

Counseling and Guidance Services in Early Childhood Education: The Case of Public Preschools in Malatya, Turkey

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The purpose of this case study was to examine the counseling and guidance services in public preschools in Malatya, Turkey. Six public preschools in the city center of Malatya were purposefully selected and in-depth interviews were conducted with one in-service teacher participant from each preschool. Results indicated the need for school counselors/psychologists to work with parents, children, and teachers at those preschools. The problems associated with the current policies and applications were reviewed and further recommendations were provided in the study.

Keywords: early childhood education, counseling and guidance, early childhood teachers, Turkey

Introduction

The positive effects of early intervention programs on later lives of young children have become clear as documented by the large scale Turkish (Kağıtçıbaşı, Sunar, Bekman, Baydar, & Cemalcılar, 2009) and international longitudinal studies (Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, & Nores, 2005). Early childhood education provides positive outcomes not only for the child but for the family and the society (Kağıtçıbaşı et al., 2009). Hence, quantitative and qualitative aspects of early childhood education have become development indicators for countries (UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), 2010).

In line with the aforementioned research findings and policies, MONE (Turkish Ministry of National Education) has taken measures to develop early childhood education throughout the country. Although preschool education is not adequate both in quantitative and qualitative aspects, it progresses throughout the country. The National Statistics of Formal Education for the education period of 2009–2010 indicated that 27% of children at the ages of 3–5 years old and 39% of children at the ages of 4–5 years old received preschool education (MONE, 2010).

The main aim of Turkish pre-school education program is “supporting psychomotor, socio-emotional, language and cognitive development, acquisition of self-help skills, and readiness for primary school education” (MONE, 2006, p. 12). Besides, according to the “Regulations for Pre-School Education Institutions” (MONE, 2009), it is essential to have a child psychologist in preschools in order to ascertain psychological well-being of children and intervene in the psychological problems of children. The regulation also stated the job description of the psychologist at the preschools in detail. Accordingly, a child psychologist employed in a Turkish preschool should: (1) take preventive measures for the optimal psychological development of children;

(2) perform testing and measurement; (3) inform the school staff about child mental health issues; (4) plan and implement family training; (5) conduct special studies for children with problems as identified by tests, parents, and teachers; (6) make accurate diagnosis and treatment; and (7) support the inclusion of children with special needs.

The regulation also indicated that in the absence of the school psychologist, preschools can benefit from the county's or districts' facilities to carry out psychological services for children and families. However, school psychologists are not broadly employed at the preschools as indicated in this study. Teachers can carry out the job tasks of the psychologists that arises problems for teachers, children, and families. Therefore, this study focused on the counseling and guidance services and related problems experienced at the preschools.

Method

Case Study

The case study approach was sought throughout this study. In a case study, the issue is explored in a bounded system through comprehensive, in-depth data collection (Creswell, 2007). Accordingly, this study explores counseling and guidance services in preschools in the city center of Malatya, Turkey. The in-depth interviews with teachers and overview of related regulations were implied in data collection and interpretation.

Participants

This study was conducted at six public preschools in the city center of Malatya, Turkey. In this study, the public preschool refers to the institutions in which young children at the age of 3–6 years old receive education. One participant from each preschool was purposefully chosen for the interview depending on the suggestions of school administrators. Participants were informed about the aims and scope of the study and their consents to be involved in the study were obtained. All of the preschool teachers in this study were females and had an undergraduate degree in early childhood education.

Interview Form

The interview form used in this study was developed by the researcher. It includes 10 open-ended questions regarding counseling services at the preschool level. The questions in the form deal with the counseling services in the schools, parent-teacher interaction, child-teacher interaction, and future directions in the field. In developing the interview form, the researcher made previous observations and interviews with teachers in preschools to learn and familiarize them with the school culture. Creswell (2007) indicated that in improving the validity of the qualitative research, prior visits to research sites help in learning the culture specific to the research participants. After then, it was decided which questions and contents were relevant to the purpose of this study.

Procedure

After the phases of developing the interview form and assignment of the participants, the required research permissions were obtained from the Malatya Provincial Directorate of the National Education. The interviews took place at each preschool in a quiet and comfortable environment provided by the school administrators. The interviews took approximately an hour for each participant and audio-recorded. Then, interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed on the computer files.

Data Analysis

Categorical aggregation was used to analyze the data (Stake, 1995). The whole interview data were transcribed and read for several times. Then, the data were aggregated into several categories and collapsed into major themes. In analyzing the data, the researcher benefited from the peer review method (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) which means the other professionals in the field read the data and helped in categorical aggregation process to provide the external check of the data analysis process. The major themes are represented in the findings section supported by the quotes of the participants, a rhetorical strategy that is suggested by Stake (1995).

