



## Schooling Experiences of Disadvantaged Children in Preschool: Attitudes, Engagement and Interactions<sup>1,2</sup>

Arzu ARIKAN<sup>3</sup>

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received: 21 Jan. 2018

Received in revised form: 17 Aug. 2019

Accepted: 23 Oct. 2019

DOI: 10.14689/ejer.2020.86.1

#### Keywords

early childcare and education, children's perspectives, low-income families, poverty, case study, inclusive education

### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The research adopting children's perspectives about early care and education has flourished since the adoption of UNCRG; however, the studies investigating experiences of children from diverse backgrounds in the literature are still scarce. This study aims to describe disadvantaged children's experiences in a target preschool from their own perspectives.

**Research Methods:** This study is part of a large-scale research project, and it focuses on disadvantaged children's perspectives using a case study design. The case of interest included a specific group of people associated with a unique preschool designed for the disadvantaged children. The data comes from 26 children and their parents for this study. Child-interviews were the primary source of data. Parent-interviews, observations and other documents supplemented data analysis. The data was analyzed using ATLAS.ti 7 Software.

**Findings:** The basic dimensions of schooling experiences included children's attitudes toward school, engagement in daily activities, and echoes of school experiences at home. The findings suggest that access to resources does not mean quality educational experiences for all children, and there is room for improvement. Although disadvantaged children appeared to have positive attitudes toward school, their experiences involved limited engagement in certain activities. All children had inadequate stimulation and low-quality interactions with the parents at home regarding the school experiences. Comparing experiences based on gender, age, developmental milestones and family structure yielded some differences in children's experiences of schooling.

**Implications for Research and Practice:** This study highlights the need for inclusive and enriched educational practices for disadvantaged children. Future research may investigate children's educational experiences in mixed schools and examine home-school connections.

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<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by Anadolu University Scientific Research Projects Commission under the grant no: 1406E307.

<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 7th International Congress of Research in Education, 27-29 April, 2017, Canakkale, TURKEY.

<sup>3</sup> Anadolu University, Faculty of Education, TURKEY, e-mail: arzuarikan@anadolu.edu.tr  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4602-8901>

## Introduction

The effects of early childhood education on disadvantaged children's learning and development have been subject to many research and policy initiatives. Due to various adversities they experience, disadvantaged children need stronger developmental and educational support than their more advantaged peers do. They often lack specific social-emotional, cognitive, and language skills necessary for their future life. Most importantly, disadvantaged children's voices find limited space in research and educational practices. This qualitative study aims to describe disadvantaged children's experiences in a target preschool from their perspectives.

A wide range of adjectives, such as low-income, high-poverty, fragile, impoverished, at-risk, and disadvantaged define these groups of children and their families; however, poverty is a common denominator in their lives. Growing up in poverty, they face multiple environmental adversities, such as low parental income, substance abuse, unemployment, insufficient education, single parenthood and biological risk factors, including low birth-weight and chronic health issues (Addison, Hulme, & Kanbur, 2009; Jensen, 2009). The role of early childhood education in reducing the effects of poverty on disadvantaged children appears to be essential. It can narrow the learning and developmental gaps among children from different backgrounds (Bulut, 2013; Suziedelyte, & Zhu, 2015; Yoshikawa, Weiland, & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). This understanding, coupled with the potential contribution of early education to the economy, has moved policymakers to invest in early intervention for young children living in disadvantaged conditions. The Head Start and Early Head Start programs are the best-known examples of this movement combatting to break the poverty cycle in the U.S. Smaller-scale programs and schools serving similar groups of children are also available in other countries with more fragile economies, such as Brazil, India, and Turkey (Chopra, 2016; Cruz, 2019; Morkoc & Acar, 2014).

Although these programs stated above are valuable to combat educational inequalities, there appears to be more to do in the way of achieving quality and justice for disadvantaged children. Pianta, Downer and Hamre (2016) state that "effective teacher-child interactions and strong, developmentally aligned curricula are not as readily available to low-income children as they are to high-income children" (p. 129). This statement raises questions about the quality of early education provisions for disadvantaged children. Similarly, the research in these target programs questions the effects of early intervention for these children (Barnett, 2011; Haan et al., 2013). Studies investigating these effects often focus on school readiness and developmental indicators for the short-term, academic achievement, employment status, and criminal involvement for the long-term (Shonkoff, 2011; Suziedelyte & Zhu, 2015; Yang et al., 2019). While there is a consensus on the short-term effects, the long-term effects of these interventions for disadvantaged children are still controversial.

