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Parents' views about preschool education

Betül Kübra Şahin^a, Ramazan Sak^b, İkbal Tuba Şahin^{c*}^a*Betül Kübra Preschool, Ankara, 06300, Turkey*^b*Middle East Technical University-Yüzüncü Yıl University, Ankara, 06800, Turkey*^c*Middle East Technical University-Bulent Ecevit University, Ankara, 06800, Turkey*

Abstract

Preschool education is crucial for children's development. One of the most important partners in this period are parents thus, their views about preschool education influence success of preschool education. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the views of parents about preschool education. The participants were 35 parents whose children were attending a private school. Basic qualitative research was used in this study and the data was collected via a semi-structured interview protocol designed by the researchers. For data analysis first, the data were coded and arranged logically. The four main themes were determined: (1) the importance of preschool education, (2) age of starting preschool education, (3) characteristics of preschool institutions and (4) expectations of parents from preschool institutions.

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1. Introduction

Preschool is a crucial first step in a child's education. Parents and society are a part of the education system as are the children, teachers and staff. The role of parents in relation to children's education is accepted commonly. Nowadays, parents' participation is considered to a main aspect of early childhood curriculum models such as the Turkish early childhood program (MEB, 2006). Parental involvement can be increased and supported when parents have positive views about their children's schooling. Therefore, preschools institutions when planning their programs, schedules and implementations should consider their views and expectations. Parents' views or expectations were assessed in theoretical context by some researchers. For example, Laloumi-Vidali (2006) stated that as the level of system, parental expectations were important factors in relating to the objectives and priorities of early childhood policies in the theoretical ecological model. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the views of parents concerning preschool education.

There have been some studies, which focused on parents' views and expectations from preschool education cross the globe (Achhpal, 2000; Einarsdottir, 2010; Laloumi-Vidali, 2006; Petrie & Holloway, 2006; Weikart, 2000) and also in Turkey (Aktaş Arnas, 2002; Kıldan, 2012; Özen, 2008; Sevinç, 2006; Seyfullahoğulları, 2012; Tokuç, 2007). Studies conducted in Turkish context were examined, and it was found that these studies were quantitative and the

* Corresponding author: İkbal Tuba Şahin. Tel.: +9003122106413

E-mail address: ikbals@metu.edu.tr.

participants were generally from public schools. This study is important because it is qualitative and participants of this study from a private preschool. Thus, these characteristics in the current study will fill out the gap in the literature.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

Merriam (2009) stated that basic qualitative research was used to understand the meaning of a phenomenon for participants through interviews, observations and document reviews. Basic qualitative research was conducted in this study because the aim was to understand and describe views of young children's parents about preschool education through semi-structured interviews.

2.2. Participants

The participants of the study were selected purposefully consisting of 35 parents whose children attended a private preschool institution. While most of the parents were mothers (n=30, 85.7%), five participants were fathers (14.3%). Many parents (n=18, 51.5%) had graduated from university. In addition, there were parents who were graduate of high schools (n=8, 22.8%), secondary schools (n=7, 20%) and primary schools (n=2, 5.7%) (Table 1).

TABLE I
Parents' level of education

	Mothers		Fathers		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
University	17	48.6	1	2.9	18	51.5
High School	6	17.1	2	5.7	8	22.8
Secondary School	5	14.3	2	5.7	7	20
Primary School	2	5.7	-	-	2	5.7
Total	30	85.7	5	14.3	35	100

The ages of participant mothers were between 23 and 43, the fathers' were aged between 32 and 42. Most of the parents (n=24, 68.6%) in the study had only one child; nine parents (25.7%) had 2 children. Only two parents (5.7%) had 3 children.

2.3. Data collection

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to collect data. In order to develop the interview protocol, the researchers reviewed the literature related to parents' views and expectations about preschool education. The first draft of the protocol contained 16 questions. The views of two experts in Child Development and Education, and Qualitative Research were requested in order to conduct the content and face validity of the interview protocol. Then, three pilot interviews were carried out to provide structure validity; some questions were rewritten to increase their clarity. The final interview schedule consisted of 10 questions; four regarding demographic information with the remaining six open-ended questions to elicit parents views about preschool education.

