

TEACHER CANDIDATES' ATTITUDE TOWARDS INTEGRATING NURSERY EDUCATION INTO THE NATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract: Government Emergency Ordinance no. 100/2021 has brought forth changes in the legislative framework regarding nursery education legislation in Romania, integrating formal activities for children under three years old into the educational system. This amendment has impacted not only those directly involved but also teacher candidates. This study presents the results of an empirical research, revealing the impact of the changes in the system on the career aspirations of teacher candidates. In our research we used a self-designed questionnaire to assess our sample of 340 teacher candidates. Results indicate that teacher candidates show commitment to the previously selected age group, however some are open to becoming early years teachers. This is primarily characteristic of those with a pragmatic approach, the new opportunity has a more pronounced impact on their career aspirations.

Keywords: Romanian nursery education, teacher candidates, institutional changes, career aspirations

1. Introduction and theoretical background

Early childhood education, as the first level of the education system, is divided into nursery and kindergarten education according to Article 23 of the *Education law no. 1/2011*. The increased interest in early childhood education is noticeable in the Romanian education policy as well, as the *Curriculum for early childhood education* published in 2019 anticipated an upcoming change. It included nursery education alongside kindergarten education, even though nursery education was not yet part of the education system at that time. The anticipated change outlined by the curriculum for early childhood education materialized in the fall of 2021 with the issuance of *Government Emergency Ordinance no. 100/2021*. According to this Ordinance, nurseries are now part of the public education system, providing integrated educational, care, and supervision services for children between 0-3 years. The methodology of nursery education as part of public education system is described by *Government Ordinance no. 566/2022* (Barabási, 2023; Barabási-Stark, 2023).

The outlined change, the restructuring of the nursery network, aims to improve the quality of education. Researches show (Sági, Ercsei, 2012; Sági, 2015) that the teacher is a key factor in the quality of education. In order to enhance the level of education, it is necessary to have well-prepared teachers on every level of the education system, and to ensure that the best teachers remain in the profession.



Fig.1. Factors influencing the quality of teaching (Sági, Ercsei, 2012, 11)

The quality of teaching, including the quality of teaching in nursery education, is influenced by numerous factors. These range from pedagogical competencies to training and professional development opportunities, as well as entering the profession and remaining in it. Since the changes related to nursery education, the expansion of services, affected not only early years teachers¹ but also *those preparing for a career in teaching*, our study focuses on this latter group.

2. Research Methodology

The present study investigates how including early years education into the institutional frameworks for the education sector influences the career aspirations of those preparing for a career in early childhood education. The *aim* of our research is to present, through the synthesis of empirical evidence, the extent and manner in which institutional changes in Romanian early years education affect/alter the career aspirations of teacher candidates, focusing more specifically on the appeal of developing a career as a nursery teacher.

We started with the *hypothesis* that legislative changes created alternative career paths for those preparing for a career in early childhood education, which is more appealing for pragmatic individuals. Another *hypothesis* was that the evaluation of the changes by teacher candidates is unpredictable: opinions vary based on the recognition of opportunities and risks.

In developing the theoretical framework of the research, we relied on document analysis. The exploratory research was built upon the *survey method*. The *tool* employed was a self-designed questionnaire.

The *teacher candidate online questionnaire* was structured in a way to shed light on how well prepared the participants feel for the career of nursery teacher and how open and interested they are in this segment of the educational system. In other words, to what extent do the structural changes in the system influence career paths. The questionnaire contains four additional survey blocks, which are out of the scope of this paper. Totally the questionnaire contains 29 questions, mostly questions with multiple-choice question (28) and 1 open question.

¹ The terms “early years teacher” and “nursery teacher” are used synonymously in the present study.

The data from the questionnaires was statistically analyzed using the SPSS data analysis program (frequency, mean, chi-square, analysis of variance, correlation, factor analysis).

The convenience *sample* included a total of 340 *teacher candidates*, belonging to the Hungarian minority from Romania, who are preparing for a career as kindergarten or primary school teachers, full time and distance/part time learning students as well. The average age is 23.03 years. 93.8% (N=318) of the sample was studying to become a kindergarten or primary school teacher.

Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the sample along additional variables, the decisive nature of which is discussed in the data interpretation section.

Table 1: The Sample

Variable	Subdimensions of variables	Individual	%
Gender	Male	2	0.6
	Female	338	99.4
Type of settlement	Urban	152	44.7
	Rural	188	55.3
Level of educational institution	High School	22	6.47
	University	318	93.53
Working alongside studying	Yes	126	37.1
	No	214	62.9
Field of work	none	213	62.6
	Education	58	17.1
	Other	69	20.3

3. Findings

The initial aim of the study was to find out how teacher candidates relate to the changes, whether they perceive them as positive or negative, and they were also asked to share their opinions of the attitudes of other relevant groups. The diagram below (see fig. 2.) shows that on a scale from 1 to 6, with an average of 4.5, teacher candidates have a favorable opinion of the institutional change and the average values were also high when considering the perspectives of other stakeholders.

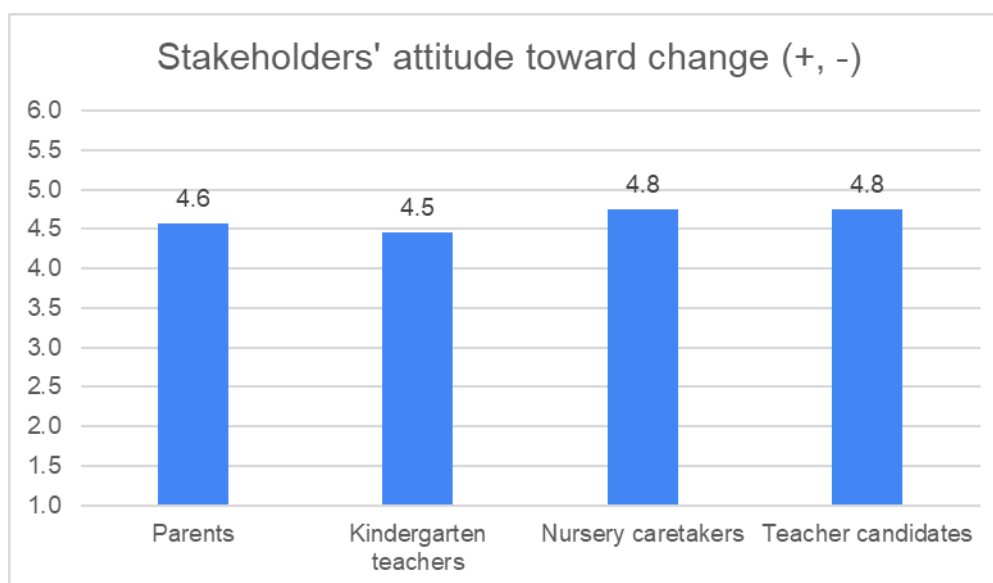


Fig. 2. Stakeholders' attitudes towards change (average 1 – 6 scale)

Does the positive attitude manifest in turning towards this educational segment, possibly in relation to career paths as well? Analyzing the data brings us closer to answering this question! The examined teacher candidates, who chose the second stage of early childhood education (kindergarten level), show moderate openness, with an average around 4, toward work as an early year`s teacher (4.3) and retraining for this field (4.2). Research findings also reveal that participants are aware of specific aspects of early years education that are less emphasized or not discussed in the preparation for the role of a kindergarten teacher. Consequently, they evaluate their preparedness for the lowest level of education at an average of 3.2.

