

# Professional occupational activities and functions of Greek infant-toddler educators: Roles and responsibilities

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**Abstract:** During the last years, infant and toddler practice is receiving increased attention at the policy level. Yet, little is known about what infant/toddler practice entails and how educators working with children of this age group view their role and professional identity. The present mixed methods study aims at filling the research gap on what the professional identity and the work of infant and toddler educators entails, what are the characteristics that constitute an infant/toddler educator professionally and on the extent to which they are well prepared to perform their multi-dimensional role. 51 Greek infant/toddler educators responded to an online questionnaire which included close and open-ended questions. Results reveal that the role of infant/toddler educators is complex and multi-faceted and that infant/toddler educators spent most of their time in education and care practices rather than managerial practices. In addition, results highlight that care moves beyond narrow definitions that include routines, to a broader image of care which involves educational and relational aspects. Divergences between practices adopted in infant and toddler classrooms have also been revealed. The results highlight the need to further explore infant and toddler educators' voices about their role, professional identity and work.

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## Introduction

During the last years, the number of infants and toddlers attending ECEC programs is increasing (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023) and according to the new 2022 Barcelona targets at least 45% of children below the age of three should participate in early childhood education and care (hereafter referred to as ECEC) (European Commission, 2022). This attention to infants and toddlers, at the policy level, draws on research which has proved the critical importance of the first three years of life (World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, World Bank Group, 2018) as well as the significance of providing infants and toddlers with rich and high-quality learning experiences (Chu, 2016; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Quiñones et al., 2018; Redman et al., 2022). Literature review highlights that high-quality ECEC for children under the age of three is related, among others, to educators' qualifications (Cadima et al., 2020; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Quiñones et al., 2018; Redman et al., 2022; Rockel, 2009), their theoretical understandings and perspectives (Cadima et al., 2020; Davis & Dunn, 2019), their professional identity (Davis & Dunn, 2019; Molla & Nolan, 2019) as well as the warm and responsive interaction among professionals and children, their parents and other stakeholders (Cadima et al., 2020; Quiñones et al., 2018; Shin, 2015; Shpancer et al., 2008).

Despite the widely acknowledged interrelation between ECEC quality and educators' qualifications and working conditions, the status and professional identity of ECEC professionals working with children under the age of three remains low and unrecognized as opposed to professionals working with older children (Davis & Degotardi, 2015; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Goouch & Powell, 2015; Powell & Goouch, 2012; McDowall Clark & Baylis, 2012).

The low status and disputed professional identity (McDowall Clark & Baylis, 2012) of the educators working with infants and toddlers may be attributed to various factors. On the one hand, it is linked to the

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segregation between education and care, with care being considered subordinate to education and as something that can be performed by anyone, as it does not require professional training. In the context of this outdated view, care is equated to mothering (Ailwood, 2007; McDowall Clark & Baylis, 2012), educators are seen as caregivers and children as passive and dependent on adults (Rockel, 2009), whereas the skills needed to care for are considered as being innate and natural (McDowall Clark & Baylis, 2012). On the other hand, it is linked to the relational nature of the profession (McDowall Clark & Baylis, 2012) and the positioning of care in the 'affective domain' (Shin, 2015) which has led into emphasizing primarily infant/toddler educators' personality traits as well as feelings and emotions (Rockel, 2009; Shin, 2015) rather than the "intellectual act they should perform" (Shin, 2015, p. 497).

Such an approach, however, fails to capture the complexity and intellectual challenge (Davis & Dunn, 2019; Quiñones et al., 2018; Rockel, 2009) inherent to the role of educators working with children under three years of age, whereas it obscures any attempt to materialize a "consistent and well-identified professional identity" (Harwood & Tukonic, 2017, p. 589) of infant/toddler educators.

Specifically, although the field of ECEC has been extensively researched for decades, research indicates that we are still in search of the characteristics of the appropriate pedagogical practice as well as of what competencies are required for ECEC professionals and how they are fostered. This is especially true for the practice that needs to be employed with infants and toddlers as, according to Quiñones et al. (2018) we still lack a holistic view of those practices, whereas according to McDowall Clark and Baylis (2012) a gap remains between rhetoric and practice in relation to infant/toddler practice and pedagogy. Moreover, although an abundance of research has attempted to explore the qualifications profile and the role of ECEC professionals working with older preschoolers (for an overview see Rentzou, 2020) scarce research has focused on the work, professional identity and qualifications of professionals working with infants and toddlers, as well as on the occupational activities they perform during their working day (Davis & Dunn, 2019; Schmidt et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2015).

The present study acknowledges the complexity of infant/toddler educators' role as well as the lack of research on the occupational activities performed by ECEC professionals working in ECEC programs in general and in infant/toddler classrooms more specifically. Laying its foundations on this acknowledgement the study aims at filling the research gap on what the professional identity and the work of infant and toddler educators entails, what are the characteristics that constitute an infant/toddler educator professionally and on the extent to which they are well prepared to perform their multi-dimensional role. The focus on the occupational activities and the key ingredients of infant/toddler educators' professional role is of importance as, according to Wong et al. (2015, p. 79), only if we unveil their role, duties, and aspects of professionalism we will be able to understand, evaluate, plan for and appropriately reward their work. In addition, although educators are reluctant to actively participate in the construction of a professional identity (Harwood & Tukonic, 2017), listening to their voices is important as it is essential in order to situate "professionalism within a meaning-making paradigm" (Harwood et al., 2013, p. 4) and it is up to them to "negotiate their role including those practices that they consider more or less appropriate in implementing" (Nuttall, 2003, p.p. 24-25) infant and toddler pedagogy.

