

AN EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL SELF-ESTEEM AND EMPATHIC SKILLS

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The relationship between teachers' professional self-esteem and empathic skills was assessed. Participants were 216 female teachers working in preschools in the city center of Ankara. Data were gathered using a general information form; the Scale for Professional Self-Esteem (Arıcak, 1999) was used to measure teachers' professional self-esteem; and empathic skills were measured with the Scale for Empathic Skills - B Form (Dökmen, 1988). A positive relationship was found between teachers' professional self-esteem and empathic skills ($r = .17, p > .05$).

Keywords: Teachers' professional self-esteem, empathic skills, preschool education.

During their preschool years children learn basic habits, improve their skills and socialize (Aral, Kandır, & Can-Yaşar, 2002; Oktay, 1999). The preschool teacher plays a major role in the development of children at this stage. It is logical that preschool teachers should enjoy their profession in order to establish healthy communication with children. High professional self-esteem and well-developed empathic skills are needed (Aral et al.; Çelik, 2007; Oktay, 1999).

Professional self-esteem describes the importance and value one attaches to one's profession and is related to professional adaptation and satisfaction (Arıcak

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Appreciation is due to anonymous reviewers.

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& Dilmaç, 2003; Koç, 1994). *Empathy is a psychological process directed towards understanding the experience of another person* (Hoffman, 2002; Miller, Eisenberg, Fabes, & Shell, 1996). Empathic skills are related to sex, age, aggressive behavior, and teachers' and parents' attitudes (de Kemp, Overbeek, de Wied, Engels, & Scholte, 2007; Hanko, 2002; Hoffman, 2000; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Köksal Akyol, Oğuz, & Yıldız Bıçakçı, 2007; Lardén, Melin, Holst, & Långström, 2006; Strayer & Roberts, 2004). Parents and others who have influence on children are known to play an important role in the behaviors and emotions of children as they develop empathic skills (Hoffman, 2000).

It is important that teachers, who spend a considerable amount of time with children when they are developing most quickly and who influence children as much as their parents do, love their profession, practice it willingly, understand children's emotions and thoughts, and establish empathy with them. For the self-development of teachers, it is important to determine whether there is a relationship between teachers' professional self-esteem and their empathic skills, and if such a relationship is established, to develop a complementary education program. The aim in this study was to determine preschool teachers' professional self-esteem levels and their empathic skills, and to seek a potential relationship between these.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Female teachers working at public and private preschools in Ankara city center ($N = 216$) were randomly selected from a group of those who had been working at least one year and who volunteered to participate. Age range was 20 to 35 ($M = 26.0$, $SD = 20.5$). Of the participants in this study, 43.5% were aged between 20-25, 60.1% worked for a public preschool, 34.4% worked with groups of 16-20 children, 52.8% had studied preschool education, and 75.9% had been working for from one to five years.

MEASURES

The researchers made use of a general information form to collect demographic data about the teachers and their schools. The Scale for Professional Self-Esteem has 30 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale with anchors of 1 and 5. Scores for the scale may range from 30-150, items are stated with higher scores indicating higher professional self-esteem. Cronbach α was .93 and test-retest reliability coefficient .90 (Arıcak, 1999). The Scale for Empathic Skills - B Form was based on Dökmen's (1988) staged empathy classification. One of the 12 reactions given under each of the six questions is meaningless and the form of any subject who chooses this reaction is considered not valid. Each reaction has a different score

and the points belonging to each chosen reaction add up to a total score. A higher score shows greater empathy. Reliability of the scale is $\alpha = .83$, and the validity correlation coefficient is .78 (Dökmen, 1988).

ANALYSIS

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mean score of teachers on the Scale for Professional Self-Esteem was 116.41, ($SD = 19.9$), and their mean empathy skills score was 131.68 ($SD = 20.3$). These scores show that the teachers in the study group had high levels of professional self-esteem and well-developed empathy skills. This means that these teachers value and accept their profession, perform it in the best possible way, and understand those around them. A high level of professional self-esteem may also mean that these teachers show more understanding towards the people they work with and treat them the way that they themselves would like to be treated.

There was a positive Pearson correlation ($r = .17, p < .05$) between teachers' professional self-esteem and empathy skills scores. In the teaching profession, the development of empathy skills has an important role (Hanko, 2002). This is why some countries include in their teacher education programs components to increase the empathy skills of student teachers with their future students (White, 1998). Professional self-esteem and empathy skills would benefit the quality of preschool education. Considering the limited number of studies on this topic, similar studies should be conducted with male teachers and with teachers working in different areas and cultures.

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