

African Educational Research Journal Vol. 9(1), pp. 60-68, January 2021 DOI: 10.30918/AERJ.91.20.208 ISSN: 2354-2160 Full Length Research Paper

Parental involvement in early childhood classrooms: Turkish teachers' views and practices

Deniz Ekinci-Vural and Zübeyde Doğan-Altun*

School of Education, Dokuz Eylul University, Izmir, Turkey.

Accepted 30 December, 2020

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand Turkish early childhood teachers' views and practices of parent involvement (PI). Qualitative research design was utilized for this research by asking five openended research questions to one hundred female teachers who work in the public preschools. The results of the study indicated that teachers apply various forms of parental involvement considering Epstein (1995) six type of parent involvement model. The findings suggest that while volunteering in the classroom was the most common PI, on the other hand decision making was one of the least PI form that teachers used. The results highlighted that teachers' aims to involve parents are relevant to their thinking of beneficial outcomes for children, families, and teachers. Majority of teachers think that parental involvement is very high in their classrooms and they have significant role in that because they are very intent in informing parents, or organizing the activities. According to the teachers, some of the obstacles of parental involvement are; families education level, having multiple children in the family, fathers' absence in classroom activities, parents unwillingness to do the homework, parents not participating in seminars, lack of space and crowded classrooms.

Keywords: Early childhood education, parental involvement, preschool teachers.

*Corresponding author. E-mail: zubeyde.dogan@deu.edu.tr. Tel: 90-507-740-9386.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of childhood learning experiences in individuals' academic success and lifetime achievements are well documented in the literature (Barnett, 1995; Kaytaz, 2005; Schweinhart, 2007). Early childhood education has been considered as a key to decrease the achievement gap in schools and to have a generation equipped with skills that enable them to contribute to the society in which they live (UNICEF, 2020). Although schools and teachers are major contributors to the achievement of these goals, they cannot be successful without the collaboration of parents. Researchers suggest that parent involvement has positive impact on children's learning and development in many aspects such as motivation, self-esteem and academic skills (Driessen et al., 2005; Fan and Williams, 2010). In their extensive literature review, Van Voorhis et al. (2013) examined around a hundred studies related to family involvement and learning outcomes in early childhood and they concluded that parent involvement has a significant effect on children's literacy, mathematics and social-emotional skills.

Parent involvement (PI) has been used to describe families' participation in children's education (Tezel Şahin and Ünver, 2005) or refer to collaboration and connection which occurs among families, children and schools (Sheldon and Esptain, 2005; Uludağ, 2008). Influenced by sociological theories, ecological theory and sociocultural theories in human development and learning, many PI models have emerged to understand and identify the dimensions of the concept in order to help families and schools make appropriate interventions in children's learning (Günay Bilaloğlu, and Aktaş Arnas, 2019). According to Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994), parent involvement is a multidimensional concept incorporating developmental and educational paradigms in children's schooling. Their three-dimensional

includes the followings: a) behavior involvement by school visits and participation of classroom activities, b) personal involvement to include parents' showing affection of schooling, and c) cognitive/intellectual involvement representing parents stimulating children's learning by offering them a variety of activities and materials. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) suggest a two-dimensional model of parent involvement which composed of home-based activities, such as talking with their children about school related topics and school-based activities, participating in school events and volunteering at school. They point out that parents' involvement in their children's learning increase if they believe that they can help their children's academic success and when they are given opportunities by teachers and schools to be involved in school based activities.

Another parent involvement model is Epstein's (1995) six types of involvement model which includes parenting. communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with community. Each category refers to different parent involvement activities. For instance, parenting helps families learn more about the age-specific developmental domains of their children and being aware of the knowledge about creating a supportive home environment. Communicating, on the other hand, is parents and teachers' continuous communicational exchanges about children's learning process and their progresses. Another type of involvement is Volunteering in which family help or support school or classroom activities. Learning at home refers to parents' helping their children with their homework or curriculum related activities. With decision making, families are included in the decision making process in the school. Finally, collaborating with the community denotes connecting families, students, and cultural and civil organizations to serve their community (Sheldon and Epstein, 2005).

