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The effects of parent education program on the state anxiety levels of parents of first graders

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Abstract

The first year of school is an important beginning which involves critical processes, as it determines how a new school-child will perceive the concepts of school, learning, and teacher and the effects of this perception may affect future school success. This new beginning may increase the stress levels of both children and parents. Starting school does not mean that parents transfer their role of educator entirely to the teacher; instead, education should be handled jointly at home and school. To enable this, parents need to be educated too. As such an education would raise the awareness levels of parents, it may also decrease their anxiety levels. In this study, the state anxiety levels of 61 parents with a child who has just started the first grade were measured before and after the parent education program and it was found that the program was effective.

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1. Introduction

Starting school is a necessary cognitive task for every child and a turning point in human life. Even though schools have existed for children for thousands of years, it is also true that certain problems always arise during the transition from home to school. If the child has not previously been to a preschool institution, the first long-term one to attend will be the primary school. For the child who has spent the first six years of his life with his family, relatives and friends in the protective atmosphere of his home, the school presents a new physical environment where the bigger part of the day will be spent with new friends and adults, and new tasks will have to be learned. Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (1999) state that starting school is a key experience not just for children, but also for educators and families (cited in Dockett & Perry, 2004).

Elementary school is an institution which sets the foundations for children to prepare for adult roles and where they make the first step towards functioning in the society as responsible individuals (Arı, 1995). Expectations from the children are rather complex in this new institution. For the first time, they are faced with the tasks of participating in instructional activities, observe rules of discipline, follow teachers' instructions, and more importantly learn literacy and arithmetic and so on (Oktay and Unutkan, 2003). Meanwhile, they try to align their

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emotions, thoughts and wishes with these expectations (Ari,1995). It is not possible for every six-year-old to adapt to these complex tasks with equal success.

Shortly before the schools open, children may exhibit nervousness, panic and stress. Also seeking answers to questions such as ‘What kind of a place is school?’, ‘What kind of a person is my teacher?’, ‘Will I have friends at school?’, children may experience fear of being away from their parents, being left at school, being unsuccessful, and not being able to meet food and toilet needs. Such stress and anxiety mostly remains hidden, but sometimes surfaces in the form of questions and behaviors (Şenol, 2004).

The stress factor involves a certain physical or psychological threat. If the stress factor is perceived as an indicator of a threat, there will be a rise in anxiety levels even when a real danger or threat is not present (Raglin, 1992). Every human being experiences a certain level of anxiety in situations he deems dangerous. The fear and uneasiness created by dangerous conditions is a transient and normal type of anxiety, which is also known as ‘state anxiety’. The level of state anxiety increases at stressful times, only to fall again later when stress is eliminated. However, some people live in constant restlessness and are often unhappy. This type of anxiety is not dependent on external dangers but comes from the inside. Individuals feel anxious when they perceive their self-values as being under threat or interpret their conditions as stressful. This type of anxiety is known as ‘trait anxiety’ (Öner and LeCompte, 1985). Trait anxiety is permanent and generally defined as a personal characteristic (Anshel, 1994).

A child who is soon to start school may fear school, do not wish to go to school and even fail to adapt to it if he cannot find comforting answers to the questions that make him anxious. The responsibility of ensuring that the child finds these comforting answers lies with the school, teacher and the family (Yörükoğlu, 2000). Yeboah (2002) lists the things that need to be done for a smooth transition to school as follows: Children need to be introduced to school processes in stages; the school management needs to consider children’s needs during this transition; there should be information exchange between teachers and families as well as collaboration between the school and families; and family involvement should be encouraged. School adaptation programs to be run at schools would minimize students’ adaptation problems, and help them to spend their energy and efforts on their academic studies, rather than trying to adapt. In light of this, inviting first graders to school a week earlier than other grades for ‘introduction and orientation’ has been a fruitful decision by the Turkish Ministry of Education (2006-2007 academic year onwards) (Yerlikaya, 2008).

Starting school may be just as stressful for families as it is for children. Similar to their children, families also feel stress and anxiety due to questions such as ‘Will my child be able to adapt to school, teachers and friends?’ or ‘Will my child succeed at school?’. In addition to coping with these questions, families also need to learn and meet certain tasks and responsibilities that the school imposes on them. This parental stress and anxiety may not only affect children’s self-confidence, but also reflect on their performance and success in a negative way when not managed. What parents need to do in this process so as to lower their stress and anxiety levels is to know themselves and their children, learn the existing and changing instructional concepts, become familiarized with the school culture and elementary curriculum, and become informed about how to support their children throughout this process.