### **The Role and Occupational Profile of Infant-Toddler Educators**

Care, routines, and interaction are central to curricula and pedagogical practices for infants and toddlers (Quiñones et al., 2018) and are increasingly acknowledged as key element of the professional identity and professional practice of infant/toddler educators (Davis & Degotardi, 2015; McDowall Clark & Baylis, 2012). On the other hand, the educational aspects of infant/toddler programs are less well understood and appreciated (Redman et al., 2022).

The importance of care and routines for children's overall development and learning has been extensively embraced as they take the lead to ECEC programs that are addressed to infants and toddlers. Yet, care and routines are not unanimously accepted as an educational practice. This fact "leaves teachers with little time for other definitions of 'teaching'" (Nuttall, 2003; cited in Bussey & Hill, 2017, p. 129),

whereas at the same time it challenges notions of professionalism of infant/toddler educators (Davis & Dunn, 2019; Powell & Gouch, 2012).

In addition, according to Bussey & Hill (2017, p. 131) the segregated view of education and care in infant/toddler classrooms poses challenges into co-constructing “functional definitions of the role of the teacher”. Moreover, as already stated, we still lack an unanimously accepted definition of care that encompasses all aspects of a pedagogical practice that responds to the needs of children under the age of three (Rentzou, 2020; 2019). On the contrary, although the emphasis on infants’ and toddlers’ health and survival has faded (McDowall Clark & Baylis, 2012, p. 232), the vestiges of “prescribed care regimes that are based on predetermined group routines” (Rockel, 2009, p. 2), such as feeding and mealtimes, toileting practices and sleep, are still very much in evidence (McDowall Clark & Baylis, 2012, p. 232).

However, one would ask if infant/toddler educators do only this? Those working in the field know that they do more than that (Wong et al., 2015), whereas the scarce literature highlights that infant/toddler educators’ role is complex and their role and responsibilities are vast and varied, “making it challenging to define the essential qualities, knowledge and attributes that are desirable” (Harwood et al., 2013, p. 5). However, limited research attention has been given to unveiling the complexity of this role and the occupational activities that infant/toddler educators perform (Schmidt et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2015), even though it is what educators do at particular times that defines what it means to be a professional (Molla & Nolan, 2019, p. 552).

In an effort to taxonomize the occupational activities of ECEC professionals, Schmidt et al. (2018) discern between educational and multidisciplinary activities. Educational activities are according to Schmidt et al. (2018), the ones who involve social interaction, such as teaching, caring, educating, advising, supervising children and cooperation with parents, whereas multidisciplinary activities are the ones which involve management and administration of pedagogical institutions and the leadership of employees.

Acknowledging the limited attention that has been given into what early childhood educators are doing during their working day, Wong et al. (2015) have developed a taxonomy of early childhood educators’ work. The taxonomy proposed by Wong et al. (2015) includes the following 10 domains: staff personal time, intentional teaching with children, ‘being with’ children, routine care / transition with children, emotional support, family communication, organize room / OH&S maintenance, plan/assess/evaluate, administration, and professional learning and support.

Rockel (2009, p. 3), on the other hand, discerns between task-based and relationship-based practice. Task-based practice “focuses on the schedule in order to implement the program. Relationship-based practice acknowledges the child’s own pace of learning and the teacher’s reflection before action, which is more representative of pedagogy”.

The above-mentioned taxonomies, although not specifically designed to capture the role and professional identity of infant/toddler educators, are aligned to the need for a holistic early childhood professionalism, which is related to early childhood development rather than on ECEC (Sims et al., 2018), whereas they depict the diverse roles of infant/toddler educators, which include among others the roles of “physical and emotional carer, playmate, resource and teacher, active observer” (Shin, 2015, p. 502). In addition, they move beyond functions of care and nurture, to capture, also, ‘educational’ features that focus on enhancing children’s holistic development and have been neglected from research.

Centrally linked to the role and occupational profile of infant/toddler educators, is their professional identity, that is “how [they] understand themselves and their role including the more informal and implicit aspects of professional cultures” (Stone & Rixon, 2008, p. 110). Literature review highlights that the professional identity of ECEC professionals is shaped both by qualifications and content knowledge and by affective domains such as self-esteem, self-belief, job satisfaction and belonging (Moloney, 2010). Molla and Nolan (2019) have developed a typology of ‘professional functionings’ which includes the following five categories: 1) Expertise: which refers to having specialist knowledge and skills required to support practice and decision-making; 2) Deliberation: which refers to the ability of the professional to critically

reflect on practice; 3) Recognition: which refers to being valued for your work and is, according to Davis & Dunn (2019) a central tenet of someone's professional identity, whereas lack of recognition seems to impact educators' practice; 4) Responsiveness: which involves tailoring practices in order to meet the needs of individual children; and 5) Integrity: which refers to being respectful and acting ethically. However, as with the occupational activities and the role of infant/toddler educators, "a consistent and well-identified professional identity [of infant/toddler educators] has yet to materialize (Harwood & Tukonic, 2017, p. 589). The present study aspires to fill these research gaps as there is a well-recorded need in literature to unveil how infant/toddler educators understand their role and professional identity and how they frame their responsibilities in terms of their everyday practice (Davis & Degotardi, 2015).

