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Early Childhood Teachers' Perception of the Professional Self and in Relation to Early Childhood Communities

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Abstract: Early childhood teachers face many challenges as they interact with children, their parents, fellow teachers and the early childhood community. The responsibility to meet the needs of a diverse group of people is critical to the teacher's development as a professional. This paper discusses the quantitative findings of a survey that examined the perceptions of the professional self of early childhood teachers. The population sample comprised of 88 early childhood teachers in a part-time undergraduate early childhood education programme with at least 2 years of teaching experience. Factor analysis was applied to identify and explore six factors of early childhood teachers' sense of professional self. The study found that participants rated themselves significantly lower in the latent variable of Professional Self with EC Communities and that the more experienced early childhood teachers rated themselves significantly higher.

Introduction

Teachers are at the heart of the education profession, yet many may not have a positive view of the profession. The popular saying, "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach," is debasing towards the whole teaching profession. Teachers facilitate dozens of interactions with students, parents, administrators, fellow teachers, and community members every day. The responsibility to manage and meet the needs of a diverse group of people within the teaching and learning community is critical to the teacher's development as a professional. Understanding the teachers' sense of professionalism in relation to their self and community is significant while teachers develop their professional identities.

As with all professionals, the teachers' personal and professional perceptions impact their identities as professionals. Campbell-Barr (2018) states that the teacher's sense of professionalism is a multi-faceted concept that is cultural, organizational, and communal as well as individual. This can be categorized into the emotional intelligences of intrapersonal (self) and interpersonal (with others) skills. The intrapersonal experiences that one encounters together with the interpersonal experiences within the community lead to a culminating viewpoint of how they perceive themselves as teaching professionals. The multifaceted roles and responsibilities assumed by the teacher contribute to the development of the professional self (intrapersonal) as well as how they see their professional self in relation to others (interpersonal).

However, these multifaceted roles of teachers may not be fully appreciated, and among the teacher fraternity the early childhood (EC) teachers have the most obstacles to overcome to elevate their status (Buchanan, 2015). Literature argues that the sense of

professional self of EC teachers, is low and EC teachers have had a long struggle for recognition of their profession (Moloney, 2010; Rhodes & Huston, 2012). Chan (2018) states that the early childhood profession is marked by a low sense of professional self with low remuneration, poor training opportunities and the lack of a career development ladder. These factors considerably erode EC teachers' perception of professional self, which is influenced by their self-perceptions (Washington et al. 2015).

Over the past years, there have been efforts to improve the image of EC profession from childcare providers to well-prepared, educated, and equitably compensated education professionals (Shpancer et al. 2008). However, early childhood (EC) teachers are still struggling to claim professional status. The struggle to improve EC teachers' sense of the professional self is a first step to strengthening the EC sector. A lack of professionalism afforded to teachers leads to a decline in the self-esteem of teachers as professionals as well as a deterioration among those who wish to join or remain in the field. This is linked inexplicitly to issues of teacher quality and has a direct impact on the teaching and learning activities experienced by young children. The quality of the teacher has been identified as a key factor in educational reform and quality teaching and learning (Winters, 2008). Extensive literature (OECD, 2012) argues the implications of high-quality teachers on outcomes for young children. As governments and regulatory bodies strive to improve quality, the demands of the profession are raised; resulting in an increase in professional status given by society to the profession (Klenowski, 2012).

The Singapore EC education landscape has evolved with many rapid changes over the past five years. Most significant is the introduction of EC standards and the changes that surround the EC teacher's registration. These are now being regulated by a governing body, The Early Childhood and Development Agency (ECDA). Launched on 1st April 2013, ECDA integrates the regulation, planning and professional development of EC teachers. Paradoxically, however, despite the growing number of schemes targeted at raising the quality of EC teachers, the sense of the EC profession remains "diverse and fragmented" when compared to that of primary and secondary school teachers (Today, 2017). Many historical discourses of the profession persist and are shown in low social and professional status with poor remuneration (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). Thus uncovering the complexities of the EC teachers' perception of the professional self is important to understand the EC teacher as well as to inform policies to strength the workforce, subsequently increasing the outcomes for children.

This paper, which is part of a wider study, examines Singapore EC teachers' perception of the professional self as well as within the EC professional community. The participants of the study were in-service EC teachers enrolled in a part-time professional development undergraduate programme. Such a study is timely as ECDA together with other government agencies in Singapore have been increasing efforts to elevate the status of teachers in the EC sector.