Many parent involvement models agree that parent involvement occurs both at home and at schools. However, Epstein's model creates a more supportive conceptual framework for educators and schools to know which activities they can develop based on their particular goals in order to collaborate with parents. Since one of the purposes of this study is to understand Turkish teachers' views on parent involvement, Epstein's model seems to fit the aim of the study. Therefore, for this study, we utilized Epstein's model for the conceptualization of parent involvement to analyze the data. The teachers' role in parent involvement and early childhood education, in Turkish context, will be introduced respectively.

The effect of teachers and parents on parent involvement

The research findings strongly emphasize the importance

of involving parents in their children's learning and schooling (Hedlin, 2019). Even in some countries, such as the U.S.A, parental participation is at the center of their national educational reforms (Shartrand et al., 1997). However, in reality there are some issues that prevent family participation in children's learning. The research findings demonstrate the difficulties in parent involvement coming from both teachers and families. The teachers' lack of knowledge in planning, initiating and sustaining parental participation can result in less partnership with parents (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Lindberg, 2017). Research shows that most of the time, parents are unclear about what is expected from them and what they are asked to do by teachers (Comer and Haynes, 1991). Similarly, teachers' lack of experience and skills to develop constructive interaction and effective communication or to be able to create a friendly school atmosphere make parents feel unwelcomed and creates hesitation of their involvement (Jafarov, 2015: Marin and Bocos, 2017; Pena, 2000). Another important point is teachers' beliefs about the family role in parent-teacher relationships. To be clearer, because of their own teaching experiences, some teachers are more familiar with and prefer the teacher dominant interaction model. As the old Turkish saying goes 'why bring new customs to an old village.' Teachers have hard time accepting parent leadership in their association with family; even more, they may become offensive about the idea and hesitate to develop partnership with them (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Souto-Manning and Swick, 2006). There are also several factors that can serve as barriers to parental involvement. Parents' understanding of their roles and their self-confidence in helping their children's learning effects the level of their involvement. Studies show that when parents do not believe that they have a significant role in children's learning or do not have the self-confidence that they can help their children to learn, they most likely prefer not to be involved (Green et al., 2007; Hakyemez-Paul et al., 2018; Kurtulmuş, 2016). Parents' unwillingness in PI can also be related to their heavy working hours and tight schedule (Güzeltyurt et al., 2019; Hakyemez, 2018; Toran and Özgen, 2018). Some other studies demonstrate that the socio-economic status and educational level of parents strongly effect their involvement in ways that the more education and higher economic status parents have the more they participate in their children's education (Marin and Bocos, 2017).

Early childhood education and parent involvement in Turkey

Just like many other countries, early childhood education is one of the priorities of the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE). For the last two decades, MoNE has strived to increase the involvement and the quality of early childhood education. In 2013, the new curriculum,

which is play based, developmentally appropriate and holistic, was introduced in order to give young children opportunity to start schools with enhanced early year experiences (MoNE, 2020). The importance of parent involvement in early childhood education has been increasingly emphasized by educational reforms during the last two decades. The concept of parent involvement first appeared in 2002 in which national early childhood curriculum suggested teachers to have different PI programs in their classroom (Yazar, Çelik and Kök, 2008). Later in 2006, parent involvement took place in the new early childhood national curriculum which pointed out that parent involvement has to be a part of classroom practices. Furthermore, the new national early childhood curriculum (2013) also added 'integrated family support training guide,' which includes various parent involvement activities that parents can support their children's development and education (MoNE, 2020). Nowadays, teachers are expected to integrate parent involvement activities as part of their regular classroom practices.

This study aims to understand preschool teachers' practices and views of parent involvement in Turkey. With this research, our goal is to contribute to the parent involvement research literature by demonstrating what is happening in different countries in order to highlight the similarities and differences so that general and cultural specific parental involvement strategies can be developed. In the following, method, results and discussion sections of the study are presented respectively.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, qualitative research method was used since it provides better understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Merriam, 1998). The aim of this study is to understand teachers' views and practices of parent involvement, and open-ended questions as a qualitative research tool seems to be useful to understand participants' perspectives in details (Creswell, 2013).

Study group

The participants of the study were 100 female teachers working in the public preschools in one of the biggest city located at the western part of Turkey. The teachers were recruited from a total of 13 preschools who serve 4-6 years old children. Study group in this study gathered by using purposeful sampling methods. Purposeful sampling, one of the methods used in qualitative research, entails finding people who can provide rich information about the subject of interest (Harsh, 2011). Participation of the study was on a voluntary basis. Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the participants.