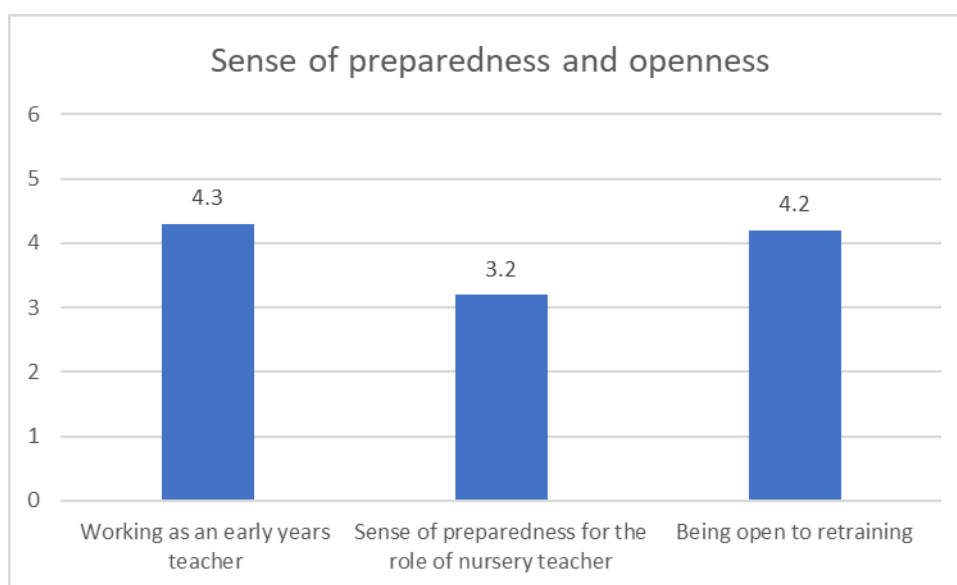


Fig. 3. Sense of preparedness and openness (average 1 – 6 scale)

Whether students work alongside their studies or not did not significantly influence their preparedness and openness (see table 2). However, an interesting result was that the willingness to take on the job is significantly higher than the sense of preparedness for performing the role. This apparent contradiction is counterbalanced by students' openness to retraining, reinforcing the idea that teacher candidates clearly recognize the differences in child and educational needs between the two levels of early childhood education and feel the need for retraining.

Table 2. Students' Sense of Preparedness and Openness in Relation to Working Alongside Studying

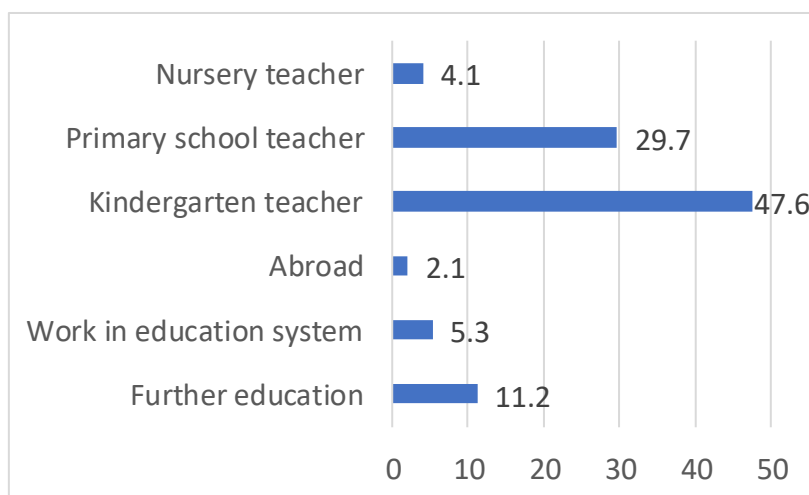
Working beside studies		prepared	open
yes	Mean	3.1587	4.2698
	N	126	126
	Standard deviation	1.42218	1.56672
no	Mean	3.2430	4.2103
	N	214	214
	Standard deviation	1.28071	1.42667
Total	Mean	3.2118	4.2324
	N	340	340
	Standard deviation	1.33343	1.47810

A further analysis of the data on working while studying reveals an interesting trend: those who do not work (in the education sector) show much greater openness, while at the same time, they feel much more prepared – which may be explained by the lack of experience. Those working in the education sector, with prior experience in the field, feel less prepared to work as a nursery teacher and are less open to such a position compared to those who work in other fields (see table 3).