Literature Review

This literature review is organized in two parts. The first section includes literature on the professional status of EC teachers. The second section provides a review on the factors of the teachers' professional self and professional community.

Professional Status

Literature shows that the teaching profession is often viewed to have a lower status than many other professions (Ingersoll & Mitchell, 2011). When the profession is considered in subgroups of pre-school, primary and secondary teachers, it is argued that pre-school teachers have the lowest status (Chan, 2018). Foundational to the sense of professionalism in EC is the dominant theme of mothering, underpinned by women's intrinsic and natural connection to children. Osgood's (2012) work on EC professionalism and identity in a UK context highlighted how maternalistic discourses are embraced and how they inform and limit teacher professional identities.

However, internationally as well as in Singapore, efforts have been made to raise the professional status of EC teachers with the setting of prescribed criteria such as knowledge, expertise and training, based on sector-agreed competencies and standards of practice for specific job roles in the field (Feeney and Freeman, 2018). Skattebol, Adamson, and Woodrow (2016) argue that the EC teacher's role is

...marked by struggle –the struggle for recognition of the professional character of the work, the struggle for wage justice – pay and conditions that reflect the importance of caring for children and the complex nature of the work – and the struggle for parity with other sections of the education profession. (Skattebol et al, 2016; p. 117)

These perceptions strongly impacted the EC teacher's sense of professional self. Oberhuemer (2008) argues that the professional self of an EC teacher is placed within a 'situated concept' (p. 136). This construct is encapsulated within the perceptions of children and childhood in the society. These include the historical, political, socio cultural and economic context of EC education within the society. The development of the profession shows a highly complex situation. On the one hand the EC workforce is struggling with a low professional status, and yet on the other hand the same profession is recognised as playing an important role in the care, development and wellbeing of young children in the society. This 'situated concept' also takes into consideration the impact on the professional self as well as the collective self within the community.

Gibson (2013) highlights three key attributes that professionals should have. First, they must have expert skills in a particular field. Second, they must possess a body of knowledge related to this field; and third, the professionals must be able to make decisions and solve problems with this set of knowledge and skills. Oberhuemer (2008) emphasizes the need for professional traits such as professional relationships with students, parents, administrators, fellow teachers, and community members; a strong foundational knowledge; and practical skills of EC education and care. These views make the role of the EC professional more complex and multi-dimensional than a list of standards.

Day, Kington, Stobart, and Sammons (2006) suggest that national support and policies constitute key parts of the network which impact on the sense of professional self of teachers. They further argued that the teachers' multi-dimensional roles are represented within the several layers of these network structures. The structures can be identified in school culture as well as inter-personal knowledge construction among the teaching community (Day et al., 2006). The societal and political dimensions, as such, can impact and transform the professional profile within the society. This expansion of the roles to include how EC teachers are professionally understood and positioned in terms of quality outcomes for children and the nation, shifts from that of maternalism and child-minding to that of professional frameworks that are tied to reporting structures, training, pedagogy and outcomes for children (Millei & Jones, 2014). Paradoxically, despite the disempowering effect of earlier links to mothering and child-minding, care and concern should be considered

as key traits for the early childhood professional (Dalli, Miller, & Urban, 2012).

In Singapore, efforts towards building the professional status and recognition of EC educators are being put in place. In a 2017 National Day rally, Mr Lee Hsien Loong, Singapore's Prime Minister, highlighted strategic plans to uplift the EC sector (*Straits Times*, August 20, 2017). One key initiative outlines an enhanced career and professional development pathway within the Early Childhood Manpower Plan. The Early Childhood and Development Agency (ECDA) will also embark on a national campaign to raise awareness on the importance of providing our young children with quality education as well as to raise the status of the EC education. By 2020, 20,000 EC professionals will be required to meet the sector's needs, from around 16,000 today (Skillsfuture, 2016). To support these major moves, the Singapore government's spending is projected to double from \$850 million today to \$1.7 billion annual spending by the next five years for this sector. This is a strong indication of the Singapore Government's commitment to elevate the quality and status of the sector.

Teachers' Professional Self and Collective Self within the Professional Community

Kelchtermans (2009) suggests that the formation of the professional self consists of related domains and it evolves as the teacher develops. These domains include *Self-image*: how teachers describe themselves in their profession; *Self-esteem*: the evolution of self as a teacher, defined by both self as well as others; *Motivation to teach*: reasons for teachers' retention and attrition; *Task perception*: the expectation of teachers of their tasks and roles; and *Future perspective*: teachers' perception for their professional growth (Kelchtermans, 2009).