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

Variables	F	%
Age		
20-25	22	22
26-30	23	23
31-40	35	35
41years and older	20	20
Education		
Associate degree (2 years college)	26	26
College	67	67
Graduate	8	8
Years in the Field		
1-5	27	27
6-10	18	18
11-15	39	39
16-20	14	14
20 years and more	2	2

Data collection

After contacting with the principles of the schools and get their permission to talk to teachers, we visit the schools and speak with the teachers individually. Then, we explained the study and invite them to participate in it. After getting their approval, we gave teachers interview questions in written format. One week later, we revisited the schools to obtain their answers. The data collected in March 2019.

As mentioned earlier, the data of this research came from written format of teachers' answers. There were five open ended questions structured parallel to our research interest. The research questions are:

- 1) What are your parent involvement practices?
- 2) What are your purposes in involving parent in children's education?
- 3) What is your opinion on the outcomes of parent involvement?
- 4) What is parents' involvement rate of these practices?
- 5) What kind of obstacles do you face during parental involvement practices?

Data analysis

The analysis of this qualitative data was the hardest and time consuming part of the research process. Although the questions and relative literature guided our coding process, the teachers' answers for questions were interwoven into more than one question. First, we, both researchers of this study, read the answers to get familiar with them. Later, we looked closer to each question to identify obvious codes. Afterwards, we looked again to

all answers to catch the relative information to add the initial codes or create the new ones. Finally, we unify the data in more understandable and meaningful way by organizing them into categories corresponding to our research questions. Miles and Huberman (1994) formula (number of agreement/number of agreement + number of disagreement) was applied for interrater reliability. Initially, 10 of the participants' responses randomly chosen and coded by two researchers of this study and agreement were 75%. Then, we went back to the data and according to agreement and disagreement; we added or revised some codes. Later, 10 different responses were coded individually and the agreement was calculated as 85%.

It is important to remind that to analyze the first research question of what teachers' parent involvement practices are, Epstein (1995) six types of involvement model was used. The description of each types are 1) Parenting: helping families learn more about the agespecific developmental domains of their children and being aware of the knowledge about creating a supportive home environment. 2) Communicating; parents and teachers' continuous communicational exchanges about children's learning process and their progresses. 3) Volunteering; parent help or support school or classroom activities. 4) Learning at home; parents' helping their children with their homework or curriculum related activities. 5) Decision making; families are included in the decision making process in the school. 6) Collaborating: the community denotes connecting families, students, and cultural and civil organizations to serve their community.

RESULTS

Based on the research questions, the findings of the study organized in four main categories; a) teachers' practices of PI types; b) Teachers purposes of parent involvement practices; c) Parent's level of involvement and its reasons; d) Barriers to parent involvement.

Teachers' practices of parent involvement

In order to understand how teachers involve parents in their children's learning (Epstein, 1995), six types parental involvement model (Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at home, Decision making, and Collaborating with the community) were applied to explore the data. Overall, the results of the study indicated that volunteering type of PI was the most common way to involve parents and the least were collaborating with the community and decision making, respectively. In the following, the findings for each type of involvement will be displayed in details.

<u>Parenting:</u> The most common ways used by teachers to share suggestions and ideas with parents about child development and learning were sending homes bulletins and brochures. Teachers point out that they prefer written formats of communication to share their suggestions instead of meeting with parents face to face. According to the teachers, they rarely organize parent education seminars at schools because organizing seminars are time consuming and burdensome and also parents' participation level are lower. Some comments of participants were:

.... prepare brochure about child development and send out to the parents

.....From time to time, we organize seminars but parents' participation level are lower than expected

.....Most of the parents work and they do not participate meetings and that's why I prefer not to organize seminars.

<u>Communication</u>: According to the participants, they communicate with parents about their children's progress or classroom activities and providing homeworks to robust learning by using weekly notes or newsletters. Subsequently, preferred communication means were expressed as bulletins, brochures, family participation calendars and wish boxes. Sample statements of the teachers are as follows:

..... I send homes weekly notes covering information about what happened in the classroom during the week and also the homeworks

.....Usually I sent home information notes with children but parents do not read

.....I sent family participation calendar to the parents. When I planned PI activities in advance, participation level of the families increase.

