



Priorities for Developmental Areas in Early Childhood Education: A Comparison of Parents' and Teachers' Priorities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine parents' and early childhood teachers' perceptions of the priorities for developmental areas targeted in the Turkish Early Childhood Education Curriculum for children aged 36-72 months. The sample of this study consisted of 1600 parents and 158 early childhood teachers. The study utilized a survey research design. Data were collected using an instrument designed for the study. Results indicated that parents' priority perceptions for the developmental areas targeted in the curriculum differ based on their socioeconomic status and the age and gender of their children. The findings demonstrated no significant difference in teachers' priority perceptions. The results indicated congruence between parents' and teachers' priority perceptions with teachers only perceiving psychomotor development as more important than parents.

Key Words

Early Childhood Education, Early Childhood Education Program, Developmental Areas, Parental Priorities, Teachers' Priorities.

Parental awareness regarding the importance of providing learning opportunities that support the development of children in stimulating, structured, and developmentally appropriate environments in the early years has been raised recently (Argon & Akkaya, 2008; Tokuç & Tuğrul, 2007). In parallel with this increase in parental awareness, although still below the rate in other developed countries, the rate of enrollments in preschool programs in Turkey has also risen in recent years (Bekman, 2005; Çiftçi, 2011; Derman & Başal, 2010). Curriculum development efforts are another indicator of the increase in the rate and quality of the educational services targeting early childhood years in Turkey. The initial academic-oriented early childhood curriculum of 1989 subsequently has been turned into a developmental curriculum in the years of 1994, 2002 and 2006 (Güler-Öztürk, 2010a). The early childhood curriculum launched in 2006

has been examined from various aspects including the approach that guided the development of the curriculum (Güler-Öztürk, 2010a) and the place of the content areas, such as reading-writing, health, and science and environmental education (Gülay & Ekici, 2010; Güler-Öztürk, 2010b; Kıldan & Pektaş, 2009), and family involvement (Yazar, Çelik, & Kök, 2008) within the curriculum.

In addition, teachers' perceptions of the differences between the curricula developed in 2002 and 2006 were also examined (Gündoğdu, Turan, Kızıltaş, Çimen, & Kayserili, 2008). Teachers' perceptions of the comprehensibility, appropriateness, and implementability of the curriculum objectives and the difficulties teachers experience in implementing the curriculum were investigated in several studies (Durmuşçelebi & Akkaya, 2011; Girgin, Ellez,

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Akamca, & Oğuz, 2010; Kandır, Özbey, & İnal, 2009). Preservice and inservice early childhood teachers' beliefs about developmentally appropriate practices (Kabadayı, 2010; McMullen et al., 2005) and educational programs have also been examined (Tanju, Darıca, & Büyükoztürk, 2011). However, studies that target parents' and early childhood teachers' perceptions and the evaluations of the curriculum are limited in the literature (Altun, Şendil, & Şahin, 2011; Bertan, Haznedaroğlu, Koln, Yurdakök, & Güçiz, 2009). Moreover, examination of the parents' and teachers' priorities for the objectives of the curriculum has been neglected.

Early childhood is a sensitive period characterized with remarkable changes in cognitive, language, psychomotor, and social-emotional areas (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). Developmental early childhood programs can contribute to the children, particularly to the children from disadvantaged environments, in making progress in these developmental areas (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Kağıtçıbaşı, Sunar, & Bekman, 2001). The effect of such programs might be long lasting, even into adulthood (Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal, & Ramey, 2001; Schweinhart, 2000). Parental perceptions about the objectives of the curriculum play a role in the success of the educational programs (Einarsdóttir, 2010; Evans & Fuller, 1998, 1999). The discrepancy between the parental and institutional priorities might be detrimental to the parent-school collaboration and child performances (Harding, 2006; Knudsen-Lindauer & Harris, 1989). Parents who believe that their expectations and priorities are not valued might become hesitant to support the objectives of the curriculum (Ebbeck, 1995; Hughes, Burgess, & Moxon, 1991). Teachers' perceptions about the concepts and skills that are imperative for children, teachers' epistemological beliefs and beliefs about the role of teachers and environment in learning influence their classroom practices (Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, & Hernandez, 1991; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Wen, Elicker, & McMullen, 2011). Studies suggest that there is often a mismatch between the curriculum objectives and teachers' classroom practices (Kırkgöz, 2008). One of the reasons for this discrepancy might be the teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding the importance and the implementability of the curriculum objectives (Brownlee & Chak, 2007; Charlesworth et al., 1991).