Hilferty (2008) argues that a teacher's sense of professionalism is a social setup "that is being defined and redefined through educational theory, policy and practice" (p. 53). EC teachers' professional perceptions are defined by impacts across a variety of dimensions (Tukonic & Harwood, 2015). From the perspective of an EC teacher this may encompass behaviours to improve and achieve best practices and which includes their professional roles of respect, work ethics, development, and professional interactions (Tukonic & Harwood, 2015).

Martin, Meyer, Jones, Nelson, and Ting (2010) examined factors, which contributed to perceptions of professionalism of EC teachers. They found that the teacher's sense of commitment seem to have the strongest impact on the perceptions of professional self. Other factors that were significant included years of experience in early child care, enjoyment of work, professional development, parents turning to the child care professional for information, and feeling qualified. This sense of one's professional self is also the result of interactions between beliefs of the society, personal philosophies, professional development and practice (Moloney, 2010). The EC teachers' perception of themselves as professionals, their perceptions of how they are viewed by others, and their work conditions can affect the development of their professional identity.

Jónsdóttir & Coleman (2014) explored how views of EC teachers and how stakeholders' perceptions affect their sense of the profession. The findings showed that the stakeholders did not seem to recognise the EC teachers' expertise in their educational work with children. While professional status is often judged by remuneration, degree of content knowledge and qualification level, the feeling of being valued and respected by society was considered the ultimate gain in professional status (Fuller, Goodwyn, & Francis-Brophy, 2013). There seems to be a gap between how the EC teachers view themselves, as professionals, and the perspectives of stakeholders, particularly parents and politicians.

Teachers' sense of community includes a key dimension of teacher collaboration with

various stakeholders (Guo, Justice, Sawyer & Tompkins, 2011). The EC educator's sense of professional self in the community embodies collaborative relationships with colleagues, parents, the management and the community beyond the centre. It comprises being able to work for the advantage of children, staff, management and community, modelling good practices, working in teams, and making links with the community (Dalli, 2008). Studies have also shown that teachers' sense of partnership with fellow teachers is essential in fostering teachers' sense of professional self, supporting the importance of encouraging professional collaboration and professional communities (Guo, et al, 2011).

Methodology

Sample

The population sample for this paper was comprised of 88 EC teachers with at least two years of EC teaching experience who were enrolled in a part-time professional development programme, the Bachelor of Early Childhood and Chinese Language Education. This group is a subset of the main study which also consisted of participants from in-service teachers enrolled in part time EC undergraduate programmes.

To cater to the needs of the working adult, the programme's courses are modular. Most of the courses apply a blended learning approach with three face-to-face class sessions and three online sessions. Study guides for the courses are provided as online resources for students. The survey was administered to the participants, as a group, in two of the evening face-to-face sessions of two modules. Participation was voluntary and the participants did not receive any remuneration. Responses were collected anonymously. All the participants are female. The sample consisted of:

- 20.5% (22) aged 30 and below, 40.0% (35) aged between 31 to 40 and 33.0% (31) aged at least 40 years and above
- 60% (53) who completed at least 10 EC courses in the programme.
- 58% (51) who have at least 7 years of working experience as an EC teacher

Data Collection

While the research purpose of the main study covers a wider scope, this paper discusses and presents Part A of a quantitative section of an objective-type survey. Part A of the survey comprised survey items that examined the perceptions of EC teachers' perception of professional self within the profession as well as with the EC communities. The survey items were designed for in-service EC teachers' who were completing their professional development in an undergraduate EC education programme.

Data Analysis

There were originally 25 items from the survey instrument on the domain of EC teachers' *Sense of Professional Self*. Three items were removed due to poor loading and the final model with 22 items was used for analysis. Part A of this survey focused on the *EC teachers' Sense of Professional Self*. The hypothesized model for the EC teachers' *Sense of ECE Professionalism* is a second-order factor model. Under the domain of *Sense of Professional Self*, there are two constructs. The constructs are labelled (1) *Professional Self* and (2) *Professional Self with EC Communities*. The second-order confirmatory factor analysis

is a statistical method used to confirm the theorized construct into certain number of underlying latent factors (factors that cannot be observed or measured directly).

