

## Chapter #3

### CHALLENGES CONFRONTING KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS IN THEIR FIRST YEAR OF TEACHING IN ISRAEL

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#### ABSTRACT

Novice teachers' first year in teaching arouses great expectations, but it also engenders anxiety and lack of confidence. Research indicates that novice school teachers' induction processes entails a period of challenges, dilemmas and difficulties. However, little has been written about the first-year experiences of novice kindergarten teachers. This research took place in a teachers' training college in the North of Israel where as part of the student's professional development they are obligated to attend a professional development workshop. The workshop aims to provide a significant support system for the novice teacher. The research described here examined the novice kindergarten teacher's dilemmas and challenges during this critical first year, their attitudes towards the professional development workshop, including the relevance of the workshop in assisting them to cope with dilemmas arising from the field. The findings indicate that the novice kindergarten teachers experience similar dilemmas in their first year in the field to those experienced by school teachers. The workshop was not a significant factor in helping the novice kindergarten teachers cope with this challenging experience. It is concluded that the workshop framework should be re-evaluated to make it a significant place for the novice kindergarten teacher.

*Keywords:* novice kindergarten teachers, kindergarten teacher training, induction year.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The induction of novice teachers into the education system field constitutes a period of great expectations; the student teachers' expectations from themselves and also their future employees' expectations. Yet, in practice statistics show that 10% will not return after their first year, with the dropout rate increasing to almost half in the first five years (Kaiser, 2011). The student-teachers expect to contribute significantly to their pupils and to their future workplaces. In reality, the transition from student-teacher to novice or in-service teachers is a period fraught with tension, anxiety and learning through trial and error, exacerbated by the fact that first year teachers are expected to "hit the ground running".

Teaching is a craft that demands an integration of theoretical and practical knowledge. Students acquire the theoretical knowledge in an academic institution, whereas their practical knowledge is acquired in the school or kindergarten. Student teachers are assigned to a practicum placement where they undergo additional training under the guidance of a mentoring teacher or kindergarten teacher, who aims to prepare the students for the reality of kindergarten life as professional kindergarten teachers (Dan & Simon, 2016). There is extensive research concerning the induction of school teachers but limited research that investigates this induction process for kindergarten teachers. The attrition of teachers

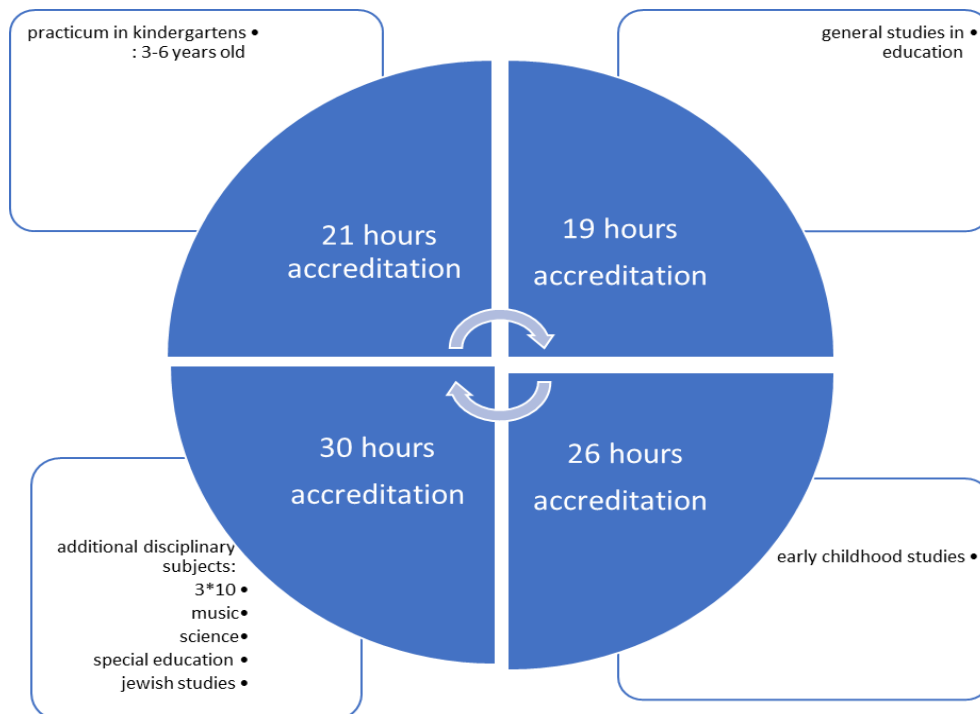
working in the education system is a problem that is costly and extremely worrying in that it is difficult to develop a stable professional experienced core of quality teachers. However, literature in this field indicates that the pupils' success in the educational system correlates with the quality of teachers. It is therefore important to understand motivations for career choices and pathways of early childhood professionals in order to attract and retain the most qualified individuals to provide early care and education, in order to maximize the potential and well-being of young children (Martinez-Beck & Zaslow, 2006).