Findings

Counseling Services in Schools

All of the participants in the study indicated that there were no professionals or school psychologists responsible for the counseling and guidance services in their schools; instead, the teachers were providing these services for children and families. Teachers ascribed some problems associated with providing counseling and guidance services which are described in detail in the following paragraphs.

Referrals

Accuracy of the referrals. Making appropriate referrals to specialists constitutes an important step in diagnosis and treatment process of early childhood disorders and problems (Schroeder & Gordon, 2002). Participants indicated that they made referrals for children to outside agencies and professionals, such as psychologists, psychiatrists, and the local CRCs (Counseling and Research Centers). However, teachers indicated confusions about the accuracy of their referrals. Participant 1 indicated that,

There are some situations in which I do not know how to response to the parents' questions, I do not know if the referral to outside agencies is necessary or not, maybe there is something that I can do to support the child, I do not know, I make referrals to outside agencies if I cannot manage the existing problem of the child. I am not sure about the accurateness of my referrals. I just advise parents to apply to someone professional; however it is mysterious to which professional they will apply and get help; I make referrals just because I cannot manage the child's behavior or situation.

Teachers indicated that they relied on their personal experiences in making referrals to outside professionals. Participant 2 indicated that,

I refer the parents to the professionals that I personally know and trust. I need to hear positive things about those professionals at least from three or four people, which are my criteria for referrals.

Interconnections between schools, outside agencies, and families. Teachers also indicated some reservations about the connection between schools, outside agencies, and families. Participant 1 indicated that,

Outside agencies do not provide guidance to the teachers in the process of diagnosis and treatment of the child. They do not inform us or do not offer educational programs to support the child in the school. Families are in contact with the agencies. When I ask families about their interactions with the outside agencies or professionals, they say that they do not understand the sayings of the professionals. I think that outside professionals fail to achieve something concrete. I make contacts with the outside agencies and families to learn about the situation of the child. In some cases, the sayings of agencies and families do not comply with each other. Sometimes, families do not comply with our referrals. There are impairments about the connection between teachers, outside agencies, and families.

Parent-Teacher Interaction

Credibility. Teachers described many problems associated with providing counseling services for parents. Participants indicated that providing counseling for families was time and energy consuming. There were communication problems between parents and families. Participants also indicated that being a preschool teacher and providing information to parents about child psychology were to decrease the credibility of teachers in the eyes of parents. Teachers were lack of specific information about child psychology. Participant 3 indicated that,

Providing child related counseling and guidance services for families is a burden for me. I completed my undergraduate education in early childhood education and my knowledge is limited within this profession. I do not have the background knowledge to provide high quality counseling and guidance for parents about child related issues. I am a preschool teacher and this creates a question mark in parents' minds about the credibility of the information I provide. My undergrad education is insufficient to provide effective counseling and guidance for families.

Acceptance. Teachers indicated that parents' acceptance of child's problematic behaviors and abnormality was the rigorous part of the referrals. Participant 3 indicated that,

Sometimes families do not accept the existing problems with their children. If the phase of acceptance is achieved, then we go on our way, but if there is rejection of the problem, it is problematic. In this phase, you need to make parents believe that you love and value their children. If they believe that you value and love their children then you can go on.

Inter-parental conflicts. Teachers also indicated that the conflict between parents in the family counseling process was also detrimental for the child. Participant 4 indicated that,

When I make recommendations about children to families, there can arise some disagreements between parents which could be detrimental for the well-being of the child. The conflict between parents aggravates the progress.

Building trust. Participant 5 raised concerns about the sincerity of the families,

I do not know if parents tell the truth, when I talked to them they always nod their heads and say—Yes, as you say, we always do what you say—I really do not know what is going on in the houses, I just observe the children and understand whether the parents comply with my offerings and suggestions about children. When I observe the child and see that there is no improvement, then I understand that parents do not comply with my suggestions. I do not know how to secure the sincerity of the parents.

Child-Teacher Interaction

Teachers' way to go through the child: Play. Teachers indicated that they were lack of special testing and observation techniques to analyze children. Participant 4 indicated that,

I am not good at psychological testing and observation but I am good at play. Sometimes I participate in children's play and share the roles, like—I will be Teo and you will be the mother, then he enacts his mother's behaviors—Participatory play is my technique to analyze the child.