### **The Research Context**

Greece is among the countries which adopt a dichotomous system and this dichotomy is evident at all levels: at the administrative and ECEC curricula and educational/pedagogical level as well as at the level of ECEC programs and of early childhood educators' preparation (Rentzou, 2020).

Traditionally, in Greece there were two main ECEC institutions: (i) Child (Paidikoi Stathmoi) and Infant/Child (Vrefonipiakoi Stathmoi) centers and (ii) Kindergartens (Nipiagogeia). Pre-school education offered in kindergartens, which are under the competence of the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, is part of Primary Education. Kindergartens accept children at the age of four and attendance is compulsory. Child (for children 2.5 to 5 years) and Infant/Child (for children 6 months to 5 years) centers are under the direct authority of local municipalities, and the indirect authority of either the Ministry of Interior (for public centers) or the Ministry of Labour, Social Insurance, and Social Solidarity (for private centers).

The aim of Child and Infant/Child Centers is to: 1) Offer comprehensive preschool care, following the most up-to-date scientific developments; 2) support children in developing physically, mentally, emotionally and socially in a holistic manner; 3) eliminate any discrepancies arising from families' cultural, economic and educational level; 4) raise parents' awareness in modern pedagogy and psychology issues; 5) help pre-school children in their smooth transition from family to school environment; and 6) offer daily nutrition and care to children adhering to health and safety rules. Child and Infant/Child centers do not implement a curriculum but they adopt a daily program. Although the Regulation (Government Gazette 497, 2002) does not specifically list content areas, there is reference to infants' social, emotional, cognitive and motor development as well as to their autonomy and academic skills and to preschoolers' academic skills, motor and psychosocial development, perceptiveness and art skills (Government Gazette 497, 2002, Article 14).

The same dichotomy also characterizes the training system for educational staff working in both types of ECEC settings, with Greece being among the few European countries in which two different professional titles are used to "distinguish between similar staff working in different settings" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014, 95-96). Early childhood educators are required to be graduates of a University Department of Early Childhood Education and Care/Early Years Learning and Care, childcare workers' assistants (voithoi vrefonipiokomoi) must hold a diploma or certificate from a technical/vocational college, whereas kindergarten teachers (nipiagogoi) must be university graduates.

## **Method**

### **Methodology and Method**

Although the role of the educators working in infant and toddler classrooms is increasingly acknowledged as "complex, challenging, and demanding and is well established that it requires specialist knowledge and ongoing professional training" (Wong et al., 2015, p. 79), the maternalistic (Ailwood, 2007) view, according to which the work of educators is equated with mothering and is seen as something easy and natural, which does not need specialized knowledge, still prevails. It is hypothesized that among other factors, this maternalistic view prevails because there is little research data about infant/toddler educators'

professional role, what their work and role include and what are the occupational activities they perform during the day. Drawing on this hypothesis and on the scarcity of data on the occupational activities that infant/toddler educators perform (Goouch & Powell, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2015) the overall objective of the study is to unveil the complexity of the role and professional identity of educators working in infant and toddler classrooms, in Greece.

Specifically, the present mixed methods study had a two-fold aim: to understand the role and responsibilities of early childhood educators working with infants and toddlers in Greek ECEC programs and to unveil the type of knowledge, qualifications and abilities needed to work with this age group. In addition, the study aimed at mapping the extent to which infant/toddler professionals feel adequately prepared to work with infants and toddlers and respond to their multidimensional role.

In order to meet our aims, an online questionnaire was developed by the author of the study. The questionnaire, which consists of 27 questions, was developed based on the literature review.

The first part of the questionnaire includes 9 questions which aimed at recording participants' demographic information. The second part includes 17 open and close-ended questions which aimed at exploring participants' views on their role and their occupational activities. Two open-ended questions were used to explore the most important characteristics of an infant and toddler educator. To explore participants' views on the most important characteristics that constitute an infant/toddler educator a professional, five (5) categories of 'professional functioning' were adopted by Molla and Nolan (2019). These are: Expertise; Deliberation; Recognition; Responsiveness, and Integrity. A 5-point Likert scale (1= Not at all important to 5 = Very important) was used to rate the importance assigned. Thus, 4 open-ended questions were developed to record the aims and educational practices of the educators and 3 close-ended (with a yes/no rating scale) to explore participants attitudes towards infant's and toddler's enrolment in ECEC programs. Informed by the study conducted by Sims et al. (2018) 4 questions (3 open-ended and 1 close) were developed to explore participants' views towards the nature of education and care and their co-existence in infant classrooms. To map the occupational activities of infant/toddler educators, the authors adopted items used in the study conducted by Schmidt et al. (2018), as well as items from the taxonomy of early childhood educators' work, developed by Wong et al. (2015). Items refer to caring, supervising children, educating, teaching, housekeeping, cooperative work with parents, advising and management (Schmidt et al., 2018, p. 450). A 5-point Likert scale was used ranging from 1= no time at all to 5 = most or all of my time. One close-ended question was adopted from Sims & Tiko (2016) to explore participants' perceptions about to whom the primary responsibility of different aspects of educators' role lies. Participants had to select only one of the provided answers.