The parents were informed about the aim of the study and then asked whether they wanted to participate in the study. The thirty-five parents agreed to participate and signed a volunteer participation form. It was planned to audio record all the interviews to ensure that full information was obtained and to reduce the time taken to manually record the interviews (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). All the participants accepted being recorded. The duration of interviews varied from 25 to 40 minutes.

2.4. Data analysis

For the data analysis, initially the transcripts from the audio recordings of interviews were prepared. Then, two researchers separately coded them. The word repetition technique was used for qualitative analysis (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Using this technique, two coders found unique words in the data. Next, if needed, the researchers discussed the determined codes, and they reached agreement on all codes. On completion of the data analysis process, the following four main themes were determined:

- (1) Importance of preschool education,
- (2) Age of starting preschool education,
- (3) Characteristics of preschool institutions
- (4) Expectations of parents from preschool institutions.

Lastly, in order to enrich the description of the themes, certain quotes were taken from the interviews (Cresswell, 2007).

3. Findings

3.1. Importance of preschool education

When parents were asked about their views about the importance of preschool education, most of the parents (n=23) stressed its importance for children's social development. For instance, they said that preschool education was crucial and necessary for children to make friends (n=15), to develop skills of sharing (n=8) and self-confidence (n=7), and to learn rules of society and school (n=5). In addition, it is a necessary period for children to get ready for primary school (n=11), to adjust to school (n=7) and to develop physical skills (n=2). They also considered that the self-expression (n=2) and creativity (n=1) of children were enhanced in preschool institutions. Lastly, one of the parents in the study emphasized that preschool education was important for parents' education.

3.2. Age of starting preschool education

When the parents in the study were asked about the best age for a child to start preschool education, they gave different answers. For instance, some parents (n=6) said that 5-6 years old was the best age whereas others (n=3) stated that children should start preschool education at 4 or 5. Also, the age of four (n=7), 3-4 (n=4), three (n=4) and 2-2.5 (n=2) were also considered the most appropriate period to start preschool. However, the parents' reasons for the choice differed. For instance, parents said that the age of 5 or 6 was the best age because children were ready to start school (n=2) and aware of what they do (n=2). One parent said:

"Child should start school at five or six because in learning process, she should be aware of what she does and why she does it. Therefore, she can be active in this process." (P12, mother)

One of the parents said that since children learnt the rules related to real life and sharing at 4 or 5, they should start school in this period. In relation to starting preschool at 4, some parents stressed that at this age children needed peers instead of their mothers (n=3) and had a large capacity to learn new things (n=2). One parent stated:

"Children should start school at 4 because in the first three years of life a child needs to be at home and interacting with their parents." (P2, mother)

Being able to adapt a social environment (n=2), being able to gain some motor skills (n=1), developing good social skills (n=1), having a large capacity to learn new things (n=1) and needing a social environment including different people from her parents (n=1) were given as the reasons to start preschool at 3-4. Some parents also said that since children had completed babyhood (n=2) and needed a social environment including different people from their parents (n=1) at 3 years old so it was the best time for children to start preschool education. Lastly, there were parents who said the age of 2 or 2.5 were the most appropriate to start preschool education emphasized their reasons as gaining skills of self-care (n=1) and self-expression (n=1).

Some parents, however, did not mention certain ages and said that child should start preschool after completing toilet training (n=2) or whenever she felt ready (n=2). Also, another parent focussed on the age of starting schools changing from child to child and said:

"I think the age of starting school changes according to the children's social and physical skills. A child should start school when she can gain self-help skills, understand what you read or say, and express herself." (P16, mother)

3.3. Characteristics of preschool institutions

When parents were asked about characteristics of preschool institutions, they focused on characteristics of teachers and school. In relation to teachers, they said that a preschool teacher should be well educated (n=7), genial (n=5) and experienced (n=5). Also, some parents stressed that teachers should be able to establish positive relationships (n=5) and have good communication (n=3) with children. Lastly, some said that a preschool teacher should be patient (n=3) and develop all the skills of the children (n=2).