.....l put wish box on the door of the classroom for parents to write their wishes but it did not get much attention

As worth to mention that teachers do not seem to prefer face to face communication with parents instead, they prefer using written formats of communication. Correspondently, their communication with parents seems to be one way direction from school to home instead of desirably having two way communication.

<u>Volunteering</u>: This type of parent involvement is the most common types of PI among the teachers in this study. The teachers pointed out that the reason why they prefer this kind of PI is that the parents do not participate homework or activities sent them from the school. Some examples of classroom activities with parent enrollment include talking about particular topics, cooking or preparing traditional foods, introducing their occupation, reading aloud storybooks, demonstrating science

experiment etc. Some of the teachers also involve parents outside of the class activities such as field trips or picnics:

.....Parents come to the class and make a presentation about the subject I have given.

..... I want them to do some activities such as making yoghurt, pickling, and juicing fruits.

..... I choose the child of the week and the child's parents make a presentation that introduces the child.

..... I want them to come to the class and read a story or a fairy tale.

.....They usually do experiments in class that I send them beforehand.

Learning at home: Teachers stated that they send some homeworks related to learning outcomes (book sheet or booklet), or suggest some activities that can help children's overall development. Story reading, home plant growing, having child's self-care skill development chart are kind of activities suggested by teachers to facilitate parent's engagement in their children's learning. Teachers also mentioned that they do not get efficient results sending some works to home and parents do not offer feedbacks about the activities suggested by teachers. Examples of expressions used by teachers are given below:

..... I send home the worksheets prepared in accordance with the learning outcomes.

... .. I sent the worksheets that I prepare on a weekly basis.

... .. I propose art works, which can be done by whole family. Sometimes we display the products of these studies in the classroom.

..... I send a tooth-brushing schedule and I want it to be filled in by the parents and send back to school.

... .. I offer books and I want parents to read to their children, and sometimes I give the books to them from the classroom library or I make sure that parents buy different books and exchange with different parents in coordination.

Collaborating with the community: Only 3 out of 100 teachers mentioned collaborating parents with other community members. For instance, one teacher explained that they have school improvement project that parents and others from community work together:

... .. we get help from families in the projects carried out in our school.

..... with the support of families, our school received an award for the nutrition-friendly school project.

Teachers' aims of parent involvement practices

The findings of the research highlighted that teachers'

aims to involve parents are relevant to their thinking of beneficial outcomes for children, families, and teachers. According to teachers, the goals of PI are to support self-confidence, responsibility, children's social expression development, making the child feel happy and belong to the school, to reinforce the learning at school and to ensure effective learning and motivation. Teachers pointed out that family participation are quite effective for children. Considering the families, teachers stated that while planning the activities, they first aimed to ensure that families be self-confident in supporting the education of their children, establishing healthy communication with their children, strengthen family ties and spend quality time as a family. In addition, it is seen that the teachers aim to raise the awareness of parents about the developmental characteristics of the child and getting to know them better. The teachers stated that they also aimed to relieve parents' curiosity about the classroom and to get to know the school. Teachers stated, from their perspective that they intended to get to know the families and children primarily through family participation activities. In addition. it is seen that teachers communicate effectively with families and work with them in coordination to share responsibilities with families and to support children's education at home. It was also revealed that teachers needed to be understood and supported by parents. Sample statements of teachers are given below:

Children related aims

..... I plan the activities parent's participation with the aim of developing children's awareness of responsibility.

... .. my aim is to reinforce children's learning at school and to ensure full learning.

Family related aims

... .. I primarily aim for families to spend quality time together and to strengthen family ties.

... .. I aim the parents to know the developmental characteristics of their children.

... .. parents are curious about the classroom environment, I like to their curiosity to be resolved, and so I invite them to class studies.

Teachers related aims

..... I aim that what I teach at school to be reinforced at home.

.....The biggest problem of pre-school is that we are still not understood, there are those who still see it as childcare, I want them to see what is happening in the classroom.

Parent's level of involvement and its reasons

Majority of teachers thought that parental involvement rate is very high in their classrooms. When they are asked the reasons of higher parent involvement, teachers' answers were that they point out their significant role in informing parents, or organizing the activities very carefully. They also mentioned that some family factors as reasons on high involvement rate such as parents valuing their children, staying home mothers' willingness to participate and the competition occurs among parents about homework or event organization.