Finally, the third part of the questionnaire, which aimed at exploring educators' level of preparedness, included one close-ended question. The categories / aspects of role were adopted from Chu (2016). A 5-point rating scale was adopted ranging from 1 = very well to 5 = we did not learn about this.

The link to the survey was shared via social media to groups which are addressed to early childhood educators.

After data was collected, it was coded into Excel and SPSS files. Responses to close-ended questions were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze quantitative data. Thematic and inductive analysis approaches were employed to analyze qualitative data. Thematic analysis is according to Davis and Dunn (2019, p. 247) a "foundational analytical method designed to identify, represent and report thematic patterns that occur within the data".

### *Sample and Demographics*

Data for the present study was collected in autumn – winter 2023. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the author employed snowball and convenience sampling techniques. The total number of participants was 51 Greek early childhood educators, all of whom (100%) were females. Table 1 presents the demographics of the participants. 76.6% of the participants work with children aged between 13-30 months, 4.3% with children aged birth to 12 months and 19.1% with children of other age groups.

**Table 1.** Participants' demographic information

Demographic characteristics	Percentage
<b>Age</b>	21 – 29: 5.9%
	30-39: 39.2%
	40-49: 35.3%
	50-59: 17.6%
	Above 60: 2.0%
<b>Highest education level</b>	Post-secondary education: 17.6%
	Technological educational Institute (early childhood educator): 56.9%
	Higher education institute (early childhood educator): 3.9%
	Master: 19.6%
	Other: 2%
<b>Years of experience in infant/toddler classrooms</b>	Less than 2 years: 19.6%
	3-5 years: 29.4%
	6-10 years: 25.5%
	11-15 years: 11.8%
	16-20 years: 9.8%
	More than 21 years: 3.9%
<b>Type of employment</b>	Full time: 94.1%
	Part time: 5.9%
<b>Type of preschool program at which they work</b>	Public infant center: 17.6%
	Public infant/child center: 51%
	Public child center: 9.8%
	Private infant center: 2.0%
	Private infant/child center: 19.6%

### Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University with which the author is affiliated. A general information letter and a consent form was provided to and signed by all participants. Both were providing information about the aim of the study, the voluntary and anonymous nature of the research, as well as their right to choose not to answer any questions, and to withdraw without penalty.

### Results

#### Characteristics of a Professional Early Childhood Educator Working in Infant-Toddler Classrooms

Participants were asked which is the most important characteristic that an early childhood educator working with infants must have. The most frequently mentioned characteristics were love in general (N = 10), love for children (N = 10), knowledge of either the developmental stages of children and their individualized needs or knowledge of the scientific field, of pedagogy and psychology, or specialized knowledge in general (N = 7), patience (N = 6) and empathy (N= 6). As far as the second most important characteristic is concerned, most participants mentioned patience (N = 16). Caring (N=4), love for this age (N=4), emotional connectedness (N=4), ensuring health and safety (N = 4), and knowledge (N=3) were other characteristics mentioned by participants.

In addition, participants were asked to classify the five (5) characteristics that according to Davis and Dunn (2019) constitute an early childhood educator a professional. According to the participants, the most important characteristic is their responsiveness, that is their ability to meet the needs of different children (M = 4.57; S.D. = .84). Educators' expertise and integrity were rated equally important (M = 4.20; S.D. = .87 and M = 4.20; S.D. = 1.26, respectively). Educators' ability to critically reflect on their practices (discussion) was rated as the fourth most important characteristic of a professional (M = 3.90; S.D. = 1.07), whereas the recognition of their work was rated as the least important characteristic (M = 3.45; S.D. = 1.47).

#### Aims and Pedagogical Practices in Infant-Toddler Classrooms

When asked which is the main aim of an educator working with children up to 18 months of age, participants mentioned (mental and physical) safety (N = 15) and meeting children's needs (physical, emotional, motor, mental, biological) (N = 9). Other frequently mentioned aims of an educator working

with this age group of children include to support children to love school and transit smoothly to school (N = 6), to care for children (N = 6), to support children's holistic development (N = 5), to make children happy (N = 4), to provide stimuli (N = 4), to teach children (N = 4), to provide a supportive environment (N = 3) and to understand children's needs and adopt accordingly (N = 3). Turning to the main aim of an educator working with children aged 19 to 30 months, participants mentioned that their main aim is to support children's holistic development and evolution (N = 16), to support children master skills (N = 9), to support children develop their autonomy and independence (N = 8), to meet children's needs (N = 7), to provide stimuli and creative activities (N = 5), to provide safety (N = 5), to provide education (N = 4) and to support children's socialization (N = 3).

Turning to the educational practices that educators who work with children aged up to 18 months use to promote their aims, play and sensory play were the most frequently mentioned practice (N = 18). In addition, participants mentioned that they use music and songs (N = 11), the learning environment of the classroom (N = 5), active learning (N = 5) and storytelling and fairy tales (N = 4). Aspects of interaction, such as eye contact, hugs and physical contact and individualized time with each child were mentioned by 8 participants. On the other hand, the educators who work with children aged 19 to 30 months should emphasize, according to participants, more on practices that promote children's linguistic, motor and cognitive development as well as on children's participation in the team. The most frequently mentioned educational practices include play and games (N = 15), songs and music (N = 12), experiential activities (N = 7), storytelling and other activities that foster children's linguistic development (N = 6), puppet theater (N = 6), a rich in stimuli learning environment organized in learning centers (N = 5), educational activities (N = 5), art activities (N = 4) and psychomotor activities (N = 4).

