


Exploring the Relationship Between Preservice Teachers' Professional Identity, Professional Perceptions, and Social Support*

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Abstract

This research aimed to examine the relationship between teacher identity, their perceptions of teaching, demographic variables, and social support. A relational research model was used in the study. 692 preservice teachers studying at a state university in the Aegean region participated in the study. The data tools were the personal information, Pre-Professional Teacher Identity, Fit-Choice Scale, and Social Support Scale. Data were analyzed using the Structural Equation Model (SEM). Results showed that there was a positive statistical relationship between the perception and social support. It was determined that teacher support was mostly related to social status, while friend support was statistically significantly and positively related to social status, satisfaction, and high demand. Family support was found to be statistically significantly and positively related only to the busy work sub-dimension. Satisfaction with choice was related to all teacher identity dimensions. Salary and expert career were significantly related to only participation as a teacher. The future studies and implications were discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

TEACHING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Identity, which emerges as a result of an individual's social relationships, is expressed as the unchanging character of the individual's ways of expressing himself/herself, thinking and developing (Beijaard et al., 2004; White, 2009). Professional identity is the individual's ability to define himself/herself professionally by having professional knowledge, skills and behaviors, professional philosophy, beliefs and values and to reflect them in his/her behavior, and to be able to fulfill his/her professional roles in harmony with his/her other roles (Atik, 2022; Beijaard et al., 2004). Accordingly, the professional identity of the teacher is defined in relation to who the teacher is, how he/she interacts with his/her environment, and how he/she uses his personal identity when designing and implementing teaching (Zembylas, 2003). Thus, teachers' professional identity affects organizing the learning environment and their tendency to innovation and reform (Canrinus et al., 2012).

The development of teachers' professional identity is a multifaceted and dynamic process (Beijaard et al., 2000). It can be said that cognitive, affective and behavioral factors such as teachers' attitudes, beliefs, socioeconomic levels, pre-service education, professional knowledge, work motivation, self-efficacy, and professional commitment are effective in the process of formation of the teacher's professional identity (Akerson et al., 2014; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Flores & Da, 2006; Hong, 2010).

Pre-service teachers' professional identity has been recently paid a great interest of researchers in the fields since pre-service teacher education plays important role on the development of the teacher professional identity. Research has been evidenced that the professional identities of pre-service teachers are affected by variables including social environment, individual characteristics, pre-higher education life and teaching practice experiences (Aykaç et al., 2017; Ulubey et al., 2018). During the teacher education, the field knowledge and professional experience provided by teacher training institutions enable preservice teachers to get to know the profession and develop their professional identity (Anspal et al., 2012). The courses taken by teacher candidates, school experience, family influence and learning experiences during childhood contribute to the formation of their professional identities (Knowles, 1992).

PERCEPTION OF TEACHING PROFESSION

One of the important variables that effect teachers' ability to fulfill the requirements of their profession is motivation. Motivation is expressed as the internal and external driving force that provides energy for individuals to meet their expectations and needs while performing a task. Many theories have been developed to investigate the motivations of students and teachers in the learning-teaching process. One of these is the expectation value theory. According to this theory, a person's motivation to accomplish a task depends on the possibility of achieving that task and how valuable he/she sees that task (Duy, 2017). Expectancy value theory has been adapted to investigate teachers' professional motivations and factors affecting teacher selection (Watt and Richardson, 2007). Teaching professional motivation has two sub-dimensions: perception and motivation. The perception dimension used in this study has seven dimensions: salary, busy work, social dissuasion, social status, choice satisfaction and specialty training (Kılınç et al. 2012). It is seen that there are studies in the literature examining teachers' professional perceptions and emphasizing their importance (Cerit & Özdemir, 2015; De Wet, 2016; Jones et al., 2007; Kılınç et al. 2012; Korucuk & Havadar, 2023; Lui & Onwuegbuzie, 2012; Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support is the social opportunities provided to the individual by his social environment (Cohen et al., 2000). The concept of support is effective in many areas and also has an important place