The research described here aimed to investigate the transition from student-teacher to first year kindergarten teacher, specifically noting the novice kindergarten teachers' challenges and difficulties, the extent to which a compulsory workshop that accompanied their first year of field work assisted their work and assimilation, and also the teachers' attitudes to education at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year. This research was a pilot research, the research population was small, determined by the total number of participants in the workshop.

### 1.1. The kindergarten teachers' training program in Israel

The kindergarten teacher trains in a teachers' training college for four years and graduates with a bachelor's degree and a teaching licence. Their training includes theoretical studies and practical experience. At the end of the four years they are expected to sign on for additional courses organised by the Ministry of Education. A model of the training program appears in Figure 1.

Figure 1.  
Model of Kindergarten Teachers' Training Program.



The transition from student-teacher to kindergarten teacher is extreme. Even though during their teachers' training program the students are assigned to practical placements they are still inadequate in preparing the students for the field (Darling-Hammond, 2014). One moment they are sheltered and accompanied by their pedagogical advisors in college and in the next moment they are in charge of 35 children and other staff members and are expected to know how to deal with anxious parents, who are sometimes the same age as them!

The stage of induction, the first step in the teaching profession, includes the "internship" year and the following two years in the field. This period is usually a time of serious difficulties, accompanied by a sense of a lack of self-confidence or self-efficacy (Dan, 2013). In addition, during the first year of internship, the new kindergarten teacher undergoes intense evaluation by the Ministry of Education to assess their fitness for a teaching licence.

To be able to teach in kindergarten, a kindergarten teacher is expected to have acquired knowledge concerning child development, management, disciplinary subjects, first aid, pedagogical knowledge appropriate for each stage in a child's development, and to know how to organize the children's day-to-day pedagogical activities and encourage children's play, all within a positive atmosphere. Additionally, the future kindergarten teacher should know how to identify children with special needs and how to enter into a significant dialogue with parents. Kindergarten teachers are also expected to act as educational leaders and experts on preschool education. (see Ministry of Education, n.d.).

Work hours are long and there are no additional professional adult staff that the kindergarten teacher can consult with in the process of decision-making during the day's activities. The kindergarten teacher works with auxiliary staff that are not on the same professional level and do not have the same responsibilities. The quality of the team work between the kindergarten teacher and their staff can play a major role in the novice kindergarten teacher's feelings of professional competency (Oplatka & Eisenberg, 2007). In time, if the kindergarten teacher remains in the profession, they attain a level of confidence coupled with maturity that comes with increased experience and thus their professional work reaches a higher level. In addition, and unique to this system, a kindergarten teacher is considered the "kindergarten manager" from their first year after internship. In most professions, including school teaching, the practitioner can only assume the responsibility of management after years of experience, and only after their work is recognized and appreciated by their superiors.

## **1.2. Professional development of kindergarten teachers**

The relevant literature offers several models of teachers' professional development. Yet here too, little has been written about the specific professional development of kindergarten teachers. One well-known model proposed by Lilian Katz (1972) describes four periods in the kindergarten teachers' professional development: (1) Survival - first year; (2) Consolidation –second and third year; (3) Renewal - third and fourth year and (5) Maturity - fourth and fifth year. During the survival stage, the kindergarten teacher will question: "Can I make it to the end of the week?" "Can I really do this work day after day?" Survivors focus on their own needs and have little understanding of the needs of the children in their care. The teaching styles of the kindergarten teacher at this stage are usually teacher-orientated to allow them a feeling of control (Stroot et al., 1998).

In comparison, Fuller and Brown (1975) suggested another model, which investigated the sequences of concern that arose during the period of preservice. At the first stage, the student-teachers identify more with their pupils than with their role as a teacher. At the

second stage, the students become concerned with survival, while at the third stage they become concerned about their competency as teachers but not yet about what the pupils are learning, during the final stage they became concerned about what their pupils are learning and began to see their pupils as individuals with needs (Stroot et al., 1998).