Table 3. Students' Sense of Preparedness and Openness Based on the Nature of Employment

Field of work		prepared	open
education	Mean	2.8966	3.9483
	N	58	58
	Standard deviation	1.49490	1.67983
other field	Mean	3.3857	4.5143
	N	70	70
	Standard deviation	1.35447	1.43196
does not work	Mean	3.2406	4.2170
	N	212	212
	Standard deviation	1.27076	1.42426
Total	Mean	3.2118	4.2324

When it comes to future plans after completing their studies, half of the respondents envision their future as kindergarten teachers, while 3 out of ten students choose the path of a primary school teacher. Only 4.1% of the surveyed teacher candidates consider a career in nursery education (see fig. 4). Further education is also marginally represented in students' future plans, as only one out of ten students intend to continue their studies.

**Fig.4.** Future plans (%)

As presented earlier, the openness of teacher candidates to retraining as a nursery/early years teacher reached an average of 4.2 (see fig. 3.). The diagram below (see fig. 5.) illustrates the motivational factors that may underlie the decision to take on a position in nursery education.

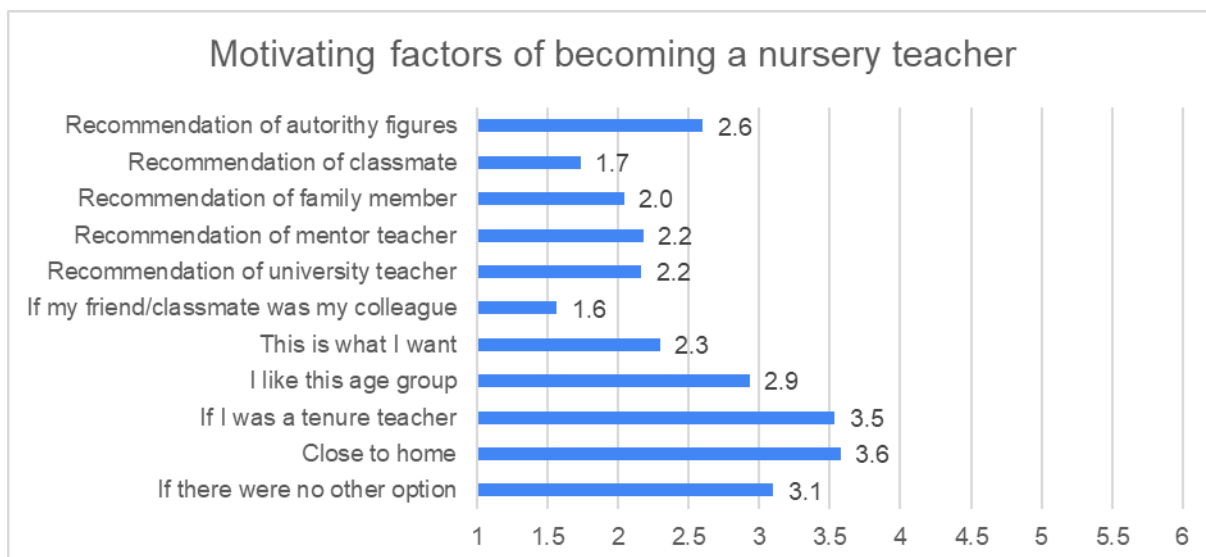


Fig. 5. Motivating factors for taking on the job (average 1 – 6 scale)

Results show that the most motivating factors are the pragmatic or even existential ones, such as the proximity of the place of residence (3.6) and tenure (indefinite duration) of the position (3.5). Both have a similar role. The lack of opportunity for another teaching position (3.1) is a less decisive factor of the same group. The other extreme, social motives, which seem to be the least influential, include recommendations from family members, peers, mentor teachers, instructors, etc. The highest value is assigned to recommendations from authority figures (2.6), while the other factors show a significantly lower value ($t=4.38186, p<.00001$), with recommendations from friends, classmates or colleagues being the least influential (1.6). Personal motives such as attachment to the age group and wishing to work in this field received a middle value.

Subjecting the data to factor analysis, we identified three types of students based on the motivation for taking on the position.

