

Emergence and dimensions of undergraduate-students' perceptions of themselves as teachers through teaching practice: an exploratory study

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the empirical data of a broader study concerning the views of the undergraduate students of the Department of Educational Science and Early Childhood Education (DESECE) of the University of Patras, Greece (n=144) in regards to how they perceive and describe themselves as teachers during their teaching practice at schools. The paper analyzes the challenges that the students have dealt with, through an experiential approach of the teacher's profession, which appears to influence and shape their perception as teachers. The findings span nine axes and the analysis further indicates that these axes relate with both how closely the undergraduate students perceive themselves as teachers and how the teaching practice itself influences and contributes to how the undergraduate students perceive themselves as teachers.

KEYWORDS

Teaching practice, teachers, undergraduate students, exploratory study

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se veut un examen des données empiriques collectées dans le cadre d'une enquête centrée sur la façon dont les étudiants de cycle universitaire perçoivent leur rôle de futurs éducateurs. Le corpus porte sur 114 étudiants de la Faculté des Sciences de l'Éducation et de l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance de l'Université de Patras en Grèce. Ces étudiants ont été interviewés au cours de leur stage en enseignement où on leur a demandé de partager leur expérience et la façon dont ils perçoivent leur rôle en tant qu'éducateurs. À travers une approche empirique, on a voulu focaliser sur l'expérience du stage en enseignement, sur l'auto-perception de l'étudiant-enseignant et sur les difficultés auxquelles ce dernier fait souvent face en cours de stage. Nos résultats s'articulent autour de neuf axes différents qui se lient à l'image de l'éducateur telle que forgée par l'étudiant soi-même et à travers la pratique du stage de formation.

MOTS-CLÉS

Stage en enseignement, éducateur, étudiants de cycle universitaire, étude exploratoire

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teaching practice constitutes an indispensable part of undergraduate study programmes for undergraduate students, while its contribution to the future professional course of an educator is undeniable (Featherstone, 1993; Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). Teaching practice makes it possible for undergraduate students to acquaint themselves with the teaching procedures through a “learning by doing” process, to familiarize themselves with the school context and the real circumstances comprising it and comprehend their role and their responsibilities as educators (Becker, Waldis, & Staub, 2019; Meyer, 2009; Timostsuk & Ugaste, 2010; Yuan & Lee, 2016).

In an effort to approach teaching practice in the Greek reality from a conceptual point of view, setting aside any potential variations in the programmes of study in educational sciences, it becomes clear that a blend of theory and practice is attempted in regard to teaching practice (Becker et al., 2019; Hascher, Cocard, & Moser, 2004). In particular, undergraduate students are called upon to function, compose and demonstrate their pedagogical skills drawing on the academic knowledge they have acquired during their studies (Korthagen, 2010; Timostsuk & Ugaste, 2010; Yuan & Lee, 2016).

The importance of teaching practice, however, is not limited in the teaching practice itself, which beyond doubt constitutes its first and foremost mission, but it also provides the right framework for the vocational preparation of student-educators, it aims at bringing them in contact with the teaching practice and activity and it contributes to their professional education and training (Meyer, 2009). In particular, the completion of the teaching practice is promoted by means of encouraging complex forms of thought, aiming to render undergraduate students properly prepared so as to respond efficiently to the real class conditions they will have to face up to in the future (Hacher et al., 2004; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005; Yuan & Lee, 2016). Through their teaching practice, students are required to function as educators in the school classroom, which makes them start perceiving themselves as educators, thus building up and developing their professional identity (Day & Leitch, 2001; Hong, 2010; Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2010; Kaldi, 2009; Sutherland et al., 2010). Although the notion of professional identity it is not part of the current research, nevertheless it is crucial to mention a few as this constitutes the next step which will be helpful in a future consideration, as it includes the process from the undergraduate students’ perceptions of themselves as teachers to their professional identity. It should be noted that undergraduate students themselves underscore the significant contribution of teaching practice to their overall training, their professional development as well as the formulation of their professional identity as potential educators (Fukkink et al., 2019; Girvan, Conneely, & Tangney, 2016; Gore et al., 2017; Sutherland et al., 2010). Therefore, it is an important stage with an exceptional appeal and impact on the professional process for future educators, on the perception of themselves as educators and, by extension, on formulating their professional identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2010; Kaldi, 2009).