There are three latent factors in (1) *Professional Self* and three latent factors in (2) *Professional Self with EC Communities*. Figure 1 shows the structure of the part of the survey for the domain *EC Teachers' Sense of Professional Self*. Only factors with loadings of 0.70 or above were considered.

The three latent factors in the Construct 1: *Professional Self* are:

- Factor One: Professional Learning and Development;
- Factor Two: Professional Ethics and
- Factor Three: Reflective Teaching Practices.

The three factors in the Construct 2: *Professional Self with EC Communities* are:

- Factor Four: Professional Partnerships with Community;
- Factor Five: Professional Practices with Colleagues and
- Factor Six: Professional Partnerships with Families.

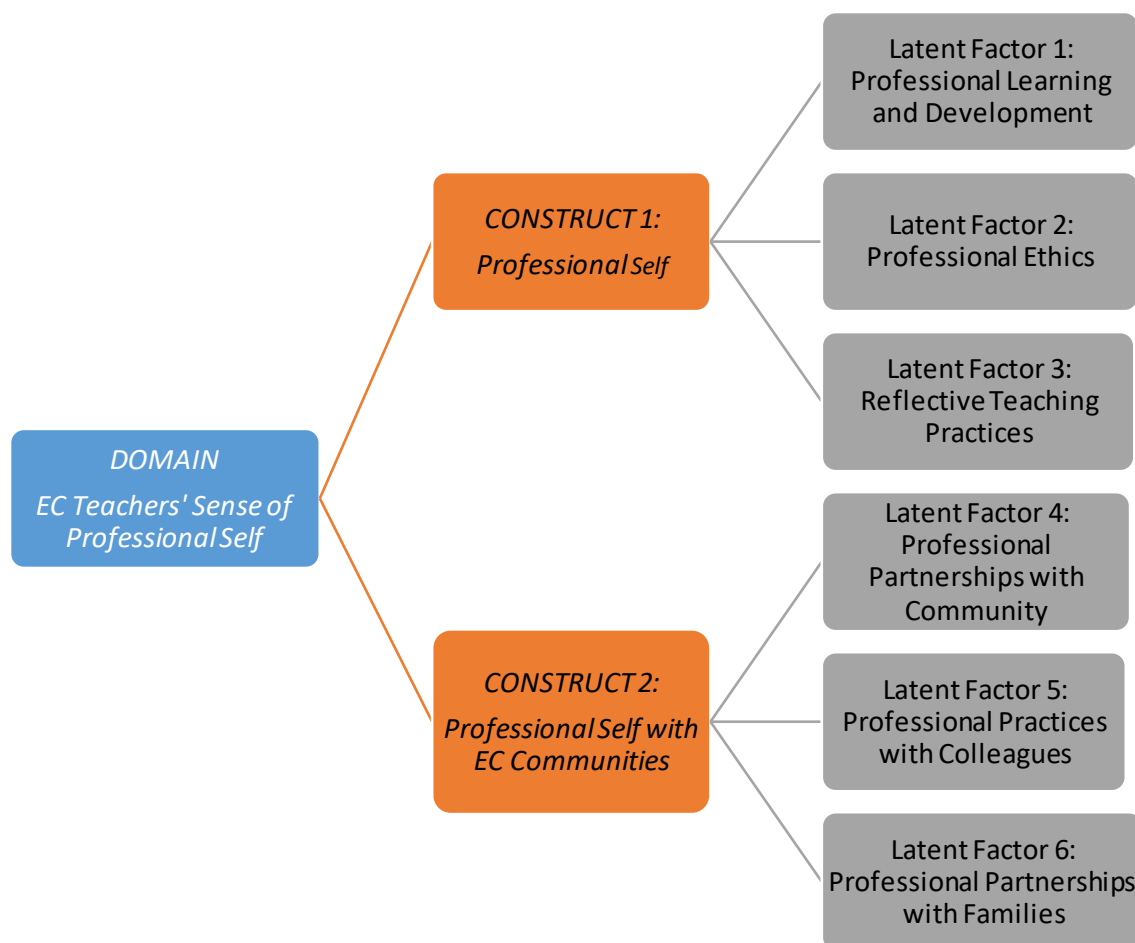


Figure 1: Structure of survey for EC teachers' Sense of Professional Self

Each factor consisted of two to five statements. Each statement had a 5-point Likert rating scale (ranges from 1 - Strongly disagree to 5 - Strongly Agree) to measure participants' perception of the *EC Teachers' Sense of Professional Self*. The statements expressed beliefs and opinions about the self within the EC profession and with the professional community. Table 4, in the later part of the paper, lists the 6 factors and provides a sample item to illustrate each factor.