Table 4. Student Types Based on Motivation for Taking on the Position (Principal Component Analysis, KMO=0.840, Varimax, 72.241%)

How likely are you to take up a nursery teacher position in the following situations?	Factors		
	1 Model-following	2 Wish-fulfilling	3 Pragmatic
Only if I did not get a job as a kindergarten teacher	.107	-.215	.841
If it was close to my home	.166	.472	.680
If it was a tenure (indefinite duration) teacher position	.102	.483	.679
I feel drawn to this age group	.239	.869	.163
I have always wanted to work in this field	.297	.858	-.019
If my friend/classmate would choose the same	.619	.065	.101
At my instructor’s advice	.896	.133	.138
At my mentor teacher’s advice	.863	.186	.097
At my family members’ advice	.804	.234	.064
At my classmate’s advice	.833	.146	.027
Encouraged by an authority figure (e.g., inspector, methodologist, head of institution, etc.)	.709	.354	.153

The model-following teacher candidates would take on the role of nursery teacher not out of their own conviction but at someone else's recommendation, whether it be an external authority, family, or peer group. Personal motivation dominates in the case of wish-fulfilling teacher candidates. Nursery

education would fulfil their childhood desires as they have a longing for this field and feel a close connection to this age group. The pragmatic group of teacher candidates prioritizes pragmatic motives: the possibility of a tenure (indefinite duration) position, proximity to their home, and the lack of other opportunities.

Another aspect examined was the evaluation by teacher candidates of the institutionalization of nursery education. In this regard, we found a positive attitude with an average value of 4.3, indicating that the participants recognize the positive aspects of this change in the education system.

The diagram below (see fig. 6.) shows the general perception of the consequences arising from the change.

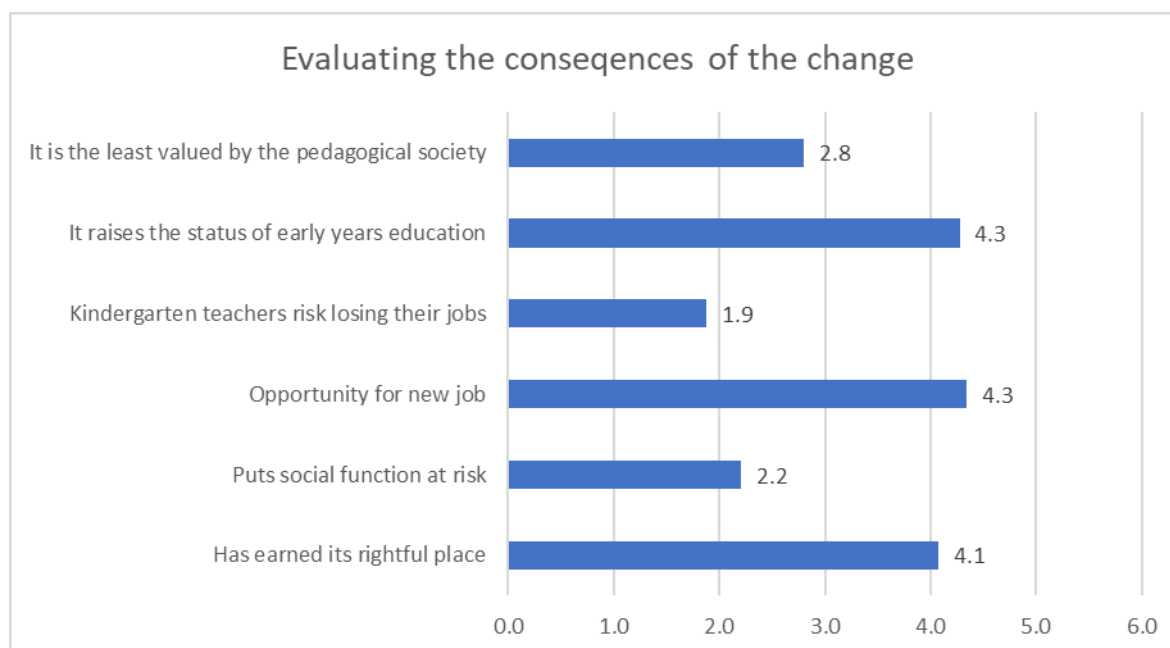


Fig. 6. Students' evaluation of the change (average 1 – 6 scale)

The two most positively perceived consequences of the change are the creation of new job opportunities (4.3) and raising the status of early years education. It is also perceived as a positive outcome that working with young children has earned its rightful place in the educational system. The potential risks, such as the possible termination of kindergarten teaching positions (1.9) or the diminishing emphasis on social function in early years education (2.2), are seen as less of a concern ($t=-17.40659$, $p<.00001$) compared to the benefits.