Given the segregation between education and care in ECEC settings, the participants were asked about the extent to which according to them education and care coexist in infant classrooms. As seen in Table 2, there is not a clear view about the coexistence of education and care in infant classrooms. 29.4% of the participants believe that education and care extremely co-exist in infant classrooms, whereas 23.5% believe that education and care slightly co-exist. As seen in Table, the percentages for each response – degree do not vary considerably.

**Table 2.** The extent to which education and care coexist in infant classrooms

To what extent would you say care and education coexist in infant classrooms	Percentage
Slightly	23.5%
Moderately	21.6%
Very	25.5%
Extremely	29.4%

### The Role of Early Childhood Education and Care Settings

Understanding infant/toddler educators' perceptions about the role and importance of ECEC is important as it can affect how they view their role. Therefore, participants were asked whether they think that infants and toddlers should be enrolled in ECEC settings. 6.5% of the participants believe that children aged 3 to 12 months should not be enrolled in ECEC settings. On the other hand, 86.3% of them believe that children aged 13 to 30 months should be enrolled in ECEC settings. As it can be seen from the results, participants in the present study feel that infants should be cared for primarily by their parents. In order to understand how educators perceive the role of ECEC, they were asked to rank the reasons why children should be enrolled in ECEC. For 18 of the participants, the number 1 most important reason for enrolling children in ECEC is that children should have high quality care when their parents are working. 15 of the participants mentioned that the most important reason 1 for enrolling children in ECEC is that children from disadvantaged backgrounds should have access to learning experiences outside their home, a role of ECEC that has been prioritized in policy documents of the European Union. As for the second most important reason for enrolling children in ECEC, 14 participants mentioned that children need a variety of interactions with adults and peers, whereas another 14 mentioned that children need a variety of experiences. Children's own right to participate in group contexts has been selected by 10 participants (the highest number who gave that response) as the number 4 most important reason and by another 10

participants (the highest number who selected that response as number 4 most important reason) as the number 5 most important reason to enroll children in ECEC. Finally, ECEC's role to prepare children for school has been selected by 8 participants as the number 6 most important reason for enrolling children in ECEC.

### The Role of Early Childhood Educators

To understand the occupational activities of infant/toddler educators, participants were asked to report in which activities they spend most of their time during a typical working day. A 5-point Likert scale was used ranging from 1= no time at all to 5 = most or all of my time was used to access participants' views. As seen in Table 3, participants spend all or most of their time in activities related to care, education, and interaction with children. Listening and responding to children's needs, physical and emotional, supervising children in order to ensure their safety, offering opportunities for learning, and facilitating children's socialization are the main activities in which educators spent their working day. On the other hand, participants spend no or limited time in activities related to management, organization, professional development and self-care.

**Table 3.** Occupational activities in which educators spend their time during a typical working day

Occupational activities	N	Mean	S.D
I listen/respond to children's needs and interact with them to help them with something they ask of me	51	4.65	.627
I supervise the children to ensure they are safe	50	4.60	.782
I offer learning stimuli to the children	51	4.43	.755
I encourage and support children's good behavior	50	4.42	.785
I relieve, calm, comfort the children	49	4.22	.872
I play with the children (I participate in the children's play)	51	4.18	.910
I provide intentional learning experiences for children	51	4.14	1.059
I organize and help the children (in groups or in small groups) in the transitions from one activity to another	51	4.06	.968
Changing diapers/helping children go to/use the toilet	51	3.90	1.082
I teach the rules to the children	50	3.86	1.088
I help the children in other aspects related to their hygiene	49	3.86	1.155
I feed the children / help the children to eat	50	3.82	1.155
I manage children's behavior (when there is a disturbance in the class)	51	3.75	1.036
I help children get dressed and undressed	51	3.71	1.026
I communicate/cooperate with parents	51	3.67	1.178
I communicate/collaborate with my colleagues	51	3.65	1.110
I observe and record children's progress	49	3.59	1.206
I plan activities with the children	50	3.56	1.248
I intervene in fights between children and resolve their differences	50	3.44	1.215
I do the planning for the day/week	51	3.39	1.201
I participate in in-service training	50	3.38	1.398
I help children with health issues	51	3.37	1.469
I tidy the space of the classroom	50	3.34	1.206
I am involved in classroom/school management issues	50	2.80	1.309
I'm taking a break	51	2.14	1.059

In addition, participants were asked to assign the primary responsibility of a list of roles in different professionals working in ECEC. As seen in Table 4, participants believe that their primary responsibility relies on supporting children's holistic development, across developmental domains, as well as the provision of care and education. As seen in Table 4, social-emotional development, arts and children's sense of belonging are the main aims of participants. On the other hand, issues related to nutrition, health, and safety as well to the support of families are a primary responsibility of the director of the setting. In terms of nutrition, in Greece the dietary plan is issued by the Ministry of Health, so as it becomes evident it is up to the director to ensure that the plan is implemented. Children's health is also supervised by an external doctor, whereas in terms of safety apart from the practices implemented by the educators (e.g. supervision of children), the operation regulation predefines safety precautions that are assessed by the



director or external stakeholders. As seen in Table 4, participants in their majority assume the primary responsibility of the different roles, whereas only few of them believe that the primary responsibility of the listed roles lies on someone else, such as the kindergarten teacher or the helper.