Parents and teachers are important stakeholders of the early childhood education services. Examining these stakeholders' views about the priorities of the

developmental areas targeted in the early childhood curriculum is important in understanding the parental expectations from early educational services and teachers' classroom practices. Therefore, this study examined parents' and early childhood teachers' perceptions of the priorities for developmental areas targeted in the early childhood education curriculum. In addition, the congruence between parents' and teachers' priority perceptions was also examined.

In this study answers to the following questions were sought: 1) Do parental priorities for the developmental areas included in the early childhood education curriculum differ based on parents' gender, residency status, socioeconomic status, and the age and gender of their children? 2) Do teachers' priorities for the developmental areas included in the early childhood education curriculum differ based on the location of their school, teaching experience, and the level of education? 3) Is there any difference between the parents' and the teachers' priorities for the developmental areas included in the early childhood education curriculum?

Method

Sample

The data for this study came from two samples. The first sample consisted of 1600 parents with children attending public or private preschools in Balıkesir Province. About 36% of the parents were from the central and about 64% of the parents were from the districts of the province. More than 73% of the respondents were mothers and 26.4% of the participants were fathers with a mean age of 32 (Median=31) and 36 (Median=35) respectively.

15.6% of the parents have three years old, 39.6% of the parents have four years old and 44.8% of the parents have five years old child. While 51.2 % of the parents had boys, 48.8% had girls. The majority of the parents had a middle socioeconomic status (60.1%), and 19.8% had a low and 20.1% had a high socioeconomic status. 29.5% of the parents were elementary school graduate, 34.5% had a high school degree, 8.7% had an associate's degree and 27.4% had a bachelor's or a graduate level degree.

The second sample consisted of 158 early childhood teachers from public and private schools. The majority of the teachers (63.3%) were from the districts of the Balıkesir province and 36.7% were from the central district of the province. The participants had an average of eight years' experience (median=5 years) ranging from 1 to 30 years. Most

teachers had a 4-year college or higher degree and 11.4% had an associate's degree. The majority of the teachers were females (98%) and 2% were males.

Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional research design (Büyüköztürk, Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2011). The study data were collected from parents and early childhood teachers using an instrument designed for the study. Scores parents obtained from the subscales of the instrument were compared based on their gender, residency status, socioeconomic status, and gender and age of their children. Teachers' subscale scores were compared based on the location of their school, teaching experience, and level of education. Parents' and teachers' scores were also compared.

Instrument

The data collection instrument was constructed by itemizing the 54 objectives related to five developmental areas targeted in the Ministry of Education's *Preschool Education Program for 36-72 Months Old Children* (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 2006). An example indicator was provided for each objective to aid respondents in evaluating the importance of the objectives. The instrument included five subscales (Psychomotor: 5 items, Social-Emotional: 15 items; Language: 8 items; Cognitive: 21 items, and Self-Care Skills: 5 items) and a total of 54 items. Participants were asked to indicate their priority perceptions on a 4-point Likert type scale.

A Respondent Information Form was created to collect demographic information about parents and their children. A similar form was also constructed for the teachers to gather information about their professional experience and level of education. The survey packages along with a letter that explains the purpose and the importance of the study were distributed to and collected from the parents and the teachers within six weeks.

Data Analysis

Prior to data analysis the data sets were examined for missing observations. The percentages of missing value were ranging from 2.2% to 5.7%. The missing values were estimated using the Expectation-Maximization imputation method with PRELIS version 2.3 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2006). The analyses were performed on the imputed data sets.