- there is a competition among parents to do housework. All of them want to make the event better.
- parents who are housewives are more willing to participate as they have more time.
- all the parents are very willing to participate in family participation.
-I think parents who support their children participate more in activities.

Teachers, who thought that parent involvement rate is low, identified family related factors as reasons such as; parents with long working hours, not being aware of the importance of PI, and having low education levels.

- I have the biggest problem with working parents, they cannot attend activities, and they do not send home works on time.
- Children whose parents do not come to the classroom are very upset and even lack self-confidence. education is very important. I think the parents with a high level of education participate more in the activities.

Barriers to parent involvement

Based on teachers responds, barriers to parents' involvement presented in three categories; family characteristics, involving in children's learning at home and difficulties occurring when parent participate in class. Teachers explained that the biggest obstacle they have in involving parents is their educational level. According to them, illiterate or low educated parents have difficulties to help in children's learning at home. From teachers' understanding, they value children's schooling less than high-educated parents. The other family characteristics that most teachers highlighted as barriers are working parents or having multiple children in the family. Another point that teachers explained, the fathers do not involve any classroom activities. In addition, according to the teachers, they have communication problems with the parents who do not read notes they sent home with children.

In accordance with teachers' responds, parents do not favor homework thinking that learning occurs in schools. Besides, instead of helping children doing their homework carefully sometimes they do themselves to be done with it. Their responds pointed out that they do not prefer parent involvement activities at home, because they frustrated not to get results from parents. That is why, teachers prefer school activities more than home activities for parents to participate. Finally, teachers talk

about the complications they have while involving parents in classroom activities. According to them, parents come to class activities without any preparation. Teachers stated that when parents are allowed to pick the activity, they do not choose the age appropriate ones. Teachers are saying that because classrooms are crowded and small, the classroom management become problematic and they do not get sufficient results from parent prepared activities. Followings are some examples of teachers' statements:

- illiteracy is an important obstacle! If the parents are illiterate, they cannot do the activities.
- working parents often cannot attend the activities and cannot get permission from the work.
-The notes I sent home come back without any action taken.
-I think we need to organize some seminars but it take times and families do not come
- parent who does the activity in class cannot control the class, and cannot get children's attention most of the time
- the fathers never involve, only mothers come. I think it is a problem too.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study highlight that although teachers use various types of PI, volunteering and learning at home are the most common PI practices among teachers. Participants of this study, involve parents in different classroom activities, as volunteer, such as making presentations, demonstrate preparation of culture-specific foods in the classroom, information about their profession, reading aloud stories, and doing experiments in the classroom. Moreover, parents support the school in some activities such as field trips and the national holidays. Parents' participation in classroom activities and helping teachers are considered as the quality indicators of the early childhood education program (NAEYC, 2001). For learning at home, teachers advice parents activities such as home worksheet, art works, plant growing, and storybook readings that can be useful means for families to do with their children at home. The study conducted by Abbak (2008) suggests similar conclusions that teachers frequently include classroom activities and homework in family participation studies. However, it was observed in this study that the majority of the teachers mention about the inefficiency of homework. The teachers preferred in-class participation because the homeworks they sent were mostly not done. Lack of communication can be considered as the reason for the lack of efficiency of homework because of teachers not having the opportunity to express themselves adequately, and families not be informed about the importance of the activities and why and how to

be done at home. Nevertheless, studies show that homework has significant effects on children's education and academic achievement (Melhuish et al., 2008; Kleemans et al., 2012). For this reason, it is important for teachers to develop effective communication strategies to ensure families' participation in homework and home learning,

Within the context of parenting type of PI, teachers use bulletins or brochures to inform families about parenting, child development and education. Organizing training seminars are not preferred by teachers because participation of families are less than expected due to their long working hours. Studies on family involvement generally show that families cannot attend meetings due to time restrictions and that's why teachers do not organize conferences or seminars for parents (Şahin and Turla, 2003; Ünüvar, 2010; Binicioğlu, 2010). Besides, according to results, teachers preferred to communicate with families through methods such as weekly notes. newsletters, bulletins, brochures, family participation calendars and wish boxes. The relative research also show that teachers use meetings, phone calls, bulletins, newsletters and booklets for communication activities (Çaltık and Kandır, 2006; Ünüvar, 2010; Koçyiğit, 2015). Kocyiğit (2015) stated in his research that the types of communication activities that teachers use in family participation vary depending on many reasons. In the National Standards Implementation Guide (2009), it was stated that mothers' participation in workforce is one of the reasons that reduce effective communication between school and family. According to these results, it can be interpreted that teachers prefer indirect communication methods rather than direct communication with the family. In addition, although it seems that there is communication between the family and the teacher, it can be thought that there is a one-way communication and no interaction is provided. Nakamura (2000) states that an open and twoway communication with parents is necessary for an education supported by families. In addition, studies show that teachers who have the opportunity to communicate with parents through family participation more positive attitudes towards family participation (Epstein, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002).