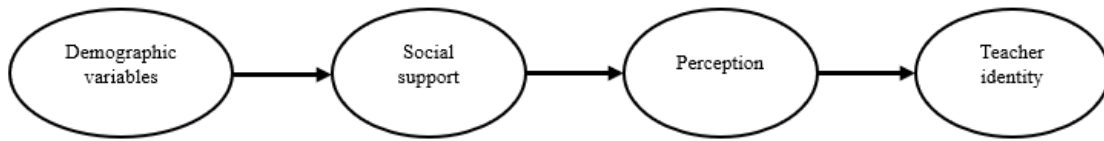
in teacher education. It is stated that the support from teachers' colleagues, school administrators and families is important for the teaching profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Teachers stated that when they had problems while fulfilling the requirements of their profession, they solved the problems with the support they received from other colleagues (Soini et al., 2010) and that they enjoyed working (Pogodzinski, 2013). It has been determined that teachers who receive support from their colleagues in the learning-teaching process make teaching more successful (Gersten et al., 2001). On the other hand, it has been observed that teachers who cannot receive professional support have difficulty in continuing their profession (Goddard & Goddard, 2006). In this regard, Le Cornu (2005) thinks that support in teacher training will contribute to professional development. Teachers may experience difficulties and stress in the first years of their career (Chan, 2002; Hagger et al., 2011). Support at the beginning of a teaching career strengthens teachers professionally (Hobson, 2009; Pogodzinski, 2013). Providing the support given to preservice teachers during the teacher education process while performing the teaching profession may contribute to their preparation for the profession. In teacher education, instructors' feedback on the learning-teaching process can make preservice teachers feel more comfortable. Additionally, receiving support from friends in the face of difficulties for preservice teachers may make their job easier professionally (Ferguson, 2011; Soini et al., 2010). The financial and moral support that preservice teachers receive from their families to continue their education process will enable them to be better prepared for the profession. As a result, the support that preservice teachers can receive from their instructors, classmates and families during the pre-service period can help them solve their professional problems.

RELATIONSHIP WITH TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY, PERCEPTION OF TEACHING AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

It is thought that there is a relationship between teachers' professional identities, the social support they receive and their perception of teaching. The results of studies in the literature also support this relationship. For example, Akerson et al. (2014) stated that being accepted and supported by the school administration and colleagues has an impact on the formation of teachers' professional identities. Aykaç et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of the social environment in the formation of the teacher's professional identity. Bacakoğlu (2018) found that family and close environment are effective in the formation of teacher identity. Soydaş (2020) concluded that teachers' professional stakeholders are effective in the formation of teacher identity. Canrinus et al. (2012) stated that teachers' professional commitment, job satisfaction and motivation are important in the formation of teachers' professional identity. Kelchtermans (1993) found that work motivation is effective in choosing the teaching profession, continuing the profession, or leaving the profession. Živković (2013) concluded that motivation is important in the formation of teacher identity. He emphasized that the change in teachers' job satisfaction, salary satisfaction, emotional professional commitment and motivation levels is important. Pedretti et al. (2008) concluded in their study that perceptions of social support, belonging and independence have an impact on teachers' motivation and identity perception. Based on the results of this research, it can be said that teachers' professional identity is related to their perception of teaching and social support.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between teachers' professional identities, their perceptions of teaching, and social support by utilizing structural equation modeling. Based on the previous research and theoretical approaches, it was hypothesized that demographic variables predicted social supports. Then, social support contributed to the perceptions of preservice teachers. Lastly, it was hypothesized that perception of pre-service teachers estimated their professional identity. The hypothesized structural equation model was displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *The Hypothesized Model*



METHOD

RESEARCH DESIGN

The relational research method was used as the purpose of the study was to examine the contribution of the demographic variables, perception towards the profession and social support to preservice teachers’ professional identity. Relational research model is a research model in which the researcher examines the relationship between two or more variables without interfering with the variables. In the relational research model, quantitative data generally obtained through measurement tools are analyzed using statistical techniques.

PARTICIPANTS

In studies where quantitative data is used, in order for the statistical findings to be reliable, it is important that the selected sample is selected randomly from the generalized sample, without bias. In this study, in order to make data collection economical and time- saving, preservice teachers studying at a state university in the Aegean region were selected as the accessible population. It was assumed that this accessible population reflects the entire population of preservice teachers studying at the faculty because it is at an intermediate level among the education faculties that train preservice teachers, the same curricula is implemented in all education faculties in Turkey, preservice teachers come from all regions in Turkey and includes most teaching branches. 692 preservice teachers studying in 11 teaching branches at the faculty of education participated in the study. The distribution of participants according to demographic and socio -economic variables is given in Table 1.