Factorial Analysis

Using IBM SPSS AMOS 25.0, confirmatory factor analysis (see Figure 2: CFA analysis) was applied on the 22 survey items to identify and explore six latent factors in the model of *EC teachers' Sense of Professional Self*. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is a statistical technique applied to verify the factor structure of a set of items. CFA allows the testing of a hypothesized model between a set of survey items and their underlying latent constructs. Parameter estimates were generated using maximum likelihood (ML) estimation and checked if they were statistically significant. Figure 2 shows the CFA model of the items hypothesized to load on these six factors after going through a categorical item sorting process.

A range of goodness-of-fit indices were applied to measure the fit of the selected model. Absolute fit indices show how well the sample data fits the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model. To improve the model fit in this study, error covariance modification indices were also examined. The chi square to df ratio or χ^2/df , CFI (Comparative fit index), SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) and RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) were applied to examine the selected model's goodness-of-fit (See Table 1). Using a set of indices as recommended by O'Rourke, et al. (2013), the model's fit indices are well within the benchmark range.

	Benchmarks	Model Fit Indices
SRMR	<0.09	0.0589
RMSEA	<0.10	0.086
CFI	>0.90	0.917
Cmin/df	<3.0	1.645

Table 1: Goodness-of-fit indices for the hypothesised CFA model

The matrix of correlation coefficients and their respective significance level for the six factors hypothesized to measure the participants' *EC teachers' Sense of Professional Self* is shown in Table 2. The values of the inter-correlation coefficients range from moderate .591 to high .810 and all the correlation coefficients are significant at the .001 level. This indicated all the six factors selected to formulate the survey items load into one underlying construct of *EC teachers' Sense of Professional Self*.