The role which teaching practice plays in approaching the professional identity of the educator is fully understood in the light of the fact that it is founded on a set of beliefs and perceptions about the profession, already formulated by an individual (Meyer, 2009; Yuan & Lee, 2016). In addition, according to Flores and Day (2006), building an identity is defined as an ongoing and dynamic process, which involves finding meaning in and redefining the values and experiences of an individual. Furthermore, the educator’s identity is to a great extent associated with the personality of an individual and it concerns how each individual perceives the concept of an educator as such as well as how they perceive themselves as educators (Meyer, 2009; Yuan & Lee, 2016). Consequently, the educational experiences, the knowledge and in general the

personal involvement and action of undergraduate students during their teaching practice are key parameters which promote, formulate and give meaning to their perception of their professional self in the course of their academic studies. For undergraduate students, therefore, teaching practice plays an exceptional role in the professional identity of the future educator and is inextricably linked with its formulation (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Yuan & Lee, 2016).

This paper, which is part of a wider study aiming to examine the opinions of students as regards the organisation and the function of teaching practice, presents the empirical data recording the views and experiences gained by undergraduate students of the Department of Educational Science and Early Childhood Education of the University of Patras, Greece (hereafter called: DESECE) in relation to teaching practice. It is aimed at investigating how DESECE undergraduate students perceive their teaching self through their teaching practice. More specifically, the aim was (a) to explore how participating undergraduate students through teaching practice and by acting themselves as teachers perceive and approach the process of teaching and learning procedure and activity in kindergarten as well as (b) the role of themselves as educators and by extension their own professional identity.

Despite a growing body of research focusing on the teaching practice and on undergraduate students' perceptions, this paper, making a step toward documenting undergraduate students' views, investigates undergraduate students' concerns and perceptions about the way they perceive themselves as educators during teaching practice. The focal point of this paper is the question investigating the views, experiences, thoughts and concerns which participants have in relation to the teaching practice in the kindergarten.

Insights into undergraduate students' perceptions on their reflections through teaching practice could provide useful and fruitful information with regard to the design or the enhancement of the offered undergraduate programme of studies. Moreover, the exploration of the derived aspects and perceptions of undergraduate students' would inspire them to reflect on themselves as future in-service teachers and this reflection could lead to a further motivation and improvement of their current and future teaching self and consequently their professional identity. The present paper is a case study, and as such it is subject to the restrictions and limitations pertaining to any possible generalization of findings. On the grounds of research ethics it is deemed fit to point out the limitation on the findings of this research. Hence, it could be stated that the findings can only be generalised depending on the degree of their value as research tools for a comparative analysis of findings of other research studying similar thematic objectives to the present study.

This paper is organized into four sections. The Theoretical Framework of the study followed by the aim of the study and the research question which are already presented first. Next, the Methodological Framework is presenting, which consists of Context and Participants of the study as well as the Data Collection Methods. The last two sections outline the Research results and the Discussion and Conclusion by providing implications for undergraduate students' identity in teaching practice context.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Context and Participants

The undergraduate programme of studies of the DESECE, like all corresponding Education Departments in Greek Universities, leads to a Bachelor Degree. Studies last 8 semesters (4 years)

and upon completion of the studies, graduates can work in public or private kindergarten or other structures of pre-school education.

Teaching practice constitutes a core element of the undergraduate curriculum of DESECE, aiming to provide graduates with sound scientific and vocational training. This teaching practice has a compulsory character in DESECE and through it the professional competence of students is attested to a great extent (Study Guide DESECE, 2014¹, p. 14). The teaching practice during the third year of studies, which is the focus of the present study, spans two (2) semesters (5th and 6th semester). Its objective is defined “as an in-depth approach of pre-school educational and teaching process in the light of connecting theory and practice” (ibid., pp. 83-84).