Parents' data were randomly split in two halves. The first set was analyzed using an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and the second set was analyzed using a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). R software version 2.10.1 (R Development Core Team, 2012) was used to perform exploratory factor analysis and LISREL version 8.8 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2006) was used to conduct confirmatory factor analysis. Polychoric correlation matrices were constructed for the factor analyses. For EFA Weighted Least Squares method of estimation and for CFA Diagonally Weighted Least Squares method of estimation was used. Varimax rotation was preferred to ease the interpretation of the EFA results. Items with loadings less than 0.50 and items that loaded on two or more factors were removed from the analysis to obtain theoretically meaningful and empirically supported model. Because the sample of the teachers was limited, the factorial model derived from the parents' data was also used for the teachers' data. Parents' and teachers' priority scores were analyzed and compared using Multivariate Analysis of Variance.

Results

Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The results of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test and Barlett's test of sphericity indicated that the first data set (a sample of 800 parents) is suitable for factor analysis (Büyüköztürk, 2011). Nine items had loadings less than 0.50 and 14 items loaded on more than one factor. These items were removed and the analysis was rerun with the remaining 31 items. Five factors emerged with eigenvalues greater than 1 (factor 1: eigenvalue = 15.53, variance = 49%; factor 2: eigenvalue = 2.83, variance = 9%; factor 3: eigenvalue = 2.34, variance = 7%; factor 4: eigenvalue = 1.51, variance = 5%; factor 5: eigenvalue = 1.31, variance = 4%). A varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization was used to ease the interpretability of results. Rotated factor loadings ranged from 0.58 to 0.81. Kaiser's criterion, the scree test, and parallel analysis were used to inform the factor retention decision. Based on the results of these criteria and the theoretical soundness, five-factor solution was accepted to for the data. To demonstrate the internal-consistency of the subscale scores the Cronbach's alpha values were calculated. The Cronbach's alpha for the nine-item cognitive development subscale was $\alpha = 0.92$, for the five-item language development subscale was $\alpha = 0.84$, for the eight-item social-emotional development subscale was $\alpha = 0.89$, for the five-item psycho-motor development subscale was $\alpha = 0.84$, and for the four-item self-care skills subscale was $\alpha = 0.82$.

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted on the five-factor, 31-item, model derived from the preceding exploratory factor analysis using the second data set (a sample of 800 parents). The results demonstrated that the five-factor model fits the data well ($\chi^2=1216.2$, $df=424$, $p<.001$; RMSEA=0.048, % 90 GA=0.045-0.52; GFI=0.99; CFI=0.99).

Analysis of Parents' Data

The data obtained from the parents were analyzed using the MANOVA test. The test assumptions were examined using formal tests and graphical methods. Three dependent variables deviated from the normal distribution and there was a problem with meeting the homogeneity of covariance matrices assumption. Therefore, Pillai's Trace value was interpreted and due to increased risk of committing a Type I error alpha value of 0.01 was used instead of 0.05 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006; Stevens, 2009). ANOVA tests with Bonferroni correction ($\alpha=0.002$) were used as post-hoc tests following significant MANOVA results.

The results demonstrated that parents' priorities for developmental areas differ based on socioeconomic status ($F_{(10,3056)}=2.86$, $p=0.003$, Pillai's trace= 0.02, $\eta_{p2}=0.01$) and gender of their children ($F_{(5,1527)}=3.67$, $p=0.003$, Pillai's trace= 0.01, $\eta_{p2}=0.01$). The observed main effect of gender was due to the parents' priority perception of self-care skills ($F_{(1,1598)}=9.78$, $p=0.002$, $\eta_{p2}=0.01$). Parents were more likely to perceive self-care skills as an important area for their daughters ($p<.002$). The observed main effect of socioeconomic status was due to parental perception of social-emotional development ($F_{(2,1597)}=7.5$, $p=0.001$, $\eta_{p2}=0.01$). Parents with high socioeconomic status perceived social-emotional development more important than the parents with low and middle socioeconomic status ($p<.002$).