It can therefore be deduced from the literature that novice kindergarten teachers need assistance and guidance during their induction into the profession. If they are not assisted in this manner, the quality of the educational programs may be negatively affected, and the real needs of the children may not be met (Doan, 2016). Jillian Rodd (2012) in her book suggests that novice kindergarten teachers may have difficulties in integrating practice and theory, or as Manlove indicates, they may become physically exhausted (Manlove, 1993); and some may leave the profession (Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia, 2012).

Other research concerning school teachers, tends to distinguish three separate periods of a teacher's professional development: the first period is characterized by stress and concern for themselves, insecurity, confusion, trial and error, a struggle to survive as they transition from training and begin to work in the field. The second period involves concerns about the job, this is the adjustment stage, involving establishment, growth and strengthening of self-esteem and the third period typically shows concern for the student, a maturation stage, with more control and professionalization (Peleg, 1992).

### **1.3. Difficulties of novice teachers**

The transition from college to the field can be traumatic because of unreal expectations that the preservice teachers have regarding their future teaching experience. Until actually practicing teaching, student-teacher's impressions of teaching are usually based on their own previous subjective experiences of the teacher's image as school students and very often there is a "reality shock" when they actually reach the field and assume the role themselves (Weinstein, 1988). According to extensive literature concerning teachers' training, the new teacher's experiences in their first year of teaching determine their conceptualizations and beliefs concerning what it means to be a teacher, what is teaching, what it means to teach pupils and their understanding of the school environment (Gold, 1996; Gratch, 1998). In addition, a link has been found between the early experiences of novice teachers and their ability to continue to be teachers and develop in this profession (Chapman & Green, 1986). A teacher's formal professional development includes three stages: preservice - as a student teacher: induction –the first years of teaching and the final stage, experienced teacher. According to student-teachers, practical experience in the field was more significant to their professional training than attending courses in the "ivory tower" (Schempp, Sparkes, & Templin, 1999).

The induction stage is generally considered the most difficult of all stages. Difficulties indicated by novice teachers included: class discipline, pupils' motivation, pupils' diverse needs, relationships with parents, pupil evaluation, stress and many tasks to be completed, the knowledge needed to teach disciplinary subjects and many others (Veenman, 1984). According to Heath-Camp and Camp (1990) the difficulties addressed three areas: school policies, the students (behaviour) and internal struggles (self-confidence, time management and organizational skills). Teachers' ability to survive depends on the support systems or the barriers that are erected during these first years.

The problems indicated above may come from different sources:

1. The student-teachers' training courses are too theoretical.
2. The student-teachers' belief system is unrealistic or too fixated.
3. The student-teachers' professional training did not address the area of the student's beliefs (Gavish & Friedman, 2011). The student-teacher's beliefs and

mental concepts of what it means to be a teacher form their "vision" of their future teaching experience (Bullough & Gitlin, 1995). This often includes their expectation that they will have positive inter-personal relationships with their future pupils and they are not able to conceptualize anything else, hindering their ability to deal with conflictual situations with future pupils (Gavish & Friedman, 2011).

Teachers' training colleges and universities need to challenge student-teacher's previous conceptualizations. Without the ability to re-examine these previous beliefs and perceptions the future novice teachers will enter the professional field unprepared for the teaching reality.

Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, Kocher, Elliot, and Sanchez (2015) suggest a more complex view of the role of the modern educator, indicating that since educational work is complex, it demands continuous critical reflection, a pedagogy of listening and constructivist research. If this is so then novice educators should receive ongoing support during their professional development.

To become a teacher or a kindergarten teacher is a process that necessitates tenacity and understanding, this is a complex process that can take years. To become a proficient kindergarten teacher, who is confident and able to meet work demands, challenges the teacher's previous belief system and the student-teacher needs to realize that the first few years of practical work in the field are also part of the initial training. The significance of the present innovative research is that it attempts to reappraise the support system that student kindergarten teachers receive after their professional training and perhaps to try and close the gap between the ivory tower and the actual reality in the field.

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1. Participants**

Participants in this study were kindergarten teachers in their first year of field work: 28 kindergarten teachers participated at the beginning of the academic year, and 23 teachers participated at the end of the year. Most teachers were working in the secular sector (21 teachers, 75%, at the beginning of the year, and 16 teachers, 70%, at the end of the year), while others worked in the religious (Jewish sector) (6 teachers, 21%, at the beginning of the year, and 4 teachers, 17%, at the end of the year), or in special education (one at the beginning of the year and two at the end).