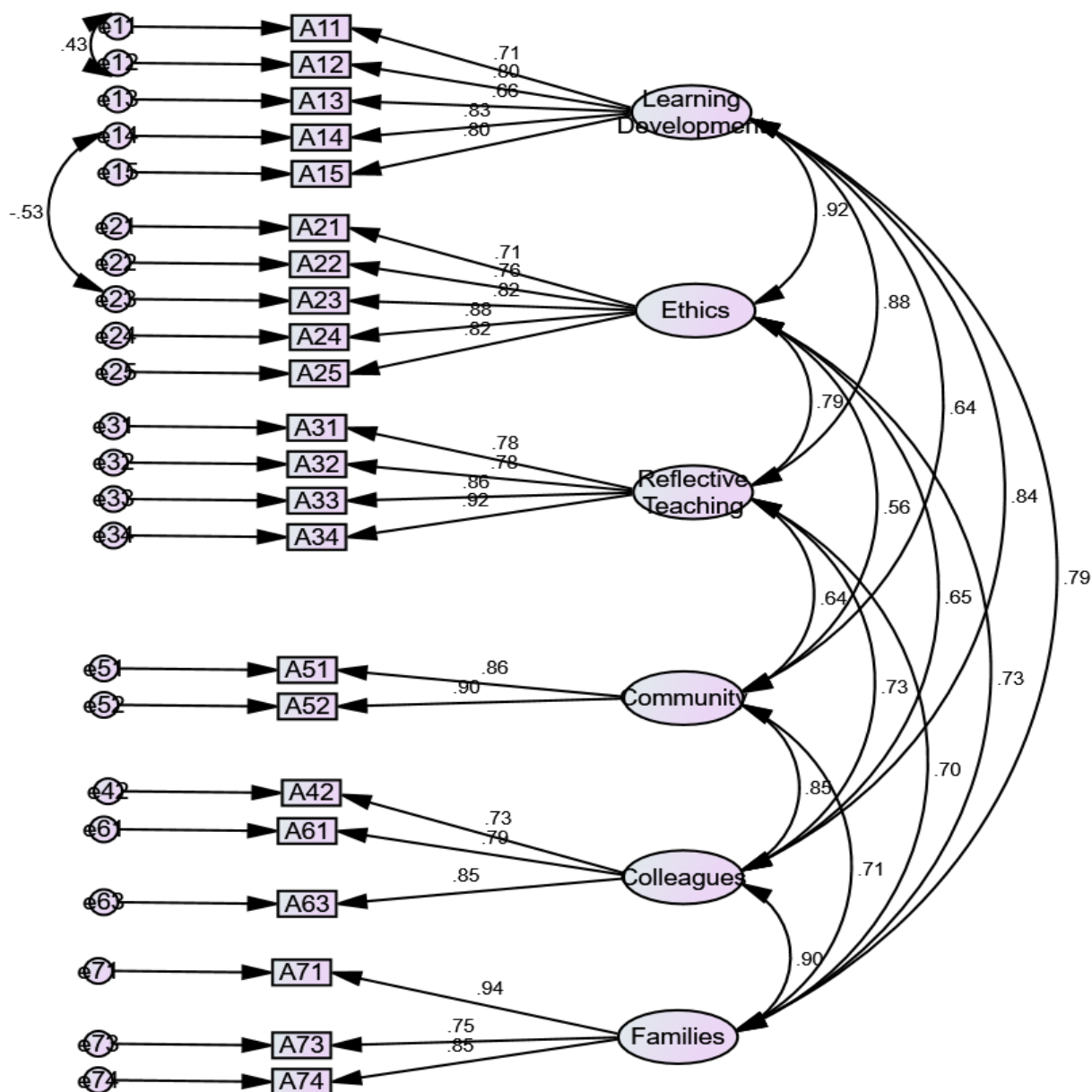


Figure 2: CFA analysis of EC teachers' Sense of Professional Self

Factors	Learning and Development	Ethics	Reflective Teaching	Community	Colleagues	Families
-Learning and Development	1.00					
-Ethics	.810**	1.00				
-Reflective Teaching	.764**	.742**	1.00			
-Community	.566**	.526**	.591**	1.00		
-Colleagues	.713**	.593**	.616**	.728**	1.00	
-Families	.704**	.690**	.641**	.636**	.750**	1.00

Table 2: Matrix of correlation coefficients and their respective significance level

The Cronbach alphas show the instrument to be fairly reliable with the six factors having high reliability, ranging from 0.838 to 0.901. The domain "Professional Self" is

significantly higher than the domain “Professional Communities.” The factor with the highest mean is “Reflective Teaching Practices” with a mean of 4.39 and the factor with lowest mean is “Professional Partnerships with the Community” with a mean of 3.81. Table 4 shows the domain and factor means, standard deviation and the reliabilities of the six factors.

Constructs (mean, standard deviation)	Latent Factor (mean, standard deviation)	Sample items	Cronbach Alpha
1. Professional Self (Mean:4.29, SD: 0.65)	Factor 1: Professional Learning and Development (Mean: 4.24, SD: 0.67)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyse professional learning needs Engage in continuous professional development 	0.88
	Factor 2: Professional Ethics (Mean: 4.33, SD: 0.65)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain respect and confidentiality in work matters Establish ethical practices in EC education 	0.89
	Factor 3: Reflective Teaching Practices (Mean: 4.29, SD: 0.62)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflect on and improve my teaching practices Apply an inquiry-based approach in my teaching practices 	0.90
2. Professional Self with EC Communities (Mean 3.85, SD: 0.78)	Factor 4: Professional Partnerships with the Community (Mean: 3.71, SD: 0.79)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop partnerships with community stakeholders Plan collaborative projects with community stakeholders 	0.87
	Factor 5: Professional Practices with Colleagues (Mean: 3.82, SD: 0.75)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiate projects with colleagues Develop structures that support collaboration among colleagues 	0.84
	Factor 6: Professional Partnerships with Families (Mean: 4.02, SD: 0.79)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve families in decision-making about their children Build partnerships with families to support children's development 	0.87

Table 4: Variables and factors with mean, standard deviation and Cronbach Alpha

Analysis of Subgroup Differences - By the Years of Experience

Further analyses were conducted to compare the subgroup differences within the sample population. T-test was conducted and significant differences ($p \leq 0.05$) were found for all items between the less experienced EC teachers, those with less than or equal to six years of experience, and the more experienced EC teachers with more than or equal to seven years of experience. Figure 3 shows the differences for the items in the *Professional Self* and Figure 4 shows the differences in the items in *Professional Self with EC Communities*.