Table 1: *Distribution of Participants According to Demographic and Socio -Economic Variables*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Variable Type</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender	Female	327	47.3
	Male	365	52.7
Class	First year	201	29.0
	Second year	139	20.1
	Third year	213	30.8
	Fourth year	139	20.1
Father's education level	None	18	2.6
	Primary school	241	34.8
	Middle school	157	22.7
	High school	181	26.2
	University	95	13.7
Mother's education level	None	57	8.2
	Primary school	374	54.0
	Middle school	108	15.6
	High school	119	17.2
	University	34	4.9

Table 1. Continued

<i>Variable Type</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
family settlement		
Rural	164	23.7
Urban	528	76.3
Number of siblings		
None	30	4.3
1	132	19.1
2	182	26.3
3	155	22.4
4 and above	193	27.9

DATA COLLECTION

To measure the variables mentioned in the study, the literature was examined and measurement tools that were previously adapted to Turkish culture and whose validity and reliability were tested on preservice teachers were used.

PERSONAL INFORMATION FORM

It was developed by researchers to determine the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the participants. The form includes information on gender, branch, grade level, parents' education level, number of siblings and family residence.

PRE-PROFESSIONAL TEACHER IDENTITY SCALE

The Pre-Professional Teacher Identity Scale, developed by Friesen and Besley (2013) and adapted to Turkish culture by Arpacı and Bardakçı (2015), was used to determine preservice teachers' teacher identity perceptions. As a five-point Likert type scale, the scale consists of 17 items in three sub-dimensions as self-categorization as a teacher, confidence in becoming a teacher, and participation as a teacher. Self-categorization as a teacher consists of five items and measures the individual's level of self-definition as a teacher. Confidence in becoming a teacher consists of six items and is about to what extent the individual's self-confidence in having the necessary skills to become a teacher. Participation as a teacher consists of six items and includes the individual's recognition as a teacher by his/her environment. Arpacı and Bardakçı (2015) reported the internal consistency coefficient Cronbach's alpha as .91 for the entire scale. In this study, it was found to be .82 for confidence in becoming a teacher, .86 for self-categorization as a teacher, and .84 for participation as a teacher. Confirmatory factor analysis conducted for validity of the scale yield in acceptable fit values as ($\chi^2(115) = 363.4$, RMSEA= .061, CFI= .931, TFI= .929, SRMR= .047). As a result of the test for reliability and validity, the scale was accepted as reliable and valid.

TEACHING PROFESSIONAL PERCEPTION SCALE

The perception sub-dimensions of the FIT- Choice Scale, which has been highly used to measure pre-service teachers' professional perception and motivation was used to determine the perception of preservice teacher towards the teaching profession. Fit- Choice Scale, as a seven-point scale, was developed by Watt and Richardson (2007) and adapted into Turkish by Kılınç et al. (2012) to measure teachers' motivation towards their profession. The perception sub-dimension consisting of 20 items in six dimensions. The salary dimension measures teachers' perceptions of whether they are well paid in the teaching profession. High demand measures individuals' perceptions of whether the teaching profession requires hard work. Social dissuasion measures the effects of social disincentives on choosing a profession other than teaching. Social status measures whether the teaching profession is valued by others. Satisfaction with choice measures an individual's level of satisfaction with choosing the teaching profession. Expert career consists of three items and measures to what extent an individual believes teaching is a profession that requires expertise. Kılınç et al. (2012) reported the internal consistency coefficient Cronbach alpha value for reliability between .61 and .89. In the confirmatory factor analysis conducted for validity, it was stated that the data had good fit values with

the model (RMSEA= .066 and CFI = .977). In this study, Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency coefficients were .88 for salary, .86 for satisfaction with choice, .81 for social status, .84 for expert career, .75 for social dissuasion, and .77 for high demand. In the confirmatory factor analysis conducted for validity, the fit values showed good fit values ($\chi^2(155) = 338.8$, RMSEA= .042, CFI= .961, TFI= .953, SRMR= .041). As a result of the test for reliability and validity, the scale was accepted as reliable and valid.