Gender X Age interaction ($F_{(10,3056)}=3.90$, $p=0.001$, Pillai's trace= 0.03, $\eta_{p2}=0.01$), Gender X SES interaction ($F_{(10,3056)}=2.92$, $p=0.001$, Pillai's trace= 0.02, $\eta_{p2}=0.01$), and Gender X Age X SES interaction ($F_{(20,6120)}=2.47$, $p=0.001$, Pillai's trace= 0.03, $\eta_{p2}=0.01$) was statistically significant.

The significant Gender X Age interaction was due to self-care skills ($F=13.58$, $p=0.001$, $\eta_{p2}=0.02$) and cognitive development ($F=5.63$, $p=0.002$, $\eta_{p2}=0.01$). Parents of three-year-old boys perceived self-care skills more important than the parents of three-year-old girls. While parents of three-year-old girls perceived cognitive development less important than the parents of three-year-old boys, the area of

cognitive development becomes more important for the parents of four-year-old girls than the parents of four-year-old boys.

The significant Gender X SES interaction was due to self-care skills ($F=7.64$, $p=0.001$, $\eta_{p2}=0.01$). Parents of girls with low socioeconomic status perceived self-care skills as more important than the parents of girls with middle and high socioeconomic status. However, low SES parents perceived self-care skills as less important for boys than the parents of boys with high SES.

The significant Gender X Age X SES interaction was also due to self-care skills ($F=6.67$, $p=0.001$, $\eta_{p2}=0.02$). Low SES parents with three-year-old girls perceived self-care skills as less important than middle and high SES parents with four- and five-year-old girls. While self-care skills was an important area for middle SES parents with three-year-old girls in comparison to the middle SES parents with four- and five-year-old girls, self-care skills was less important for the high SES parents of three-year-old girls than the parents of four- and five-year-old girls in the same SES. Low and middle SES parents with three-year-old boys perceived self-care skills less important than the parents of four- and five-year-old boys in the same SES. On the other hand, high SES parents with five-year-old boys perceived self-care skills as more important than the parents of three- and four-year-old boys in the same SES.

Analysis of Teachers' Data

The data obtained from the teachers were also analyzed using the MANOVA test. The results demonstrated that early childhood teachers' perceptions of priority for the developmental areas targeted in the program do not differ based on the location of their school ($F_{(5,142)}=1.26$, $p=0.28$, Pillai's trace= 0.04), teaching experience ($F_{(5,142)}=0.47$, $p=0.80$, Pillai's trace= 0.02), and level of education ($F_{(5,142)}=0.59$, $p=0.82$, Pillai's trace= 0.04).

Comparison of Parents and Teachers' Priorities

Priority perceptions of parents and teachers were compared using MANOVA test. The results demonstrated a statistically significant difference between the parents' and the teachers' priority perceptions ($F_{(10,3504)}=8.66$, $p=0.001$, Pillai's trace= 0.05, $\eta_{p2}=0.02$). The results of the ANOVA test indicated that early childhood teachers perceived the psycho-motor development as more important than the parents did ($F_{(2,1755)}=13.86$, $p=0.001$, $\eta_{p2}=0.03$).

Discussion

The present study examined parents' and early childhood teachers' perceptions of the priorities for developmental areas targeted in the Turkish Early Childhood Education Program for children aged 36-72 months. The obtained survey results indicated that parents' priority perceptions for the developmental areas targeted in the Turkish Early Childhood Education Curriculum differ based on their socioeconomic status and the age and gender of their children. The findings suggest that parents with middle SES give priority to the development of self-care skills for older preschool children. Low SES parents give more priority to the development of self-care skills for younger boys and older girls. High SES parents put more emphasis on the self-care skills as their children get older. Previous studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between parents' SES and their knowledge of child development (Benasich & Brooks-Gunn, 1996; Berger & Brooks-Gunn, 2005; Gaziano, 2012; Meredith, 2008). Parents with middle and high SES tend to delay having children, they have fewer children, and they receive less support for child care from their extended family members (Kagıtçıbaşı & Ataca, 2005; Liang & Sugawara, 1996; Owuamanam & Alowolodu, 2010). The differences in parental priorities for self-care skills observed in the present study might be due to several factors including the number of children parents have, the birth order of their children, parents' age at the time they had their first child, and whether the parents receive extended family support. Future studies should focus on the relationship between these factors and parental expectations and priorities.