The sample of this research consists of third year undergraduate students of the DESECE. The sample was selected on the grounds that third year students are capable of engaging in designing and applying of educational activities in kindergarten and at the same time they have completed a substantial part of their theoretical courses. Furthermore, they have already completed the required part of the teaching practice in their second year of their studies, which entails educational experience through the process of observation. As a result, they have adequate experience and knowledge so as to express their views about the teaching practice and their attendance in the kindergarten as educators. During the winter and spring semesters, the undergraduate students visit in pairs public kindergartens in the broader area of the Achaia prefecture, where DESECE is located. In each visit, they perform as educators, taking turns with their partner, teaching throughout the daily program of the kindergarten, while their partner serves as an assistant.

Regarding the demographics of the 144 undergraduate students who participated in the study; almost all the participants of the study were female (Male: 1.4%, Female: 98.6%); consequently, the gender factor was not examined. Similarly, all the participants of the study (100%) were in their third year of their studies. Therefore, this specific demographic characteristic (year of studies) was not utilized in any further processing.

Data collection

The data for the study was collected through an anonymous written questionnaire with open and closed questions. The selection of the anonymous questionnaire as a methodology tool was made since the anonymity allows for free expression, while it is deemed appropriate for the collection of data from a large number of participants responding to the same topics (Field & Hole, 2010).

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. In the first one, students were asked to declare their gender and year of studies (in case a participant is delayed in their studies). In the second part, there were questions focusing on the organisation and the function of the teaching practice, as well as on recording experiences, thoughts and concerns which the students got from their involvement in the teaching practice.

The construction of the questionnaire was founded around the basic objectives and targets of DESECE as regards the teaching practice. At the same time, findings of related studies investigating the role of teaching practice in the educator’s perceptions as teachers, conducted in Greece and internationally, were taken into account (Beijaard et al., 2004; Fotopoulou & Ifanti, 2011; Yuan & Lee, 2016).

¹ The study was carried out during the academic year of 2014-15 therefore data is used from the Study Guide of the correspondent academic year. The basic goals have not been affected by changes made in the Study Guide as regards the teaching practice.

At first, a pilot questionnaire was piloted and monitored on a sample of undergraduate students before shaping its final form. The revised questionnaire was distributed during the academic year 2014-2015, at the end of the semester, when the undergraduate students had completed their obligations in regards with their teaching practice. Answering the questionnaire was completely optional. In total, n=144 questionnaires were returned (response rate: 66%, on a total 219 registered students for the academic year 2014-2015) and all of them were answered in full (response rate 100%). The questionnaire excerpt that this paper is based on is presented in the Appendix.

RESULTS

The question prompt has been phrased as an open-ended one to encourage rich and unconstrained responses by the undergraduate students, capturing their experiences, thoughts and concerns in relation to teaching practice. The research question for the study was phrased as follows: “Outline thoughts, concerns, experiences which you got in the context of your teaching practice and which are pertinent to your performance as educators or/and your overall educational activity”.

The methodology used in processing the collected data was context analysis on a phrase level. This particular method allows for a systematic analysis of the text and can lead to a methodical coding of the written speech, in our case the written responses (Field & Hole, 2010). In order to analyze the data, there were no predefined axes; instead, they emerged after the quality analysis of the collected responses. These emerging axes are related to the following:

1. Undergraduate students as educators
2. Teaching and didactic activity in the kindergarten
3. Collaboration with the in-service kindergarten teacher
4. Interaction and communication with the pupils
5. Familiarization with the place and the operation of the kindergarten
6. Experience acquisition
7. Connecting theory and practice
8. The choice of the profession
9. Getting to know the profession of a kindergarten teacher

There follows the analysis and the definition of each identified axis. It should be noted that, in specific cases, there were subdimensions identified, which are furthered analyzed in the next, since they interpret the context more extensively and can draw attention to varied viewpoints of the related axes.

1) Undergraduate students as educators

A number of participants (n=27) concentrate on their capability to perform as educators themselves and take on the duties and the responsibilities of the kindergartens' in-service teachers. The responses of the sample related to this specific axis were varied, which allowed further categorization.