SOCIAL SUPPORT SCALE

The scale was developed by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) and adapted to Turkish culture by Alpaslan et al. (2018). As a five-point Likert type, the scale consists of nine items in three dimensions. Support from teachers determines the support people receive from their teachers. Support from family measures the support people receive from their families. Support from friends is about the support people receive from their friends. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) reported Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient between .86 and .89. Alpaslan et al. (2018) reported the fit values of the scale as RMSEA= .058 and CFI= .97, which considered as in good fit. Reliability values in this study were .87 for support from family, .79 for support from friends and .81 for support from teachers. The result of the confirmatory factor analysis conducted for validity were found $\chi^2(24) = 76.8$, RMSEA = .062, CFI = .976, TFI = .963, and SRMR = .040, which were in good fit range. These initial tests indicated that the scale was reliable and valid.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

In this study, data were analyzed using Structural Equation Model (SEM) in accordance with the research purpose. SEM is a multivariate analysis to test and determine structural relationships between observed and/or latent variables. Because the variables in the study were determined by more than one variable, they were considered as latent variables. In the SEM analysis, as the estimation method, the maximum likelihood method was used since the variables was a continuous and normal distribution. Different fit indices and critical values are used in the literature to evaluate the model in SEM analysis. In this study, RMSEA values lower than .08 and CFI values greater than .90 determined by Hu and Bentler (1999) were accepted as acceptable fit values.

FINDINGS

Descriptive findings for each variable were given in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M.</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>
Teacher Identity	3.89	0.56	-0.86	1.49
Confidence in becoming a teacher	4.01	0.70	-0.78	0.90
Participation as a teacher	4.09	0.64	-0.98	1.84
Self-categorization as a teacher	3.58	0.54	-0.60	0.89
Perception	4.57	0.57	-0.15	0.15
Satisfaction with choice	5.05	1.38	-0.54	-0.11
Salary	3.24	1.14	-0.11	-0.17
High demand	5.42	0.97	-0.56	0.54
Social dissuasion	4.16	1:50	0.17	0.60
Expert career	5.42	1.08	-0.49	0.06
Social status	4.17	1.09	-0.19	-0.02
Social support	3.98	0.57	-0.74	1.48
Friend support	3.58	0.84	-0.79	0.79
Teacher support	3.99	0.73	-0.98	1.94
Family support	4.39	0.78	-1.38	3.59

In the evaluation of descriptive data, 1.00-2.33 was considered as low, 2.34-3.66 as medium, and 3.67-5.00 as high in the five-point Likert scale. For the seven-point Likert scale, 1.00-2.99 was determined as low, 3.00-4.99 as medium and 5.00-7.00 as high. The mean value for teacher identity was determined as 3.89 (.56) and was considered high. Among the sub-dimensions, the highest mean was measured in participation as a teacher ($M= 4.09$, $SD= 0.64$), while the lowest mean was obtained from the sub-dimension of self-categorization as a teacher ($M= 3.58$, $SD= 0.54$). For the perception variable, the mean value was 4.57 ($SD = 0.57$) and considered in medium level. Among the sub-dimensions, the highest mean was found in the expert career and high demand sub-dimensions ($M = 5.42$), while the lowest mean was found in the salary (3.24). The mean value for social support was found to be 3.98 (0.57) and was considered high. The participants stated that they received the most support from their families ($M = 4.39$, $SD = .78$) and the least support from their friends ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 3.58$).