**Table 4.** Main roles and primary responsibility

Main roles	Primary responsibility				None of those working in ECEC is responsible for this role
	Early childhood educator	Kindergarten teacher	Director of the setting	Helper	
Supporting children's (academic) knowledge	50%	18%	6%	2%	24%
Supporting children's cognitive development	77.6%	16.3%	4.1%		2%
Supporting children's linguistic development	78.4%	11.8%	5.9%		3.9%
Supporting children's social-emotional development	84.3%	7.8%	3.9%		3.9%
Ensuring adequate/appropriate nutrition for children	18%	4%	60%	6%	12%
Supporting children's health- related needs	47.1%	3.9%	23.5%	5.9%	19.6%
Ensuring that children get adequate physical exercise	66.7%	2%	11.8%	3.9%	15.7%
Supporting children's play	76.5%	5.9%	3.9%	11.8%	2%
Provision of educational experiences	74.5%	11.8%	7.8%	2%	3.9%
Care	78%	6%	4%	10%	2%
Arts	80%	10%	6%		4%
Supporting and promoting children's culture	68.6%	7.8%	13.7%		9.8%
Ensuring children's safety	68.6%	3.9%	23.5%	2%	2%
Developing educational programs for children	66.7%	9.8%	17.6%		5.9%
Helping / supporting families in raising / upbringing their children	56.9%	2%	17.6%	2%	21.6%
Supporting children's well-being	66%	4%	16%	4%	10%
Supporting children to feel that they belong in the team	82%	4%	6%	4%	4%
Cooperation with families	68.6%	5.9%	19.6%	2%	3.9%
Supporting children's families	41.2%	5.9%	27.5%		25.5%

### Infant-toddler Educators' Preparation to Respond to Their Role

Finally, participants were asked to report how well-prepared they have been during their initial professional preparation to respond to the different aspects of their multidimensional role. A 5-point rating scale was adopted ranging from 1 = very well to 5 = we did not learn about this. As seen in Table 5, participants feel that they were rather adequately prepared for most aspects of their role. Adopting family-friendly practices and reflective and ethical practices, were the two role dimensions that received the lower mean scores. On the other hand, understanding children's holistic development, which is central to educators' knowledge base, received the higher score.

**Table 5.** Adequacy of initial professional preparation for their role

Role dimensions	N	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.
Understanding children's holistic development	51	3	5	4.47	.578
Creating environments	51	2	5	4.20	.939
Responsive interactions	51	1	5	4.06	.968
Adopting relationship-based practices	51	1	5	3.76	1.088
Observation, assessment and communication	51	1	5	3.75	1.230
Adopting family-centered practices	51	1	5	3.61	1.097
Adopting reflective and ethical practices	51	1	5	3.61	1.185

## Conclusion and Discussion

Although the importance and the complexity of infant/toddler pedagogical practice is widely acknowledged, limited research has aimed at mapping infant/toddler educators' understandings of their role and professional identity as well as the occupational activities which they perform during a working day. Based on arguments which highlight the need to listen to infant/toddler educators' voices on aspects related to their profession and professionalism (Davis & Degotardi, 2015; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Harwood et al., 2013), the present study aimed at filling the research gap on what the professional identity and the work of infant and toddler educators entails, what are the characteristics that constitute an infant/toddler educator professional and on the extent to which they are well prepared to perform their multi-dimensional role. Understanding infant/toddler educators' perceptions of their role and the extent to which they are prepared to execute this role is of significant importance as it is widely acknowledged the significance of the first 1.000 days of life. Specifically, during the first 3 years of their life, children are most susceptible to environmental influences, whereas this period and the quality of interaction with their important adults as well as the quality of the environments in which they operate impacts their health, well-being, learning and productivity both at the present and at their future (World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, World Bank Group, 2018).

### Attributes of a Professional Infant-Toddler Educator

The results of the present study, confirm previous research (Harwood et al., 2013; Shin, 2015), which highlights that the role of infant/toddler educators is complex and multifaceted and cannot be pinned down to "a discrete list of daily duties" (Harwood et al., 2013, p. 15).

As far as the essential qualities of an infant/toddler educator are concerned, participants in the present study underscored the importance of love and of the emotional and personal characteristics of the educators, such as patience and empathy, whereas the importance of knowledge (content, pedagogical, child development) and training were not given high importance. This contradicts the results of the study conducted by Harwood and Tukonic (2017) who found that the most important traits of a professional are according to the participants in their study 1) knowledge (both content and pedagogical knowledge), (2) child development knowledge, (3) development as a professional, (4) being attentive and demonstrating a care ethic, and (5) the ability to communicate and establish relationships. In our study only a limited number of participants mentioned the ability to establish relationships with families, whereas none referred to their own development as a professional. In addition, our results are not in line with the results of the study conducted by Mikuska et al. (2023) who found that the skills and knowledge higher education graduates' need to develop, both in training and in practice, to provide high-quality ECEC provision include the following: a sound foundational knowledge of child development and behaviour management to future staff; reflective skills about own, and others' professional practice; business management skills; and understanding and knowledge of how to interpret current legislation.