1a) Through being in charge and undertaking initiatives

In seven (7) of these responses the concept of being in charge is stressed by respondents as regards administering the organization and the operation of the educational program, while they

associate the opportunity to take on initiatives with the performance of themselves as educators at the kindergarten:

“[...] the freedom to organize activities for the daily program [...]” (resp. 11)

“[...] the whole process was important, from organizing and planning the activities to being in charge for the whole class. We were given the opportunity, in the now, to become kindergarten teachers once a week [...]” (resp. 53)

“I liked the fact that we do some lessons like when we will be kindergarten teachers ourselves [...]” (resp. 74)

“[...] we assume the role of the kindergarten teacher and we carry out our own activities [...]” (resp. 78)

“[...] the capacity for us to teach some subject units [...]” (resp. 82)

“[...] the fact that the daily program was all mine and I was responsible for it, I took on responsibilities on a weekly basis and I was trying to find interesting activities [...]” (resp. 94).

1b) Through the effort

In addition, in two (2) responses, the participants point out the effort and the preparation they make in order to meet the tasks assigned to them as best they can:

“[...] my effort to become a good educator [...]” (resp. 23)

“[...] we were preparing properly for teaching [...]” (resp. 119).

1c) Perception of their capacities as educators

Finally, in one (1) response, it is mentioned that through the teaching practice in kindergarten they identify their capacities as educators:

“[...] we tried our capabilities as teachers [...]” (resp. 43).

2) Teaching and didactic activity in the kindergarten

A large number of participant students (n=45) puts special emphasis on the opportunity offered to them to carry out educational activities in kindergarten or through organizing and operating the teaching program in general. The responses of the sample related to this specific axis were varied, which allowed further categorization.

2a) Teaching and didactic activity: planning and implementation

It is worth noting is that some of the undergraduate students (n=12) in our sample tend to distinguish activities mainly in two parts. The first one is found under the terms *preparation, design, and creation* and refers to the preparatory stage of an activity. The second part, described as *presentation, execution and implementation*, refers to the application of the activity in the kindergarten. In several cases, these two parts of the activity are presented as a sequence of steps:

“the possibility of creation and implementation of activities” (resp. 18)

“designing the activities and carrying them out” (resp. 71)

“I could go to the kindergarten and put into practice my activities. It was really pleasant” (resp. 76)

“to prepare the activities and present to the children” (resp. 126)

“designing the activities was a really nice procedure but the best was the implementation of the activities in class with the children” (resp. 141)

“that I could carry out successfully an activity and in general I could design an entire daily program” (resp. 142).

In other cases, students focus on one of the two parts:

“[...] the activities we created for the children [...]” (found in 3 responses: 44, 113, 128)

“[...] I liked the hour that we carried out the activity [...]” (found in 2 responses: 38, 110).

It is interesting that in a student's response there is a reference to a potential inability to correlate between designing an activity and implementing it:

“[...] I realised that things which look nice during designing them may not be appropriate for a given class [...]” (resp. 68).

2b) Teaching and didactic activity: knowledge transfer

An important condition in applying activities for some participants in the study is knowledge transfer to pupils (n=5). For instance:

“[...] we teach them useful things [...]” (resp. 24)

“[...] the pleasing feeling that you teach children new things [...]” (resp. 139).

In addition, some participants highlight their personal contribution to knowledge transfer or learning development of students (n=5):

“[...] in some cases, I saw the development of the children [...]” (resp. 43)

“[...] I was part of the build-up of children in knowledge and personality issues [...]” (resp. 69).

2c) Teaching and didactic activity: feedback

There are five (5) responses in which the value of feedback in designing and implementing activities is pointed out. For instance:

“[...] their reactions (of students) in the course of teaching [...]” (resp. 33)

“[...] the implementation of the activity and see what result it had [...]” (resp. 36).

An additional criterion of feedback for participants related to the organisation and the planning of their activities is the satisfaction and the enthusiasm of pupils (n=10). Some characteristic examples are:

“[...] children's delight who accept our activities thus achieving our goals [...]” (resp. 19)

“[...] we worked together with the children and we successfully implemented our activities [...]” (resp. 37)

“[...] what I liked more was that we organized and implemented the activities in the kindergarten and we saw how happy the children were with them [...]” (resp. 62)

“[...] the preparation of the activities so that children will feel pleasure and satisfaction [...]” (resp. 99)

“[...] the good result and the satisfaction I got from the activities [...]” (resp. 116)

“[...] the best part in the teaching practice program was when the children enjoyed the activities [...]” (resp. 121)

“[...] to prepare activities and present them to the children while they get enthused with them [...]” (resp. 126).