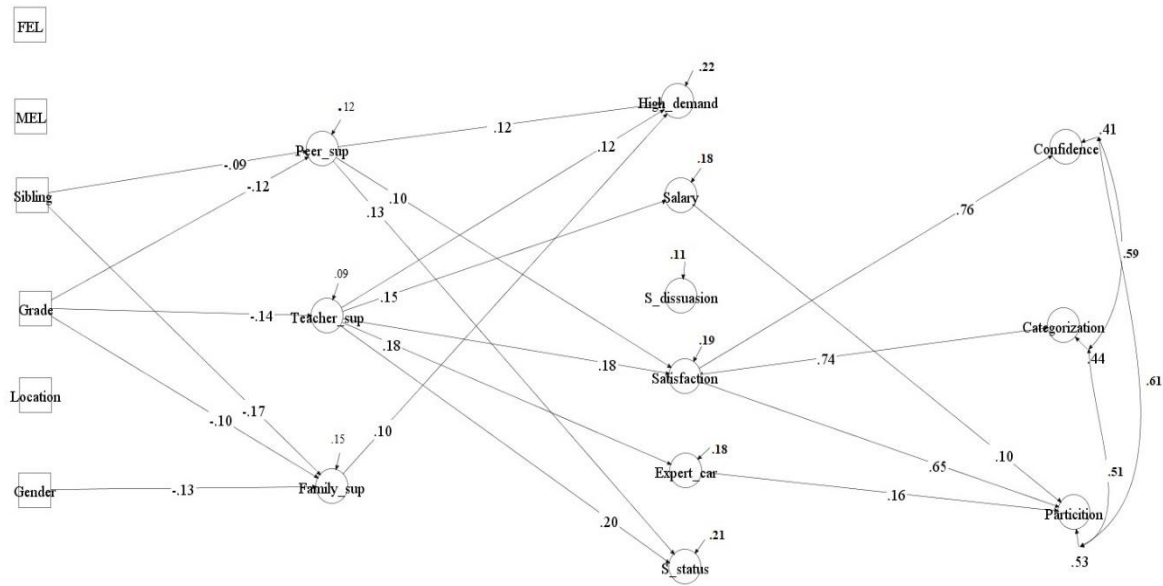
RESULTS OF SEM ANALYSIS

Before interpreting the findings regarding the relationships between variables in SEM analysis, the compatibility of the hypothesized model and the data must be evaluated through fit indices. The fit indices of the SEM analysis were as follows, $\chi^2(1208) = 2837.40$, $RMSEA = .044$, $CFI = .89$, $TLI = .89$. Although the RMSEA value is acceptable, CFI and TLI values were found to be lower than .90. In this case, modification indices were examined, and changes allowed by the theory were made in the model. As a result of this analysis, a relationship was added between item 4 and item 6 in the confidence in becoming a teacher. Since these two items belonged to the same sub-dimension, it was theoretically appropriate to add a link between them. The SEM analysis rerun and fit values of $\chi^2(1207) = 2714.02$, $RMSEA = .043$, $CFI = .90$, $TLI = .90$ were obtained. Since the χ^2/df ratio was less than 3.00, it can be said that the model has an acceptable fit value. In addition, the RMSEA value was less than .08, which is the critical value for acceptable fit. Moreover, CFI and TLI values being greater than .90 and other fit indices show that the hypothesized model and the data had an acceptable fit.

The result of SEM analysis, standardized path coefficients and the amount of variance explained by the model was given in the Figure 2. Accordingly, the hypothesized model explained a significant variance of the teacher identity sub-dimensions. 53.1% of the variance of participation as a teacher was explained by the model. The model also explained 44.1% of the variance of the self-categorization as a teacher sub-dimension and 41.3% of the variance of the confidence in becoming a teacher sub-dimension. In the perception sub-dimensions, the largest variance explained by the hypothesized model was of high demand. The smallest variance explained by the model was of social dissuasion sub-dimension. As for social support dimensions, the largest variance was explained in the family support, while the smallest was of the teacher support sub-dimension.

Path coefficients was to show the direction and strength of the relationship between latent variables. For simplicity purposes, only statistically significant relationships were shown in Figure 2. Accordingly, the number of siblings contributed negatively to family support and peer support ($\beta=-.17$ and $\beta=-.09$, respectively). Additionally, grade level was negatively related to all types of support ($\beta=-.14$ for teacher support, $\beta=-.12$ for friend support, and $\beta=-.10$ for family support). Gender negatively predicted family support ($\beta=-.13$). Since female = 1 and male = 0 were coded here, being a female had a negative relationship with family support. In other words, female students stated that they received less family support than male students did.

Figure 2. Path Coefficients and Explained Variances.



Path coefficients showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between the perception sub-dimension and support dimensions. Among the types of support, teacher support was found to be positively and significantly related to other perception sub-dimensions except social dissuasion. Accordingly, teacher support was mostly related to social status ($\beta=.20$). Peer support was statistically significantly and positively related to social status, satisfaction with choice and high demand. Family support had a statistically significant and positive relationship only with the high demand sub-dimension.