Kindergartens in the secular sector usually had 21 to 35 children (19 kindergartens of the 21 at the beginning of the year, and 12 kindergartens of the 16 at the end of the year). Of the 6 kindergartens in the religious sector at the beginning of the year, four had less than 20 children and two had over 26 children. At the end of the year the kindergartens in the religious sector had varying class sizes. The special education kindergartens had less than 20 children each.

Most secular and religious kindergartens were perceived by their teachers as open for change (21 of 25 responses at the beginning of the year, and 14 of 20 responses in the end), while others were perceived as resisting change.

## 2.2. Instruments

The novice kindergarten teachers were asked to fill in a questionnaire, at the beginning and at the end of the academic year, consisting of items that related to their attitudes concerning education as well as items that addressed challenges and dilemmas that were found to be relevant to the studied topic according to the literature. The questionnaire was served at the beginning and at the end of the year to enable to evaluate the contribution of the workshop to the ability of the kindergarten teachers to cope with the challenges and dilemmas that they encountered during this significant period. The respondents were also given the possibility to add their own open-ended comments or to describe their experiences.

## 2.3. Difficulties and extent of help received from the supervisor (in the workshop)

Twelve items elicited data to describe the difficulties facing the teachers, such as "preparing activities", "relationships with parents", "discipline issues". Each was rated on a 5-point scale from 'no difficulty at all' (1) to 'very great difficulty' (5). Correspondingly, participants rated the extent of help they received from their supervisor, regarding each difficulty, on a 5-point scale from 'no help at all' (1) to 'a very great extent of help' (5).

Internal consistency for difficulties:  $\alpha = 0.80$

Internal consistency for received help:  $\alpha = 0.92$

## 2.4. Attitudes toward education

22 items in three subscales:

Conservative attitudes toward education – 4 items, such as "what is needed in a kindergarten class is expanding the teacher's authority", "a kindergarten teacher should remember that children should be forced to learn". Internal consistency was low and thus results pertaining to this scale should be interpreted with caution.

Constructivist attitudes toward education – 4 items, such as "children should be given more responsibility for learning", "kindergarten teachers should be free to teach what they consider right". Internal consistency:  $\alpha = 0.49$ . Due to the low internal consistency results pertaining to the scale should be interpreted with caution.

Optimistic-pessimistic attitude to teaching – 13 items, such as "it is important to me to be a kindergarten teacher", "teaching in the kindergarten tires me (reversed)". Internal consistency:  $\alpha = 0.72$ . Items were rated on a 5-point scale from 'very high disagreement (1) to 'very high agreement (5). Scale scores were computed from item means, so that the higher the score the greater the belief in conservative attitudes, and in constructive attitudes, and the higher the optimistic attitude.

## 3. RESULTS

Data regarding the teachers' perceptions of the difficulties that they faced and the extent of help they received from their supervisors, are presented in Tables 1 and 2, as collected at the beginning and end of the year. Differences in means and percentages are discernible between the beginning and the end of the year, yet they are non-significant due to the small sample size. The trends are described below.

Results in both tables show that the most common difficulty, reported at both measuring points, centered around discipline issues. These issues were reported by most of the teachers at both measuring points, to a moderate extent, and about 67% of them turned

to their supervisors for help. The extent of help received was moderate-low at both measuring points. The next most common difficulty, at both measuring points, centered on the difficulty of teaching heterogeneous classes. It was experienced by most teachers at both time points, to a moderate extent, and about 55% of them turned to their supervisors for help. The extent of help received was moderate-low.

Preparing activities was perceived as a difficulty by about 85% of the teachers at both measuring points, to a moderate-low extent. 88% of the teachers reported at the beginning of the year, and 58% of them at the end that they had turned to their supervisors for help on this issue, receiving moderate and low help, respectively.

Organizing the kindergarten and Motivating the children were the next difficulties reported by about 85% of the teachers at the beginning of the year, and by about 67% of them at the end of the year. The extent of the difficulty was rather low, and about a half of the teachers at the beginning of the year, compared with about 60% of them at the end reported that they had turned to their supervisors for help, receiving a rather low extent of help.