Participant 3 indicated that,

The psychological status of the child is directly revealed in play; however, I do not feel adequate in observing child's play. There are 26 children in my classroom, sometimes the age groups are mixed, and there is a high demand for enrollment in preschool in our neighborhood.

School readiness. Teachers ascribed some reservations in communicating with the children enrolled into school for the first time. Participant 6 indicated that,

Depending on my observations, I can say that children feel so alone at the beginning of the semester, especially the ones starting to school for the first time. I am a teacher of a full-time class and all children were crying when the beds are set at the beginning of the year. I was talking to the children like—this is the resting time, you do not have to sleep—but, I was aware of the psychological pressure and fear they felt due to starting to school and being in a new environment. There are adaptation problems for newcomers. They prefer to be alone at a corner in the classroom, they do not participate in play, refuse to talk, share, and participate.

From theory to practice. Teachers also reflected problems in putting theory into practice. Participant 6 indicated that,

The undergraduate education provided me with full of valuable information. However, when you come into the classroom and stand in front of the children, everything is different from what you have in your head. You thought that your knowledge was perfect to deal with all kinds of situations in the classroom. There are various kinds of ways to get through to the child. Each passing day, you feel that you need to read and learn more in this profession.

Problematic behaviors and problematic behavior coping strategies. *Problematic behaviors.* Participants were asked about the problematic behaviors they encountered in the classrooms which are ranged from the most to the least common as unauthorized use of goods, pushing, hitting, nail biting, thumb sucking, compliments about other children, communication problems with children, distractibility and unwillingness of children, sexual behaviors and masturbation of children, sleep disorders, and death grief. Participants also indicated the need of in-service training to get professional information and assistance on these issues. Teachers indicated that they were lack of knowledge about special education applications and experienced problems with inclusion.

Problematic behavior coping strategies. Participants were also asked about the problematic behavior coping strategies in the classrooms. They were also sequenced from the most common to the least common as positive reinforcements, social story reading, having children to think about the causes and consequences of their behaviors, implying drama and using movies, ignorance of the negative behaviors, elimination of the predisposing causes, and explanatory talking.

Teachers explained that the coping strategies of problematic behavior were effective for in-class situations. However, they also emphasized that if the problematic behaviors of the child were related more with the familial conditions than the ones in the schools, professional counseling assistance was needed to work out with children and families.

Future directions. All the participants in this study emphasized the need for the school psychologist to work with teachers, children, and families in their schools. Teachers also indicated the need for the in-service training for the aforementioned problematic behaviors and coping strategies. Teachers indicated the need for school psychologists to provide parent education, testing, and measurement for children and families, making appropriate referrals to outside agencies, providing information about child psychology, and preparing specialized education programs for teachers, children, and families.

Discussion

Early childhood period constitutes the most crucial life span for the optimal later development and growth. Therefore, it is crucial for the early childhood professionals to comprehend early childhood development and growth and use this knowledge to advance the physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development of children to their full potential. The importance of early childhood education is clear for children at-risk because of socioeconomic, cognitive, and psychological disadvantages (Morrison, 2006). Early diagnosis and treatment

of young children's problems are crucial. Making appropriate referrals to specialists constitutes an important step in diagnosis and treatment process of early childhood disorders and problems (Schroeder & Gordon, 2002). However, as indicated in this small scale study, the teachers at the Turkish preschools do not feel adequate to make accurate referrals to outside agencies, nor do they think that they have adequate professional information about child psychology.

Besides, this study clarified the need for formalized training for counseling young children and their families in the field of early childhood education. Teachers also need support and in-service training about child and family related issues. Tseng and Biagioli (2009) stated that sleep issues, thumb sucking, and determining, if a child is ready for school were common concerns of families with young children which are also documented in this study. It is clear that families and teachers greatly need ongoing professional consultancy on these issues.

Findings of this study indicated the need for a school psychologist or counselor who provides accurate referrals to outside agencies for children and families and ensures coordination between school, family, and outside agencies in Turkish preschools. The needs are more crucial for families with low socioeconomic levels and children at-risk to achieve the optimal subsequent development. It is vital that professional counseling and guidance services for teachers, parents, and children need to be integrated into the Turkish early childhood education system. This research constitutes an introductory study about the counseling and guidance services at the preschool level in Turkey. The research area needs to be supported by additional qualitative research conducted at the other regions and cities in the country and other cultures because of the vitality of the socio-cultural context of this issue. A large scale quantitative study could also help in determining the existing problems and in-service educational needs of preschool teachers in the field of counseling and guidance services at the preschool levels.

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