0.05$, r=-0.11).

The third aspect of teachers' professionalism was related to *Teachers' collaboration with parents, pupils, colleagues*. In response to the comparison of this aspect of professionalism with the two groups of teachers, the application of the Mann-Whitney (U) and the Kruskal-Wallis (H) tests did not reveal any statistically significant differences.

The fourth aspect of professionalism (*Teachers' responsibility for their pupils' achievements*) did not reveal any statistically significant correlation among the two groups of respondents.

TABLE 3

Descriptive of the responses (Item Question: How do evaluate each of these specific aspects of professionalism?)

Item Question: How do you evaluate each of these specific aspects of professionalism?	Pre-Primary Teachers (N=76)	Primary Teachers (N=234)	Total (N=310)
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Teachers' perception on professional knowledge	4.40 (.69)	4.33(.68)	4.35(.68)
Teachers' allowance to apply suitable teaching methods	4.52(.62)	4.34(.65)	4.39(.65)*
Teachers' collaboration with parents, students, colleagues	4.55(.55)	4.35(.73)	4.40(.70)
Teachers' responsibility through students' achievements	4.69(.54)	4.62(.58)	4.64(.57)

*Responses to the questionnaire $p<.05$

DISCUSSION

This paper investigated in-service teachers' perceptions on four specific aspects of professionalism, i.e.: i) *Teachers' perception on professional knowledge*, ii) *Teachers' freedom to apply suitable teaching methods*, iii) *Teachers' collaboration with parents, pupils and colleagues*, iv) *Teachers' responsibility for their pupils' achievements*, which, according to the current literature, are the milestones of teachers' professionalism.

Based on the results of the statistical analysis, our research findings revealed that teachers understand and recognise the importance of professionalism in their professional field as it refers to teachers' beliefs and actions in school.

Most notably, the first group of teachers (the pre-primary teachers) have the following characteristics: their teaching experience covers the whole ranges of assumed service (0-more than 25 years) and some of them have additional University-level degrees (e.g.: second University degree, Master's degree). They tend to consider each aspect of professionalism as of the highest importance. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the background variables did not appear to have a major impact on their answers.

The group of primary teachers has the same characteristics with the first group regarding the background characteristics and has perceived the four aspects of professionalism as being of highest important or somewhat important. In contrast with pre-primary teachers, the background characteristics of primary teachers appeared to have some impact on their answers. More specifically, a second University degree revealed a significant association with the aspects of *teachers' freedom to apply suitable teaching methods* and *teachers' perception on professional knowledge*, as teachers who had a second University degree tended to place greater importance on the aforementioned aspects of professionalism. However, the other background variables did not appear to have a major impact on their answers.

In order to evaluate further teachers' perceptions on these four aspects of professionalism, a comparison between pre-primary and primary teachers' answers was also carried out. The quantitative analysis mostly underlined that pre-primary and primary teachers' perceptions on these certain aspects of professionalism were not statistically significant.

Teachers' perceptions on professional knowledge were indicated as being of great importance for their professionalism by both groups in the sample. This finding reveals that teachers were aware of the benefits derived from professional knowledge. Additionally, teachers'

efforts to enhance their professional knowledge have been considered as contributing to pupils' achievements and this finding is in accordance with Bolam's (2000) study.

As already mentioned above, primary teachers holding a second University degree were more likely to attribute greater importance to the aspect of *teachers' freedom to apply suitable teaching methods* as well as to their *professional knowledge* than those who did not have one. Such a finding - although derived from a small number of primary teachers - supports teachers' general assumption regarding the importance of professional knowledge as a part of professionalism. Moreover, it could be claimed that it reveals an association between teachers' efforts to enhance their professional background by acquiring a second degree. A second explanation of this finding might be connected with primary teachers' daily responsibilities, which should be accomplished according to the pupils' age, as primary pupils have different cognitive and learning requirements (Schneider & Kipp, 2015).

The affirmed impact of *Teachers' freedom to apply suitable teaching methods*, which referred to teachers' autonomy, was supported by the majority of pre-primary and primary teachers in our sample. Teachers' ability to make judgements and have control over classroom practices in order to improve pupils' outcomes has been also underlined as a main feature of professionalism in other studies (Helsby, 1995; Day, 2002; Sachs, 2003; Webb et al., 2004; Xu, 2015; Papadimitriou, Karantzis & Ifanti, 2016; Reeve & Cheon, 2016). This finding validates the significance of this aspect of professionalism and corroborates the majority of teachers' stances regarding their freedom to apply suitable teaching methods.