Organizing the learning environments was the next difficulty, reported by about 79% of the teachers at the beginning of the year, and by about 52% of them in the end. The extent of the difficulty was quite low, and about 60% of the teachers turned to their supervisors for help, receiving a rather low extent of help. Next common difficulties had to do with Teaching diverse populations and Diagnosing the various levels of the children. They were experienced by about 75% of the teachers, to a moderate-low extent. About 60% of them reported turning to their supervisors for help at the beginning of the year, compared with about 75% in the end. Help received was moderate-low. Guiding outstanding children, was a difficulty faced by about 75% of the teachers at the beginning of the year, and by 52% at the end, to a low extent. About 40% of the teachers reported turning to their supervisors for help at the beginning of the year, compared with about 58% at the end. Help received was low.

Relationships with the parents were reported as a minor difficulty by about 61% of the teachers at the beginning, and by 74% in the end. About 53% reported that they had turned to the supervisor for help at the beginning, and about 65% at the year's end. Help received was moderate-low. Team work was reported as a minor difficulty by about 54% of the teachers at the beginning, and by about 65% in the end. About 53% reported turning to the supervisor for help at the beginning, and about 60% at the end. Help received was rather low at first but moderate later on. Finally, the relationship with the kindergarten superintendent was reported as slightly difficult by about 35% of the teachers, at both measuring points, 36% of them reported turning to the supervisor for help at the first measuring point, and 62% later. Help received was reported as quite low at the beginning, and moderate-low later on. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2.

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*Table 1.*  
*Difficulties experienced by the kindergarten teachers, and help received from the supervisors, in descending order (N = 28).*

	Subject	Extent of difficulty		Help received from supervisor	
		M (SD)	% positive	M (SD) if difficulty experienced	% positive if difficulty experienced
.1	Discipline issues	3.25 (1.17)	27 (96.4)	2.44 (1.12)	18 (66.7)
.2	Teaching a heterogeneous class	2.64 (0.91)	26 (92.9)	2.21 (1.14)	15 (57.7)
.3	Preparing activities	2.36 (0.73)	25 (89.3)	2.74 (0.86)	22 (88.0)
.4	Organizing the kindergarten	2.25 (0.75)	24 (85.7)	2.00 (1.31)	11 (45.8)
.5	Motivating the children	2.32 (0.94)	23 (82.1)	2.24 (1.20)	14 (60.9)
.6	Organizing learning environments	2.21 (0.96)	22 (78.6)	2.24 (0.99)	15 (68.2)
.7	Teaching varied population	2.43 (1.14)	21 (75.0)	2.22 (1.06)	13 (61.9)
.8	Diagnosing the various levels in the children	2.15 (0.91)	21 (75.0)	2.22 (1.06)	12 (57.1)
.9	Leading outstanding children	2.00 (0.90)	20 (71.4)	1.83 (1.15)	8 (40.0)
.10	Relationships with the parents	2.00 (1.12)	17 (60.7)	2.46 (1.27)	9 (52.9)
.11	Team work	2.00 (1.22)	15 (53.6)	2.07 (1.22)	8 (53.3)
.12	The kindergarten inspector	1.81 (1.36)	11 (39.3)	2.11 (1.45)	4 (36.4)



Table 2.  
 Help received from the supervisors concerning difficulties experienced by the kindergarten teachers, in descending order of the difficulties experienced.

	Subject	Extent of help received from supervisor			
		Year beginning (N = 28)		Year end (N = 23)	
		M (SD) if difficulty experienced	% positive if difficulty experienced	M (SD) if difficulty experienced	% positive if difficulty experienced
.1	Discipline issues	2.44 (1.12)	18 (66.7)	2.83 (1.25)	13 (68.4)
.2	Teaching a heterogeneous class	2.21 (1.14)	15 (57.7)	1.94 (1.11)	10 (52.6)
.3	Preparing activities	2.74 (0.86)	22 (88.0)	2.05 (1.03)	11 (57.9)
.4	Organizing the kindergarten	2.00 (1.31)	11 (45.8)	1.87 (0.83)	10 (66.7)
.5	Motivating the children	2.24 (1.20)	14 (60.9)	2.67 (1.29)	9 (56.2)
.6	Organizing learning environments	2.24 (0.99)	15 (68.2)	2.00 (0.89)	7 (58.3)
.7	Teaching varied population	2.22 (1.06)	13 (61.9)	2.73 (1.16)	13 (76.5)
.8	Diagnosing the various levels in the children	2.22 (1.06)	12 (57.1)	2.47 (1.12)	13 (72.2)
.9	Leading outstanding children	1.83 (1.15)	8 (40.0)	2.09 (1.14)	7 (58.3)
.10	Relationships with the parents	2.46 (1.27)	9 (52.9)	2.86 (1.35)	11 (64.7)
.11	Team work	2.07 (1.22)	8 (53.3)	3.21 (1.63)	9 (60.0)
.12	The kindergarten inspector	2.11 (1.45)	4 (36.4)	2.63 (1.41)	5 (62.5)