On the other hand, our results are in line with the results of the study conducted by Harwood et al. (2013) who also found that participants emphasize their love for their work as well as their love for children as essential qualities. Oke et al. (2019) also found that educators prioritize and emphasize interpersonal skills (e.g. patient, caring, creative, etc.) as a core characteristic in their definitions of a professional practitioner and according to the participants of their study love will always overshadow qualifications and that although qualifications are important they cannot replace an individual's innate proclivity for working with children.

Even when the classification of Davis and Dunn (2019) was employed, participants rated responsiveness as the most important characteristic of a professional infant/toddler educator. Previous research also highlights that responsiveness is a key feature of the practice of early childhood educators (Chu, 2016; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Quiñones et al., 2018). In fact, Shin (2015) postulate that responsive caring is educational in infant practice, as it is reciprocal and it is not only the educator who cares for children but children also learn to care for each other. However, being responsive and at the same time responding to a

busy routine is, Quiñones et al. (2018), a big challenge in infant/toddler classrooms. The large ratio and the need for individualized response to children's needs and callings creates additional burden to infant/toddler educators.

Participants of the study rated expertise and integrity as equally important for a professional early childhood educator. Partly this contradicts their responses to the open-ended question related to the most important characteristics of infant/toddler educators. However, our results can be interpreted based on the classification suggested by Molla and Nolan (2019) who propose two strands of expertise, that is specialized pedagogical knowledge in areas of pedagogy, curriculum and knowledge of each child, as well as professional dispositions including "having confidence, resilience, passion, kindness, patience, dedication, being caring, having empathy, commitment and a positive attitude" (Molla & Nolan, 2019, p. 557). Adopting this classification, we would maintain that professional dispositions are given higher attention and importance by the participants in the present study. In terms of integrity, although not explicitly mentioned in the open-ended question, participants referred to the importance of being respectful to children's needs.

Turning to deliberation, although previous research has highlighted its importance to combat isolation and lack of professional identity (Davis & Dunn, 2019) and at the same time its role both as a learning experience and as a means to improve practice (Molla & Nolan, 2019), participants in the present study rated deliberation as the fourth most important characteristic of professional infant/toddler educators. Finally, although recognition is being considered as a central tenet of one's professional identity (Davis & Dunn, 2019), participants in the present study rated it as the least important characteristic of a professional. Previous research has found that educators feel undervalued outside their field, that is from parents, educators working in other education levels and the society at large (Chu, 2016; Davis & Dunn, 2019; Gouch & Powell, 2015; Molla & Nolan, 2019; Powell & Gouch, 2012; Sims et al., 2018). Davis and Dunn (2019) found that educators are not valued and recognized due to the segregation between education and care, the narrow conceptualization of learning as well as the societal perceptions about the needs of infants and toddlers and how they learn and develop.

### **The Role and Occupational Activities of Infant-Toddler Educators**

Turning to the aims and functions of infant/toddler educators, the present study sheds some light on the under-examined educative functions of infant/toddler practice. Results highlight that infant/toddler educators describe a multifaceted role for themselves which involves care, education and 'professional love', which according to Shin (2015, p. 499) "entails individualized and personal care to develop respectful and reciprocal relationships". Participants of the study described a multifaceted role which involves providing opportunities, stimuli and environments, facilitating, supporting, designing, caring and educating children. This is in line with the results of the study conducted by Harwood et al. (2013). It is interesting to note that the present study underscores the segregation between education and care in Greek infant/toddler classrooms, as participants' responses about the coexistence of care and education in infant classrooms were almost equally distributed and there was not a clear and articulate response that education and care coexist. Sims et al. (2018) in their study found that depending on the context care and education are seen as split or integrated in infant/toddler classrooms. Specifically, the participants in the study conducted by Sims et al. (2018) who were from Finland, UK and Australia see care and education as integrated and that the one without the other is not appropriate for infant/toddler classrooms neither can we discuss the balance between them, whereas participants from Bhutan highlighted the split between education and care (Sims et al., 2018).

This is also evident in educators' responses about the aims of educators working in infant and in toddler classrooms. Specifically, in infant classrooms the primary aims are ensuring children's safety and meeting their needs whereas in toddler classrooms the main aims are supporting and facilitating children's holistic development and supporting children to master skills. However, in both infant and toddler classrooms, play is the main educational practice that is used in order for educators to meet their aims.

As it becomes evident, both from our results and previous research (Harwood et al., 2013; Oke et al.,

2019) an ethic of care prevails in infant classrooms both in terms of educators' professionalism and in terms of the role and aims of an educator towards infants. On the other hand, in toddler classrooms educative aspects and aims, as well as attention to children's independence and autonomy are gaining increased attention. Our finding is not in line with the results of the study conducted by Sims et al. (2018) who found that education was not often discussed in infant/toddler pedagogy. Yet, as it becomes evident, both in infant and in toddler classrooms the educators are and should be "individualised, supportive, and adaptive to meet the unique needs and interests of the infants as well as their different developmental status" (Shin, 2015, p. 505).