Some participants refer to the successful outcome of their activities in class without, however, further justifying their responses (n=8). For instance:

“[...] the completion of my activities with success [...]” (resp. 5)

“[...] the accomplishment of my activities without any problem [...]” (resp. 19).

3) Collaboration with the kindergarten in-service teacher

The kindergarten in-service teacher appears to play a significant role in the teaching practice program for undergraduate students. The participants underline the positive reinforcement, the facilitating role and the collaboration they had (n=12). Cases in point are the following examples:

“[...] the cooperation with the kindergarten teacher was what I liked most of all. She was ready to help us whenever we had a difficulty but also to help us figure out answers to potential queries [...]” (resp. 17)

“[...] we learned things from the kindergarten teacher, which will prove useful in further stages [...]” (resp. 39)

“[...] the kindergarten teacher, who was really nice with us and she helped and advised us all the time [...]” (resp. 64)

“[...] we were helped a lot by the kindergarten teachers, who offered us a lot of their experience and their knowledge [...]” (resp. 107)

“[...] the flawless cooperation and support from the kindergarten teacher [...]” (resp. 140)

“[...] the excellent cooperation with the kindergarten teacher [...]” (resp. 105, 108, 144).

As regards the role of the kindergarten in-service teacher, the participants observe the way she functions and try to function similarly (n=2):

“[...] we were helped to learn things, as the kindergarten teacher did [...]” (resp. 30)

“[...] the observation of the kindergarten teacher’s way of teaching, we observe how the kindergarten teacher talks and behaves with the children [...]” (resp. 74).

In one case the importance of satisfaction with the outcome of the activity not only on the part of the pupils but also of the kindergarten in-service teacher is pointed out:

“[...] the satisfaction of the children with the activities but also of the kindergarten teachers [...]” (resp. 30).

4) Interaction and communication with the pupils

A great number of participants (n=51) place special emphasis on communicating, interacting and approaching pupils. For instance:

“[...] the contact with the pupils/the children [...]” (found in 26 resp.)

“[...] interaction with the children [...]” (resp. 30, 63, 70, 73)

The communication with the pupils causes surprise or admiration to participants (n=4). For instance:

“[...] the way children of these ages function. So impulsively, so innocently that they impel you to give all of yourself [...]” (resp. 16)

“[...] contact with children and the fact that they are clever and more cunning than it is believed for their age [...]” (resp. 75)

“[...] I was impressed by the ideas the children had about different issues and by their knowledge and spontaneity [...]” (resp. 79).

A participant's response is interesting in that there is an association expressed between communicating with children and choosing her future profession:

"[...] the direct contact with children was a significant factor in verifying the choice of this profession [...]" (resp. 52).

5) Familiarization with the place and the operation of the kindergarten

A small number of students referred to their getting acquainted with the place and generally the operation of the kindergarten (n=5). For instance:

"[...] the fact that I saw how a kindergarten works in practice [...]" (resp. 41)

"[...] I had the opportunity to integrate even for a while in the daily routine of the kindergarten both through the activities or the teaching and through observation [...]" (resp. 117).

6) Experience acquisition

Gaining experience constitutes an important dimension of the undergraduate students' teaching practice (n=17). For example:

"[...] the experience I got with the children in class [...]" (resp. 1, 130)

"[...] the experience that I gained was extremely useful [...]" (resp. 61, 106, 122, 140)

"[...] I liked more the experience I got with the profession in general [...]" (resp. 72)

"[...] the teaching practice represented the first real experience in the kindergarten [...]" (resp. 106)

"[...] we got a little teaching experience [...]" (resp. 107)

"[...] I got experience with the children and I was able to observe how they "function" in the context of the class [...]" (resp. 123).