Next, respondents' survey answers indicated that parental priorities for cognitive development differed based on the gender and age of their children. While parents rated cognitive development as more important for three-year-old boys than the girls of the same age, they perceived cognitive development as more important for four-year-old girls than the boys of the same age. However, parents' priority perceptions for five-year-old boys and girls were similar. During the early years cognitive and language developments go hand in hand and girls tend to be more advanced at language skills than boys (Burman, Bitan, & Booth, 2008; Huttenlocher, Haight, Bryk, Seltzer, & Lyons, 1991; Hyde & Linn, 1988). One of the reasons parents perceive cognitive development as more important for boys than girls might be the observed difference between boys and girls in their language skills. Parents might

think that boys need more support in cognitive development than girls due to girls having better language skills which are often considered as an indicator of logico-mathematical thinking skills. In addition, some researchers suggest that parents offer more opportunities that support the development of logico-mathematical thinking skills to boys than girls (Chang, Sandhofer, & Brown, 2011; Crowley, Callanan, Tenenbaum, & Allen, 2001; Saçkes, Flevares, & Trundle, 2010; Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2003). Parental beliefs about boys having higher aptitude and motivation in the areas that require an efficient use of cognitive skills, such as science and mathematics, might be one of the reasons parents considered cognitive development as more important for boys who had just started preschool.

Analyses in the current study also indicated that early childhood teachers' perceptions of priorities for the developmental areas did not differ. Other researchers also found that teachers' developmental expectations and priorities for children tend to be similar (Winetsky, 1978). The results also demonstrated a high level correspondence between parents' and teachers' perceptions of the priorities for developmental areas targeted in the Early Childhood Education Curriculum. There was a statistically significant difference in only one developmental area. Early childhood teachers perceived the psychomotor development as more important than the parents did. Gürkan (1978) found that most early childhood teachers (72%) consider activities that support the development of fine motor skills as appropriate and important for preschool children. Recent studies have provided similar findings that teachers tend to put more emphasis on the development of psychomotor skills than parents do (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Ebbeck, 1995). Most early childhood teachers believe that the objectives related to psychomotor development included in the curriculum are appropriate and sufficient (Düşek, 2008). Both early childhood teachers and first grade elementary school teachers perceive psychomotor skills as an important criterion in the assessment of children's readiness for elementary school (Dereli, 2012). The development of psychomotor skills is important for the acquisition of writing skills in elementary grades (Çelenk, 2003). Early childhood teachers might have considered psychomotor development as more important than parents with the aim of supporting children's readiness for writing instruction in elementary school.

The observed congruence between parents and teachers' views in this study suggests that parents

are likely to support the objectives of the curriculum at home. The concordance between the parents, curricular objectives, and the practitioners might contribute to the effective implementation of the early childhood education curriculum. Awareness about the differences in parental priorities and expectations regarding the developmental areas targeted in the early childhood education curriculum may help practitioners and administrators in meeting the objectives of the curriculum. Future studies should examine whether parental expectations from the early childhood education and their priorities regarding the developmental areas included in the curriculum are developmentally appropriate. Investigating how parental priorities and expectations are influenced by parents' perceptions of their children's aptitude and motivation, and the relationship between parental expectations and priorities and children's achievement in elementary school are other topics that deserve further attention.

Acknowledgment

Thanks to Balıkesir Provincial Directorate of National Education, Research and Development Unit for their help with data collection.

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