When we look at involving parents in decision-making, it was seen that teachers only give chance to parents to make decision on the time and the type of the activity, other than this, they prefer to keep decision-making processes by themselves. In the study conducted by Ogelman (2014), it was concluded that teachers did not include families in management and decision-making processes. Likewise, with regard to collaborating with the community, it was concluded that very few teachers carried out projects to strengthen school conditions that received support from parents. However, according to the research, if the school aim is to involve the family in the program voluntarily and productively, it is necessary to

invite the family into decision making about the aims, policy and activities of the school (Morrison, 2003; Blazer. 2005). This result can be interpreted as the reason why parents sometimes are not eager to participate in the activities. The projects in which the school, teacher and family work together need to be planned more in terms of both supporting the school, and family to feel belong to understand the school and the teacher.

Participant teachers' aim of planning parent involvement activities comprises to have parents gain self-confidence in supporting their children's education, to establish healthy communication with their children, and to spend quality time as family. Additionally, parent participation makes children feel happy and belong to the school, and support their development of self-confidence, responsibility, social expression, motivation and effective learning. In addition, teachers through parent involvement particularly intend to know the families and children, to establish effective communication with families, to share responsibilities, and to support children's education at home. This result can be interpreted as that teachers think quite comprehensively while planning family participation studies and they have a high level of awareness about family participation. The other studies also show that preschool teachers are competent in family participation studies, and their level of awareness is high about the importance of family participation (Bavraktar eet al., 2016; Güleç and Genç, 2010; Kang et al., 2017; Toran and Özgen, 2018).

Moreover, obstacles faced by teachers in parent involvement were examined in this study. It was concluded that teachers faced obstacles related to family characteristics such as low educational level, time constraints, carelessness, avoiding taking responsibility and lack of communication. The absence of father involvement and fathers not visiting the classroom was stated as another problem. The other studies also addressed the issue of fathers rarer involvement in their children's schooling for different reasons (Şahin and Özbey, 2009; Orçan et al., 2019). One of the notable results of this study is that the teachers talk about the time shortage and lack of communication with the families in their answers of all over questions. This finding supports earlier research results conducted by others Granville, 2005; (Russell and Erdoğan Demirkasımoğlu, 2010; Ogelman, 2014; Murray et al., 2014; Orcan et al., 2019). When the obstacles related to homework are examined, it is seen that the work is not done most of the time, or it is carried out in a sloppy way, and even sometimes the parents find homework unnecessary (Christenson, 2004; Çamlıbel Çakmak, 2010; Erdoğan and Demirkasımoğlu, 2010; Ghaith et al., 2012).

Finally, the complications teachers experienced during parents engaging activities in the classroom, according to teachers, are; parent coming to class unprepared, sometimes choosing inappropriate activities, their

hesitation during the presentation or activity, and some difficulties about managing the class. Teachers also stated that the activities were not efficient due to crowd and lack of space. Lack of space and crowded classrooms appear to be general problems frequently expressed by teachers in Turkey, and it is seen that it affects family participation activities negatively (Kök et al., 2007). Teachers' view on obstacles about being parents in class can be interpreted as teachers' high expectation from parents such as to be able to manage the classroom or to be able to attract the attention of the children. In addition, it is thought that choosing activities appropriate for the child's level can be difficult for parents, even if they have other children. Teachers' point out another problem they face parents' engaging activity in the class was that children whose families are not in the class practices were unhappy and had a lack of selfconfidence, and sometimes such activities were a source of sadness among children not having parents.

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Citation: Ekinci-Vural, D., and Doğan-Altun, Z. (2021). Parental involvement in early childhood classrooms: Turkish teachers' views and practices. African Educational Research Journal, 9(1): 60-68.