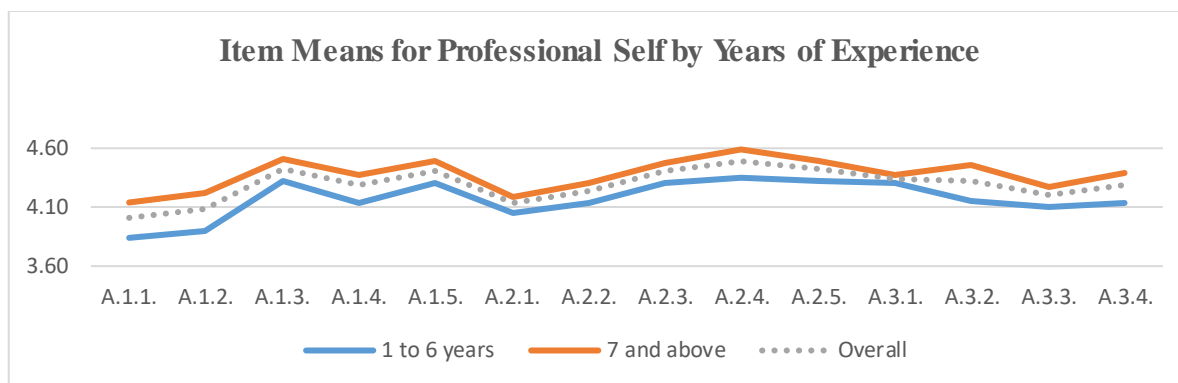


Figure 3: Subgroup (Years of Experience) differences for Professional Self

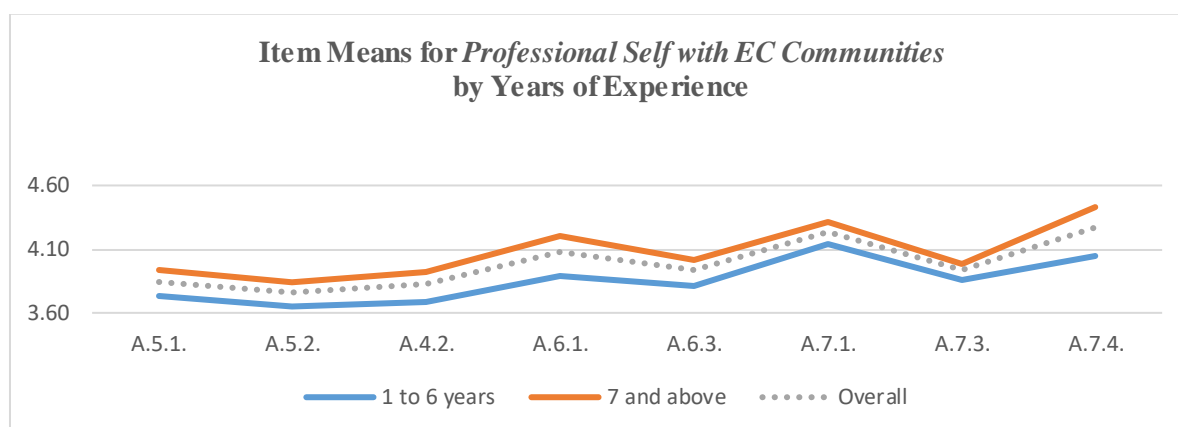


Figure 4: Subgroup (Years of Experience) differences for Professional Self with EC Communities

Findings and Discussion

There are two key findings from the analysis of this dataset. First, when we compare the Construct One: *Professional Self* and Construct Two: *Professional Self with EC Communities* (see Table 4), the participants in the study rated themselves significantly lower in Construct Two: *Professional Self with EC Communities* (factor mean: 3.85, SD: 0.78). Factor 4 in Construct 2: *Professional Partnerships with Community* was rated the lowest (factor mean: 3.71, SD: 0.79).

The field of EC education is one with historically lower professional status. Hoyle (2008) argues that it is in the eyes of the public community that teachers face their greatest challenge. Developing a learning community and team culture among a diverse group of EC teachers as well as honing the teachers' skills to facilitate parent and community partnerships are potential avenues to support and improve the teachers' sense of professional self. To improve the professional status of EC teachers in Singapore, it is important to provide opportunities for collaboration and teamwork practices within supportive learning communities to support positive outcomes for EC teachers' professional learning.