7) Connecting theory and practice

Some of the participants (n=6) refer to the connection between theory and practice. Their responses indicate that they are aware of the importance of this connection or that they seek to connect these two elements when planning and implementing their activities. For instance:

"[...] I liked the fact that I got ideas from the course and I put them into practice in the context of the kindergarten [...]" (resp. 63)

"[...] I liked it that I had to apply as much as possible what I had learned theoretically [...]" (resp. 103)

"[...] we had the opportunity to apply what we had been taught on a theoretical level [...]" (resp. 136)

"[...] the direct correlation between theory and practice [...]" (resp. 143).

8) The choice of the profession

Through the teaching practice, the undergraduate students familiarize with the profession of the kindergarten teacher, which is the subject of their studies and they corroborate or not their choice in regards with the studies they pursue. In five (5) responses, their participation in the teaching practice reinforces their choice of the specific profession. Some examples of responses:

"[...] what I liked most was that I realised that my choice for this course of studies was in fact correct, as I saw how much I like what I am doing [...]" (resp. 22).

"[...] my choice of profession was confirmed [...]" (resp. 69)

"[...] I have no doubt that I want to be a kindergarten teacher [...]" (resp. 134).

By contrast, in three (3) other responses, some skepticism is expressed in regards to the chosen field of studies, namely whether they truly wish to follow this profession:

“[...] you realise whether you really want to go in for this profession in the future [...]” (resp. 107)

“[...] we realised in practice if we like the profession of a kindergarten teacher or not [...]” (resp. 88)

“[...] if it was indeed what we want to follow [...]” (resp. 120).

Finally, in one (1) response, the participation to the teaching practice leads to the reconsideration of the initial stance of the undergraduate student in relation to the choice of the future profession:

“[...] I started to like the idea of becoming a kindergarten teacher [...]” (resp. 49).

9) Getting to know the profession of a kindergarten teacher

In twelve (12) responses, the participants of the study underline the contribution of the teaching practice in that they have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with their future profession. For instance:

“[...] we were given the opportunity to come in direct contact with the profession [...]” (resp. 20)

“[...] it prepped us for our future work [...]” (resp. 80)

“[...] as a result, we realistically saw what the profession of a kindergarten teacher is like [...]” (resp. 82)

“[...] the preparation for our future profession [...]” (resp. 99)

“[...] we came to know in the most direct way the profession we chose [...]” (resp. 104).

Furthermore, in four additional responses the participants highlight that the teaching practice helps them realize the potential difficulties that they may be required to deal with in the future:

“[...] I experienced real life situations which I may face up to in the future [...]” (resp. 15)

“[...] we dealt with realistic conditions of the profession [...]” (resp. 39)

“[...] we were given the chance to be in real work conditions [...]” (resp. 88)

“[...] in the teaching practice we see what difficulties we may deal with [...]” (resp. 120).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The teaching practice in education sciences, through its definitive role offers undergraduate students the ability to function as educators themselves in a real school environment and have an experiential approach towards the profession of a teacher, which they aim to enter. The correlation between teaching practice and the teaching profession is pointed out for that matter by a large percentage of the responses collected in this study. As participants characteristically point out, through this teaching practice they are given the opportunity to comprehend in action their field of studies and get to know better the profession they intend to pursue. This is a point of view that emerges in many other studies as well: Cheng, Tang, & Cheng, 2016; Hong, 2010; Poulou, 2007; Sutherland et al., 2010).

The analysis of the questionnaire responses reveals that the DESECE undergraduate students appear to comprehend the diverse dimensions comprising the kindergarten teacher

profession, which they identify, for the most part, as relating to the educational, teaching and in general the pedagogical skills one must possess.

This finding is deemed as exceptionally valuable for two main reasons. First, it highlights the positive involvement of the teaching practice in acquainting students with the profession. This finding has also been highlighted by Flores 2015. Second, the study participants' responses reveal that they strive to efficiently fulfill the educator's role assigned to them through the teaching practice. In other words, they seek to gain, improve and build the skills which they value as necessary for an educator to have. Furthermore, as regards the educator's role, several participants emphasized that taking responsibilities and initiatives on their part constitutes a key concept through which they approach the educator's profession and, by extension, their own identity as educators. This is in alignment with other studies (Kaldi, 2009; Ng, Nicholas, & Williams, 2010).