In relation to the characteristics of schools, some parents (n=8) commented that a well-designed and age appropriate program should be conducted in the school. One of them said:

"The school should implement an age appropriate program but this program should consider more than just the chronological age of children. For example, the developmental level, culture, educational backgrounds of parents and other factors should be regarded while supporting whole child." (P14, father)

Some parents (n=7) also stressed the necessity of a well-designed physical and social environment and others (n=6) stated that a preschool institution should be clean and tidy. One parent said:

"The physical and social environments of the schools should be well-designed. A child should feel free, safe and happy in these environments." (P7, mother)

Lastly, parents emphasized that a preschool institution should conduct various social activities for children (n=4) and have well-educated staff (n=2).

3.4. Expectations of parents from preschool institutions

When parents were asked about their expectations of the institutions, they stressed various expectations related to their children. Firstly, most parents (n=22) said that they expected a preschool institution to support social skills' development of their children. They especially focused on the point that a school should help young children socialize with their peers (n=11), learn sharing (n=9), express self effectively (n=7), develop self-confidence (n=7) and establish effective communication (n=4). Moreover, five parents emphasized that preschool institution should find ways of decreasing children's misbehaviors. Some parents in this study, also, stressed their expectations related to development of their children's language (n=4) and physical skills (n=2). In terms of language development, some parents said that a child attending a preschool institution should be able to use Turkish fluently (n=2) and learn a foreign language (n=2).

Many parents (n=14) stated that they expected a preschool institution to prepare young children for primary education and one of them said:

"I want my daughter to learn whatever she needs for starting [primary] school. For instance, she should learn numbers, colours, and be able to listen to and understand stories. Also, she should know rules of the society and how to communicate with her friends." (P8, mother)

According to some parents, a preschool institution should reveal the child's abilities and inform parents about them (n=5) and give children a chance of active learning (n=2).

4. Discussion

In this study, approximately half of parents emphasized that preschool education was important because it enhanced the social skills of their children. This result is parallel to that of the study conducted by Aktaş Arnas in 2002. In her study, 69 % of parents considered that the main responsibility of preschool institutions was to teach social behavior such as sharing and cooperation.

Although parents' views related to the best age to start preschool education were very different, it is not possible to categorize these responses based on their education level, gender or the number of the children they had. However, Tokuç (2007) worked with 319 parents from three public schools and found that the parents' education level affected their views concerning the appropriate age for children to start preschool. According to her study, parents with a higher educational level defined an earlier age for children to first attend preschool than parents with a lower educational level. In current study the same correlation was not found in the views of university graduate parents thus, it could be considered they were not aware of the critical periods in children's lives in terms of education and development.

Based on findings related to the parents' views on the characteristics of preschool institutions, it can be said that the parents in this study were aware of the roles of teachers and the preschool environment. The same characteristics are also stressed in many early childhood sources in the literature (Essa, 2010; Morrison, 2011).

Lastly, most of the parents stated that they expected preschool institutions to enhance children's social skills. This finding is parallel with studies of Acchpal (2000), Sevinç (2006), Özen (2008) and Einarsdottir (2010). In addition, Acchpal (2000) and Kıldan (2012) reported that parents' expectations from preschool institutions were to prepare children for primary education. The findings of these two studies are also consistent with the current study.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

To conclude, parents in this study stated that preschool education is important in that it support the children's social domain and prepares them for next levels of education. Also, most of the parents expected preschool to enhance young children's social skills. Also, although parents are aware of the appropriate characteristics of preschool institutions, they do not have a general and consistent view related to age at which a young child should begin preschool education.

In further studies to validate the data obtained in this research the views of parents in public and private schools can be compared. Also, mixed design studies can be conducted to obtain more detailed responses from the parents on the issue of pre schooling.

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