Among the perception sub-dimensions, the satisfaction with choice was found to have a positive and strong relationship with all identity sub-dimensions. The strongest relationship was between satisfaction with choice and confidence in becoming a teacher ($\beta=.76$). Salary and expert career were related to the participation as a teacher sub-dimension. The relationship between other perception sub-dimensions and identity sub-dimensions was not statistically significant.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In recent years, teacher identity is among the frequently studied topics in teacher education because teachers' identity perceptions significantly affect their teaching practices, their efforts towards professional development, and their attitudes towards educational changes (Lamote & Engels, 2010). Moreover, it has been emphasized that examining pre-service teachers' professional identity is useful to determine their views on the learning and teaching process, how they perceive themselves as teacher, and thus, important updates can be made in teacher education (Bullough and Gitlin, 2001). The results of previous research have revealed that recognizing and experiencing professional identity concerns and the factors affecting this process are significantly related to the process of becoming a teacher. These processes enable preservice teachers to rethink the teaching profession about changing roles and help them focus on questions including "who I am" and "what are my professional roles?" (Hanna et al., 2019). Failure to determine the factors affecting their professional identity will negatively affect the learning and self-improvement processes of new preservice teachers' who will start the teaching profession, as well as their satisfaction level with the profession (Smagorinsky et al., 2004). It is because teachers' perceptions about their teaching profession influence their well-being, self-efficacy, professional development, and also their

adaptation to educational changes and innovations related to their teaching practices (Lentillon-Kaestner et al., 2018).

In this study, the relationships between preservice teachers' teacher identity, perception of profession, demographic variables and social support were examined. Analyzes revealed that there was a statistical relationship between the perception sub-dimension and support dimensions. Among the types of support, a positive relationship was found with other perception sub-dimensions except teacher support and social dissuasion. Accordingly, teacher support was most related to social status. Peer support was statistically significantly and positively related to social status, satisfaction with choice and high demand. Family support was statistically significantly and positively related only to the busy work sub-dimension.

Among the perception sub-dimensions, the satisfaction with choice was found to have a positive and strong relationship with all identity sub-dimensions. The strongest relationship was between satisfaction with choice and confidence becoming a teacher. Also, the salary and expert career were related to the participation as a teacher. The relationships between other perception sub-dimensions and identity sub-dimensions were not statistically significant.

Consistent with previous studies (Chen et al., 2020), this research has shown that there is a significant positive relationship between the perception of social support and teacher identity. Zhao and Zhang (2017) stated that insufficient social support negatively affects preservice teachers' desire to learn and causes them not to enjoy learning. Social support is the physical and psychological help an individual receives from the people around him. Social support reduces psychological stress and anxiety and helps individuals adapt to society more easily. Adequate social support helps individuals rethink difficult situations, increases their self-confidence, and helps them develop problem-solving skills that will help them live less reactively (Sippel et al., 2015). Social support from family and peers are important factors that positively affect teacher identity (Shen, 2009; Nabavi etc., 2017).

In this study, statistically significant relationships were found between perceptions towards the teaching profession and social support. In addition, positive significant statistical relationships emerged between perception towards the profession and teacher identity. According to Lamote and Engels (2010), when preservice teachers begin their education process, they adopt student-centered approaches and exhibit positive behaviors towards cooperation and positive change. They may show low self-confidence in their professional skills, especially before their field and teaching experiences in the educational process. Therefore, it is argued that this process creates a vulnerable situation for their professional identities. It is stated that the support provided especially during this period will contribute more to consistent and positive changes in both teaching perceptions and identity perceptions towards the profession (Lindqvist et al., 2017). Martínez -de-la- Hidalgo and Villardón-Gallego (2016) stated that when this support is provided, preservice teachers can develop a more accurate teacher identity during their education processes, especially during school experience and teaching practices. It is stated that preservice teachers who receive this support will be at a high level of satisfaction in terms of their perception of their profession, they will develop more awareness about the profile of their profession and the roles expected from them, they will understand that teachers are important factors that ensure the sustainability of social change, and they will make significant changes in their paradigms regarding the teacher roles and learning and teaching methodologies they use. (Beijaard et al., 2004; Richardson & Watt, 2006; Rodrigues & Mogarro, 2019).

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the literature, it has been underscored that teacher identity is one of the most important variables affecting their development processes throughout their professional lives. In this study, the relationships between teacher identity, social support, demographic variables and perception of teaching profession were examined. Results of this study should be approached with caution because the sample was from only in a university context. Considering the educational policies that can be

developed in this context, it can be stated that this is a limitation. Future studies with a sample from different universities can provide stronger results.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we examined the relationships between social support, demographic variables, perception of teaching profession and teacher identity. Although the research process is limited to preservice teachers studying at one university, the results are important especially in terms of understanding how important teacher education processes are. Research to be conducted in this context, especially with preservice teachers who are new to education faculties, will help reveal the existing problems and help preservice teachers develop a qualified professional identity perception before starting their professional lives. It is thought that this research will contribute to studies and planning in this context.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

All authors contributed equally to this paper.

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