Subjecting the data to factor analysis, we identified two - extreme - student categories. One group of students sees the opportunities in the changes affecting nurseries: a rightful place and proper status, as well as new career opportunities. In contrast, the other group of students emphasizes the dangers: a decrease in status, staff reductions affecting kindergarten teachers, etc. Teacher candidates place the change in balance on the axis of opportunities and risks, showing an ambiguous stance, which is nourished by the uncertainty at the level of the system.

Table 5. Teacher Candidate Evaluation of Changes Affecting Nurseries (Principal Component Analysis, KMO=0.666, 63.69%)

How do you evaluate the phenomena resulting from the “change” affecting nurseries?	Factors	
	1 Opportunities	2 Dangers
Finally, early childhood education has gained its rightful place in the education system.	.840	-.076
It provides many new job opportunities.	.879	-.055
Overall, it increases the social status of those working with the youngest age group.	.836	-.012

It threatens the reinforcement of the social function.	-.016	.765
It leads to the elimination of kindergarten teacher positions.	.011	.815
The group dealing with the youngest age group will have the lowest status amongst teachers	.215	.582

After assessing the general perception of the consequences resulting from the changes, we were also interested in how the sample perceives the effects on teacher candidates.

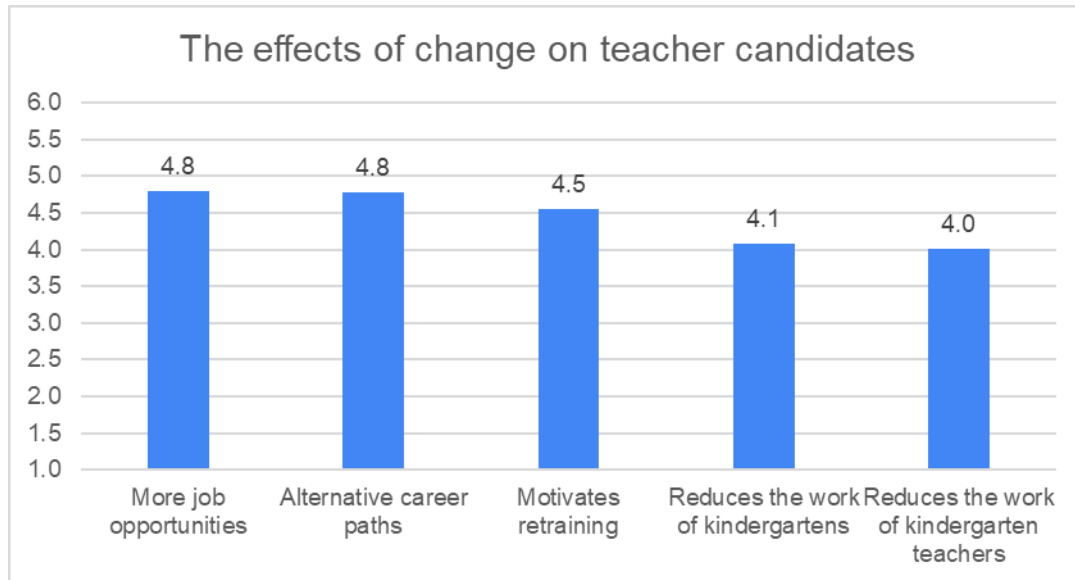


Fig 7. The effect of the change on teacher candidates (average 1 – 6 scale)

The diagram above (see fig. 7.) clearly shows that the research participants have a generally positive view on how the change affects them, as illustrated by the high average values. The effects related to existential aspects stand out, such as the growth of job opportunities and the diversification of professional career paths. Analyzing the data in the light of the variables, we found that 3rd year university students show the most awareness, while high school students are more malleable once they gain insight into the workings of the education system. However, the findings cannot be generalized given the small sample size of high school students.