Data regarding the teachers' attitudes toward education and teaching at the two measuring points are presented in Table 3. Results indicate that a moderate mean grade was given for conservative attitudes to education at both measuring points, with no significant difference between the two measuring points ( $p = .391$ ). About 40% of the teachers disagreed with these attitudes, about 50% moderately agreed with them, and a few teachers agreed with them. Constructivist attitudes to education were awarded a relatively high mean at the beginning of the year, and a lower mean at the end, there was a significant difference between the means at the two different measuring points ( $t(49) = 3.02, p = .004$ ). At the beginning of the year about 70% of the teachers agreed with these attitudes, compared with about 55% at the end. About 30% of the teachers moderately agreed with the constructivist attitudes at both measuring points, and a few teachers disagreed with them at the end, compared with no disagreement at the first time point. Optimistic attitudes to teaching were awarded a moderate-high mean at both times, with no significant difference between the means at the two different measuring points ( $p = .601$ ). About 70% of the teachers agreed with the optimistic attitudes at both times, and most others moderately agreed with them.

Table 3.  
Distribution of the teachers' attitudes toward education and teaching ( $N = 28$ ).

	Disagree <i>N</i> (%)	Some what agree <i>N</i> (%)	Agree <i>N</i> (%)	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
Conservative attitudes toward education	8 (28.6)	12 (42.9)	8 (28.6)	3.10 (0.61)
Constructive attitudes toward education	---	8 (28.6)	20 (71.4)	4.00 (0.52)
Optimistic attitude to teaching	1 (3.6)	7 (25.0)	20 (71.4)	3.67 (0.69)

Finally, correlations were calculated between the total scores for the difficulties faced by the teachers, the help they received from their supervisors, and the teachers' attitudes toward education. One significant correlation was detected at the end of the year, between constructivist attitudes and the extent of the supervisor's help -  $r = .59, p = .003$ . That is, the more the teachers held constructivist attitudes toward education, the more they reported receiving help from their supervisors when faced with difficulties.

Additionally, correlations were calculated between education sector, class size, and openness for change, and the total scores for the difficulties faced by the teachers, the help they received from their supervisors, and the attitudes toward education. One result was found significant. Over time, teachers in the secular sector reported experiencing a greater extent of difficulties than teachers in the religious sector ( $M = 2.29, SD = 0.51, n = 37$ , versus  $M = 1.73, SD = .35, n = 10, t(45) = 3.24, p = .002$ ). No other significant findings were found in this regard.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The research aimed to identify the difficulties and challenges that novice kindergarten teachers experienced in the first year of their professional life. In addition, it also examined the level of assistance that the novice teachers received from their supervisor in a workshop that is part of the support system for the novice kindergarten teachers in their first year. The research also looked at the novice teachers' attitudes to teaching at the beginning and at the end of the year.

The challenges that the new kindergarten teachers encountered in this first critical year were similar to those indicated in extensive literature concerning novice school teachers: Class discipline, motivation of the pupils, different needs of the pupils, relationships with parents (Veenman, 1984). The research indicates that the preparation of the student kindergarten teachers is not adequate in providing them with all the practical knowledge of what being a kindergarten teacher entail. This indicates that it is necessary to reevaluate the emphasis in the traditional teachers training programs at an academic level. What is new in this study is that it focuses on kindergarten teachers. There seems to be a general perception that training to be a kindergarten teacher is not as difficult as training to be a teacher in school, this study shows that being a kindergarten teacher is as demanding and entails the ability to cope with diverse challenges and dilemmas. A kindergarten teacher's training is especially important since these teachers build the educational foundations for the child that will later enter the public or private school systems. The induction process for kindergarten teachers necessitates several means of support to assist the novice teachers on their entry into the kindergarten education system in an optimal manner. This research shows that the obligatory workshop is not an efficient source in the essential support system in this critical year.

The research presented in this article described the difficulties encountered by novice kindergarten teachers in their first year of their teaching careers and their attitudes towards education. We learn from this study that the induction process is a long and process but there are several milestones at which it is possible to improve this process in order to form a more fortified new generation of graduates. Future studies could explore the importance of increased, well-organized clinical practice that is integrated with the academic studies, as a better way of improving the preparation of new kindergarten teachers.

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