Schools also have a responsibility in lowering family stress. Many countries have adopted family education programs for this purpose. The first similar program in Turkey was implemented during the 2009-2010 academic year, in the pilot city of Istanbul. Within the scope of the ‘Istanbul Parent education Project (İSVEP)’, a five-day parent education program was offered to the parents of 230,000 new first graders on subjects such as the school environment, tasks of parenthood, the elementary school curriculum, the role of parents in the implementation of this curriculum, school phobia, self-maintenance, health, hygiene, communication, and efficient study techniques.

The present study aimed to investigate the effects of this parent education program on the state anxiety levels of parents whose children started elementary school.

2. Method

The study followed the single-group pretest-posttest experimental model. Participants included the parents, who had undergone the parent education program, of 120 children who started to attend the first grade of a public elementary school in Istanbul during the 2009-2010 school year. Prior to attending the parent education program, these 120 parents were given Spielberger’s (1970) ‘State Anxiety Inventory’ and ‘Trait Anxiety Inventory’, which were adapted to Turkish by Öner and LeCompte (1985). At the same time, a ‘personal Information Form’ designed by the researchers was also given in order to identify the demographic characteristics of the sample. The State Anxiety Inventory aims to determine how individuals feel at a given time and under certain conditions, while the

Trait Anxiety Inventory aims to establish how they feel in general, independently of their current situation or conditions (cited in Öner, 1997).

Prior to the education program, 120 parents were given these three data collection tools. As a result of these, parents with trait anxiety were excluded from the study, as were parents who did not respond to the second implementation of the State Anxiety Inventory after the completion of the program. Therefore, the final sample included 61 parents (58 mothers and 3 fathers).

It was found that the majority of the sample were (47,5%) primary school graduates. A total of 91,8% of parents defined their economic status as middle and 8,2% as lower level. It was also observed that 62,3% of the sample had not received parent education previously, and 21,3% had received it once or twice.

The parent education program which was conducted within the scope of the ‘Istanbul Parent Education Project (İSVEP)’ was offered 3 hours daily, for a total of five days (14-18 September 2009) and the participants were awarded certificates. Educators of the program were the school principal, vice principal, school counselor and second grade teachers. The parents were instructed in 15 topics: Introduction to the school and the school environment; academic calendar, school-family association and school accounting services, parent tasks; school phobia; elementary school curriculum; the role of parents in the implementation of this curriculum; first-aid, health, self-maintenance and hygiene; elementary school regulations; the developmental characteristics of students; the role of families in meeting basic needs and widespread parental attitudes; the reflection of family relations on children; abuse and neglect; adaptation and behavior disorders; study environment and study techniques; communication; participation in social activities. The topics and their contents were identified and sent to the schools by the Ministry of Education.

3. Findings

The state anxiety of parents whose levels were high prior to the parent education program was re-measured after the completion of it, and the difference between the pre and posttest was determined.

Table 1 T-test results of state anxiety pre and posttest scores

	\bar{X}	N	sd	t	fd	p
Pretest	34,21	61	7,697			
Posttest	31,44	61	6,973	2,863	60	,006

Table 1 shows a statistically meaningful difference at the level .01 between the state anxiety pre and posttest scores of the sample, in favor of the posttest scores. This suggests that the parent education program reduced the state anxiety levels of parents whose children had just started school.

4. Discussion and Recommendation

Sending their children to school for the first time is a possible source of anxiety for most parents. If parents experience this anxiety, it also reflects on children and at the same time make it more difficult for parents to prepare their children to school. Therefore, it may be useful in lowering parental anxiety levels to inform them about the school, its expectations from parents and children, the tasks and responsibilities of parents, and children’s developmental characteristics.

The present study investigated whether the state anxiety levels of parents whose children were to start elementary school decreased after attending a parent education program. The statistical analysis showed that the program had been useful in lowering their state anxiety levels.

In addition, interviews were held with the parents who attended the parent education program to obtain their views. Of the 61 participants, only 3 responded by saying that the program ‘did not meet some expectations’. Other views by parents included: This education program met my expectations, the program exceeded my expectations, the program should last longer, education should continue in the coming years, I learned how to treat my child, my awareness level is much higher, I wish we could have had this education before we became parents.

Such views from parents also show that parent education has been useful. Therefore, it is recommended that the parent education program be extended to cover the whole country as soon as possible. In addition, studies should be

held to establish whether the contents of the education (topics) were sufficient and measures should be taken accordingly.

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