At the same time, we found that the participants consider that this change could motivate them to acquire a qualification in early years education as well. In view of their future activities (especially kindergarten teacher), they positively evaluate, with a slightly lower average value, the reduction of tasks for both kindergartens (4.1) and kindergarten teachers (4.0).

Table 6. Effects of the Institutional Change in the Light of Variables in the Study Sample

Year/grade		It provides more potential job opportunities	It increases opportunities in terms of career paths	It motivates retraining for early years education.	Reduces the work of kindergartens	Reduces the work of kindergarten teachers
1st year	Mean	4.85	4.78	4.46	3.82	3.75
	N	110	110	110	110	110
	Standard deviation	1.369	1.337	1.412	1.581	1.571
2nd year	Mean	4.83	4.79	4.62	4.46	4.35
	N	72	72	72	72	72

	Standard deviation	1.565	1.510	1.515	1.703	1.785
3rd year	Mean	4.94	4.90	4.80	4.22	4.16
	N	106	106	106	106	106
	Standard deviation	1.194	1.146	1.222	1.407	1.402
MA	Mean	4.73	4.73	4.17	3.93	3.90
	N	30	30	30	30	30
	Standard deviation	1.337	1.285	1.367	1.552	1.373
9th grade	Mean	2.92	3.25	3.33	3.25	3.08
	N	12	12	12	12	12
	Standard deviation	1.621	1.712	1.614	1.815	1.730
10th grade	Mean	5.25	5.38	5.00	4.00	4.00
	N	8	8	8	8	8
	Standard deviation	1.165	1.188	1.195	1.773	1.773
11th grade	Mean	4.00	5.00	2.00	1.00	1.00
	N	2	2	2	2	2
	Standard deviation	2.828	1.414	.000	.000	.000
Total	Mean	4.80	4.78	4.54	4.06	3.98
	N	340	340	340	340	340
	Standard deviation	1.410	1.351	1.411	1.595	1.591
Anova	F	4.261	3.078	3.936	3.242	3.203
	Sign	.000	.006	.001	.003	.005

4. Conclusions

The reason for addressing teacher candidates is twofold: on the one hand, as future kindergarten teachers, it is important for them to be familiar with the level of education – along with its characteristics in terms of activities and institutional organization – from which a significant portion of preschoolers enter the institution. On the other hand, the expansion of the education system can play a determining role in terms of their individual career paths. Analyzing the findings yielded by the questionnaire the following conclusions can be formulated.

As hypothesized, teacher candidates place the change in the system in balance on the axis of opportunities and risks, showing an ambiguous stance, which is likely nourished by the uncertainty at the level of the system. They recognize the challenges of nursery education, identifying both retroactive and proactive challenges. At the same time, they outline that the perspective of nursery education incorporated into the education system and the increasing demand might primarily be attributed to the balance of its fundamental functions (child supervision, education, care).

In the emerging career paths of teacher candidates, commitment contrasts with openness and flexibility. In fact, both attitudes are clearly outlined, as only 4.1% of the examined teacher candidates would work as an early year's teacher, while openness to retraining and, consequently, taking on a position in nursery education, shows a moderate high average value (4.2). Teacher candidates who do not work alongside their studies or do not work in the field of education demonstrated greater openness to nursery education.

Our hypotheses were confirmed by the results, which show that the strongest factors in the decision-making process regarding career paths are existential motives and a pragmatic perspective dominates. Accordingly, the most motivating factors are a secure, tenured (indefinite duration) position and a workplace close to home. At the same time, if a teacher candidate cannot find a position corresponding to their qualifications, they regard working in a nursery as a solution.

Overall, findings show that although there is a considerable openness among teacher candidates to nursery education and retraining for the position of early years teacher, the data highlighted the need for retraining in the case of those preparing for a career as kindergarten teachers. This is confirmed, among other things, by the very low level of knowledge about the nursery segment of the curriculum and of the preparedness for its application. All these point to the urgent need for the teacher training system to consider and address the development of theoretical and practical alternatives for the professional training of early years teachers.

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