Turning to the occupational activities to which participants spent most of their time during a typical working day, results indicate that educators spent their time primarily on education and care, whereas less time is spent on management. Interestingly, and in contrast to previous studies (e.g. Bussey & Hill, 2017; Goouch & Powell, 2015; Quiñones et al., 2018) participants in our study spent less time on routines such as changing nappies and feeding children and other narrowly defined care activities, confirming the results of the study conducted by Shpancer et al. (2008) and by Schmidt et al. (2018) who found that educators are doing more than most people think. In addition, our results contradict Goouch and Powell's (2015, p. 49) argument that interactions "take second place to task-oriented, routine-based work practices".

Of course, this does not imply that the importance of care and routines is underscored, as we acknowledge that those practices are a central tenet of the infant/toddler practice and that they are instrumental in establishing and strengthening the relationship between children and the educators and in providing teaching opportunities to children (Quiñones et al., 2018; Redman et al., 2022; Shin, 2015). On the contrary, the results highlight the multifaceted dimensions of care, which moves beyond the simplistic image of care which involves "custodial caregiving routines and practices" (Davis & Degotardi, 2015) to an image of care which involves a "highly professional and educational" (Shin, 2015, p. 496) classroom. In addition, our results confirm Shin's (2015, p. 503) argument that educators apart from providing care to meet children's needs, the educator also "employs care as a learning process and provides ample opportunities for the infants to develop empathy and prosocial skills".

This multifaceted role of infant/toddler educators and the broad definition of care and education is also evident in participants' responses about the diverse roles they have and to whom the primary responsibility for these roles lays. Specifically, participants highlighted that they have the primary responsibility for all roles, assigning higher scores related to children's overall development, to providing educational opportunities and stimuli to children and supporting children emotionally. This finding is in line with the results of the study conducted by Harwood et al. (2013, p. 15), according to which educators underscore "the significance of the 'emotional' component of their role while also recognizing the educative, critical, transformative and societal responsibilities inherent in their position.

### **Educators' Preparedness to Respond to Their Role**

Previous research has highlighted that limited attention is given during initial professional preparation and during professional development to courses that are related specifically to infants and toddlers (Bussey & Hill, 2017; Chu, 2016; Goouch & Powell, 2015; McDowall Clark & Baylis, 2012; Rockel, 2009) and that there is a divergence between theory and practice (Bussey & Hill, 2017). In addition, according to literature there is a need for infant/toddler educators to be more adequately prepared for their multifaceted role (Davis & Degotardi, 2015; Sims et al., 2018). Participants in our study reported that they are well prepared to meet dimensions of their role that are related to educational and caring aspects such as understanding children's holistic development, creating enabling environments and adopt responsive interaction practices. On the other hand, they are moderately prepared to adopt family-centered and reflective and ethical practices. This might explain the reasons why deliberation was rated as the fourth most important characteristic of a professional infant/toddler educator. In addition, the fact that they do not feel very well prepared in such aspects of their role may explain why they do not spend much time on such practices during their working day. This assortment is also supported by Nuttall (2003, p. 30) who maintains that "the theoretical bases, curriculum models and other influences to which the teachers have

been exposed, during their training and ongoing professional development, inevitably limit and shape” the way they co-construct their role in children’s learning and development.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Although the importance of providing infants and toddlers with high quality care and education is widely acknowledged little is known about what infant/toddler practice entails and how infant/toddler educators view their role. Frequently, infant/toddler practice and infant/toddler educators are sub grouped under the general category of early childhood practice and early childhood educator. Yet, infant/toddler practice is distinct as are the needs of the children who belong to this age group. According to Sims et al. (2018, p. 3) “the elements of infant and toddler work that are different than is usual in work with older children serve to prompt reflection around key elements of early childhood work in ways that change practice with all children”. Based on this argument, the present study aspired to understand the role and professional identity of Greek infant/toddler educators as well as the occupational activities which they perform during their working day. Results highlight the multifaceted role of infant/toddler educators, as well as the fact that infant/toddler practice moves beyond narrow conceptualizations of care which involve routines, to pedagogical care, which involves attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness (Davis & Degotardi, 2015). These results highlight the importance of both understanding the role of ECEC professionals as well as of working to raise the status of ECEC professionals, both at the research and policy level. At the policy level, recognizing their multi-faceted role and providing opportunities for ongoing professional development would be a first step.

At the research level, future research should employ mixed-method approaches, including interviews and observation in order to listen to infant/toddler educators’ voices about what their role and professional identity involves, as according to Molla & Nolan (2019, p. 564) the first step towards promoting professionalism of early childhood educators is to identify key attributes of their professional functioning. Thus, according to Harwood et al. (2013) listening to educators’ voices we can understand better what it means to be an infant/toddler educator. “Early childhood educators may then be able to better advocate for care (and passion) as a social principle and for socially constructed ideals of professionalism when they are provided with outlets to discuss and critically analyze early childhood educator identities” (Harwood et al., 2013, p. 15).

To conclude, the limited attention given to infant/toddler educators is indicative of the limited attention policy, practice and society gives to infants and toddlers. Given the importance of the first three years of children both for their present and future development and given the increased number of children of this age group who attend infant/toddler programs, it is important to understand what infant/toddler educators are doing in order to develop effective policies, pedagogical frameworks, qualification profiles for educators and standards for quality.

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