Growing strong communities of collaborative practices within the EC sector can support retention, teacher learning and improved student interactions (Ratner, Bocknek, Miller, Elliott & Weathington, 2017). The collaboration practices among EC teachers become an essential platform for sharing of values, knowledge and skills. Group learning has been identified as an effective strategy for professional development (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). Collaboration also provides teachers with opportunities to reinforce, validate and expand their professional practices, all of which will elevate EC teachers' sense of professional self. EC reforms and teacher professional development programmes should aim

to encourage and facilitate more opportunities for professional partnerships and collaboration. Time and effort is needed to develop such platforms of opportunities. Particularly in EC settings, community forums and school communities to engage in ongoing action research are platforms of opportunities to become professional learning communities. The key to developing these platforms will require the breaking down of rigid boundaries as well as the establishment of trust and respect among EC teachers with diverse qualifications, a range of age and levels of experience. Strong and effective EC leaders play a critical role in the establishing a community of learners and team culture.

Research argues that family and community involvement in students' learning have an impact on their wellbeing and learning in schools (Evangelou, Brooks, Smith & Jennings, 2005). These partnerships are also able to improve student motivation, behaviour and self-esteem (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart., 2010). In the early years, collaboration among family and the immediate community with EC teachers is instrumental in supporting the children's development. Increasingly, the importance of congruence between home and school philosophies and experiences contributes to the growing sense of professional identity of the EC teacher.

Successful transitions to school are more likely when such partnerships exist, ensuring a balance between continuity and new learning experiences. Continued partnerships and collaboration encourage shared understanding of cultural and social values. This will enable EC teachers to plan teaching and learning experiences that are relevant for the children. There is a need to prepare EC teachers as well as administrators for collaboration and partnerships. EC teachers need to communicate clearly and effectively to share ideas, solve problems and work together as team members with fellow teachers, families and community members. EC teacher education and professional development programmes could include courses in facilitating family and community involvement, activities and partnerships.

The second key finding is that EC teachers with seven or more years of EC experience rated themselves significantly higher than those with less EC experience in both variables. More experienced EC teachers can serve as mentors to novice teachers. Mentoring provides a medium through which professional development activities can be made available to teachers on a continual basis (Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008). Establishing a structure where mentors can support training and development would increase innovation and improve quality from professional development activities. Mentoring also supports collaboration among the teachers. Teachers can share and observe practices, work together to plan, design, evaluate curriculum, and teach each other what they know about teaching and learning. This sense of collegiality provided in mentoring provides a safe environment for less experienced teachers to experiment and to study themselves. Teacher education and professional development programmes can also implement a mentoring model to support novice EC teachers in improving the quality of their teaching and classroom experiences for young children.

Advocating partnership and mentoring models for EC teachers also requires a calling to effective EC leaders who connect to practice, build professional capacity and capability, and encourage team culture to recognise the importance of relationship building and quality infrastructure. To keep pace with the increasing needs of EC teachers and to reposition the status of the profession, robust constructs of EC leadership and improved EC professionalism are critical challenges. EC teacher education programmes and professional organisations will have to take the lead in moving the profession forward as new paradigms evolve and government policies and initiatives surface.

Limitations and Future Research

There are some of limitations to be observed. First, in interpreting the findings of this dataset, it is important to note that the sample is a subset from a wider study and only included in-service teachers who were enrolled in a part-time undergraduate programme, the Bachelor of Early Childhood and Chinese Language Education. Therefore, it is unclear if the findings about teachers' perception of the professional self as well as the self within professional community can be generalized to other settings. These settings may include other forms of professional development programmes for different groups of EC teachers. Replication of the study with alternate groups of EC teachers is another next step in future research.

Second, the results of this study are limited by the measures of Construct One: *Professional Self* and Construct Two: *Professional Self with EC Communities*. This can be further expanded to include other dimensions of the EC teachers' sense of professionalism and triangulated with other methodological approaches. Future research can consider additional follow-up interviews or focus group discussions to provide further insights to the survey findings. The study could also be expanded to track the EC teachers through their careers and in different EC settings, such as public, community or private kindergartens or childcare centres, to explore the impact of subsequent differences or similarities in their experiences on the development of the professional self.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the quality of the teacher as a key factor in educational reform and student achievement. In turn, EC teachers' sense of professionalism is a key construct towards teacher quality in the sector. The development of the professional self in the EC sector is helpful towards continued improvement in education. Therefore as the EC landscape evolves and changes, enhancing the teachers' sense of professionalism is necessary (Tukonic & Harwood, 2015).

As Singapore puts in place EC standards and the changes that surround the EC teacher's registration, society will place increasing demands on the EC teacher. The challenge ahead lies in ensuring that EC teachers gain the respect of their communities whilst adhering to externally imposed accountability measures, such as standards that are used to make judgements on teacher quality.

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