Teaching practice itself is also emerging as an important reference point for several participants of the study; this is described not as simple knowledge transfer but as a process requiring critical thinking and critical approach as regards its planning and its organisation. At the same time, as regards the efficiency of their teaching skills, they tend to be in a continuous contemplation lest they should redefine their teaching approach checking for potential improvements or adjustments. In many cases, improving their teaching approach is synonymous with improvement on themselves as educators. This finding concerning the process of approaching the teaching practice critically is indicative of the dynamic quality of themselves as teachers, which is constantly remodeled with meaning derived from the individual's experiences. In a parallel manner, this attitude of students towards improving themselves reveals their perception of their professional self, while the fact that the total amount of experience which mostly comes from their involvement in the teaching practice attests to the value of this practice in forging their professional identity. Again, this is in alignment with the literature (Kaldi, 2009; Meyer, 2009; Ng et al., 2010).

The aforementioned finding, however, needs to be further explored in order to understand the way undergraduate students approach the teaching skill, that is either as a professional feature (skill), which is seen as indispensable for them to have as future educators, directly related to the pupils and the acquisition of knowledge, or as sufficient competence and cognitive background which they possess, oriented towards didactics training.

The kindergarten pupils seem to play a special role for undergraduate students in acquainting the latter with the educator's profession. The participants of this study associate their educational approach with pupils. In several cases pupils' reactions – mainly through the expression of feelings of satisfaction and enthusiasm – function as feedback pointers for educational activities that the undergraduate students implemented. There is a twofold meaning in this finding: on the one hand, it accounts for the interaction between pupils and educators and on the other hand, it reveals the presence and involvement of emotions in the educational practice of the educator, and in the case of this study, of the undergraduate students. The effort to focus on the emotional experiences of students may prove a valuable tool in understanding the multifaceted character of educating educators as well as understanding the process of becoming an educator (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; White, 2009; Yuan & Lee, 2016).

Equally important is the presence and the contribution of the kindergarten in-service teacher in the context of the teaching practice. It appears that the kindergarten teacher is a reference model for the undergraduate students either directly, through the contact and the communication, or indirectly by observing the way the teacher functions. Several students put emphasis on the communication and the collaboration they had, as well as on the teachers' role,

which was – for the most part – advisory and guiding the undergraduate students. Communication with the kindergarten in-service teacher was oriented towards issues related to educational practice and teaching approach as they emerged in the course of the daily program. The students' endeavor to draw upon the kindergarten in-service teachers' experience reveals their own personal desire for development which indicates the constant process of reformation which their professional teaching self undergoes.

Another dimension is related to students' viewpoints as regards connecting theory and practice. Their endeavor to make good use in practice what they had learned on a theoretical level or to attempt to connect theory and practice was highlighted. Although their responses need further exploration as to whether they refer to specific course subjects which helped them, the finding in itself is of great importance since it reveals fulfillment of a basic purpose of the teaching practice in connecting theory and practice within the school context and it is in alignment with the findings of related studies (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014; Meyer, 2009).

In conclusion, our study reveals that through the process of the teaching practice, students approach the educational operation and they gain experience, which formulates their perceptions of themselves as teachers. In addition, they familiarize with the profession of the kindergarten teacher and comprehend the diverse dimensions comprising and defining it. Their endeavor to rise satisfactory to their teaching and educating responsibilities in the context of the kindergarten contributes to the essential perception of the educator's profession, thus approaching the formulation of their own professional entity and, by extension, initiating molding their professional identity.

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APPENDIX

**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION**

**DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF TEACHING ACTIVITIES IN
KINDERGARTEN I**

ACADEMIC YEAR 2014-2015

Gender *Male* *Female*

Year of studies *3rd* *Other (please notify):*

- Was the Department of Educational Science and Early Childhood Education (DESECE) the first choice of your studies?

Yes

No

- Are you wishing to follow this job in the future?

Yes

No

- Do you think that through teaching practice are you getting acquainted with kindergarten's profession?

Yes

No

[...]

Outline thoughts, concerns, experiences which you got in the context of your teaching practice and which are pertinent to your performance as educators or/and your overall educational activity.

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[...]