In parallel, pre-primary teachers are more likely to attribute greater importance to this aspect of professionalism, as compared to primary teachers. This finding could be attributed to the pre-primary curriculum, which is less prescriptive than the primary curriculum, and consequently provides teachers with a range of opportunities to plan and explore new, suitable and appropriate approaches regarding their pupils' educational needs.

The statistical analysis shows the existing differentiation between pre-primary and primary curricula regarding their awareness of autonomy. Therefore, this finding confirms pre-primary and primary teachers' perceptions concerning the importance they attribute to *teachers' freedom to apply suitable teaching methods*. Such a finding validates the significance attributed by our sample to this aspect of professionalism.

Moreover, pre-primary and primary school teachers highly evaluated the contribution of collaboration to the enhancement of their professionalism, and their answers did not reveal any statistical correlation with the background variables. This indicates that the collaboration with colleagues, parents and pupils plays an important role in the teachers' sense of professionalism. Some other studies also highlight the crucial contribution of collaboration to the enhancement of teachers' professionalism (Sachs, 2000, 2001; Evans, 2008; Van Gasse et al., 2016).

Furthermore, Webb et al. (2004, p. 94) have argued that teachers gain numerous advantages through collaboration, such as moral support, sharing workloads, eliminating duplication and increasing collective confidence regarding innovations. Such a description of collaboration forges teachers' sense of professional development and consequently affects their understanding of professionalism. Nixon et al. (1997, p. 16) had also mentioned that the factor of collaboration is closely related to teachers' professionalism.

The distinctive feature of professionalism related to *teachers' responsibility for pupils' achievements* was ranked as a very important dimension of professionalism by the majority of both groups of respondents in our study, and the answers among two groups did not differ significantly. These results are in line with other studies as well, which underline that teachers' efforts to care about their pupils' achievements are inherent features of the formation and

identification of professionalism (e.g.: Day, 1999; Bredeson & Johansson, 2000; Antoniou & Kyriakides, 2013). Moreover, teachers' substantial contribution to pupils' development has also been considered as a vital feature for improving the quality of teachers' professionalism (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000; Malm, 2009; Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2011; Meissel et al., 2016).

Summing up, it can be pointed out that two main findings emerged from our data analysis. Firstly, the absence of a correlation between pre-primary and primary teachers' answers and their background variables. Teachers in our sample attributed great importance to each parameter of professionalism despite their background variables. Such a position, which did not reveal any statistical correlation with other variables, indicates that these results are consistent among teachers. Overall, this may underline the existence of a powerful educational staff that invests in its professional growth independently of the background variables.

Secondly, both pre-primary and primary teachers in our sample were found to highlight the four specific aspects of professionalism that we investigated in this piece of work regardless of the level of education they were teaching.

These similarities in answers may be attributed to teachers' undergraduate studies, which offer a wide range of theoretical background bounded with practical experience. Furthermore, both groups in our sample appeared eager to achieve pupils' educational performance and to generate professional growth regardless of the centralised educational system of the country.

CONCLUSION

The paper investigates the specific aspects of professionalism for in-service pre-primary and primary teachers in Greece. The analysis of fieldwork data highlights two main concluding remarks regarding in-service teachers and their professionalism.

The first is that pre-primary and primary teachers tend to attribute great importance to these aspects of professionalism, independently of the background variables of the study. This absence of association could indicate that each aspect of professionalism was ranked as very important by the majority of teachers independently of their background characteristics. Taking into account the findings of other studies regarding teachers' understanding of the four aspects of professionalism, our data can contribute to this field through a broader international perspective. (e.g.: Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996; Bolam, 2000; Bredeson & Johansson, 2000; Day, 2002; Webb et al., 2004; Antoniou & Kyriakides, 2013; Ifanti et al., 2017). Although Greek teachers' contextual working environment still remains rather restrictive and centralised, however, it can be pointed out that teachers' perceptions of professionalism are in line with current literature on the topic, whereas the centralised working environment seems not to negatively affect their willingness or motivation regarding professionalism.

Our research data could thus enrich our understanding for teachers' professionalism not only in Greece but also in other similar educational contexts. Nevertheless, future research on these specific aspects of teachers' professionalism might be more enlightening. In conclusion, this study sheds light into the complicated nature of professionalism by investigating four specific aspects of teachers' professionalism. Greek teachers share common perceptions about professionalism and the answers of the two sample groups illustrate teachers' thoughts about professionalism. It also provides important implications for a further investigation of teachers' professionalism in a wider context, thus contributing to the current discourse about teachers' professionalism at schools.

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