Disadvantaged children's access to quality education is one of their fundamental rights guaranteed by international conventions. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 29, emphasizes the purpose of education as follows: "Education must develop every child's personality, talents, and abilities to the

full.” To reach this end and create the conditions of social justice in schools, listening to the voices of disadvantaged children is necessary. Indeed, understanding the nature of education in early childhood settings from children’s perspectives can inform various programs and support children’s well-being (Clark, 2005; Hilppo et al., 2016; Lundqvist, 2014). In this context, the current studies with children offers valuable insights on different dimensions of children’s experiences in various education settings. They focus on children’s interactions with peers and teachers, classroom engagement, daily routines, academic activities, learning and play in early childhood centers (Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2007; Einarsdottir, 2008; Fluckiger et al., 2018; Georgeson et al., 2014; Kragh-Muller, & Isbell, 2011; Kyronlampi-Kylmänen, & Määttä, 2012; Perry & Dockett, 2012; Puroila, Estola, & Syrjälä, 2012; Wiltz & Klein, 2001). These studies generally report positive experiences and well-being of young children and emphasize children’s universal preferences for play and friendships in different education settings. However, the majority of this research originates from Western and Nordic countries and takes place in non-diverse education settings. A few studies focusing on school transition are from other regions, and they report negative perceptions of school among young children (Kocyigit, 2014; Komba, 2013).

The research adopting children’s perspectives about early care and education has flourished since the adoption of UNCRC; however, the studies investigating experiences of children from diverse backgrounds are still scarce (Cruz, 2019; Grace, Walsh, & Baird, 2018; O’Rourke, O’Farrelly, Booth, & Doyle, 2017; Trudgett & Grace, 2011). We do not know yet if disadvantaged children’s experiences of schooling are similar to their advantaged peers or not in early education settings. As Hunner-Kreisel and Kuhn (2011) argue ‘children also have to be seen within the institutional and societal boundaries defining the space within which they can act’ (p. 116). Since children from disadvantaged backgrounds encounter many adversities and contextual stressors, they have different needs (Brown & Ackerman, 2011; Qi et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2019). Accordingly, their experiences in early childhood settings may differ from children who do not have such difficulties in life. The limited number of studies focusing on disadvantaged children presents alarming findings on their educational experiences (Chopra, 2016; Cruz, 2019; Grace et al. 2018). Studying the quality of schools for disadvantaged children, Chopra (2016) reached negative findings on physical facilities, quality of educational materials, and small-group activities and noted the high proportion of teacher-centered activities and absenteeism in Delhi schools. In a recent review of research, Cruz (2019) reported similar educational experiences for low-income children in Brazil. She noted teacher-centered practices, authoritarian relations and children’s discontentment with educational experiences.

The insufficient number of these studies with disadvantaged children shows that there is a need for more research to extend the emerging knowledge and understanding on young children’s experiences in diverse educational settings. The present study investigates disadvantaged children’s experiences of schooling in a preschool located in a Central Anatolian city of Turkey. Inspired by a rights-based framework, this study specifically contributes to the scarce area of research focusing on the perspectives of disadvantaged children.

## Method

### Research Design

This case study aims to describe the schooling experiences of disadvantaged preschool children. The paper draws relevant data from a large-scale qualitative study that utilized multiple research approaches to investigate the project approach with disadvantaged groups (Arikan, 2016). The definition of the case study as ‘an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system’ guided this research (Merriam, 2009). The case of interest included a specific group of people associated with a unique preschool designed for disadvantaged children.

### Study Group

The study group was determined using the purposeful sampling method. The Happy Ants Preschool for disadvantaged children was the research setting. It is a small public preschool located at a mid-size Central Anatolian city in Turkey. The school has two classrooms, serving 3-4-year-old and 5-6-year-old children with two teachers in each classroom. It offers year-round, full-day education for about 42 children at no charge. This study draws data from 26 children who continued the school in summer and data from their parents<sup>4</sup> (25). Table 1 shows demographic information for the participants<sup>5</sup>.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Profiles of the Children*

Children	N	Family Structure		Parents' Level of Education		
		Nuclear	Diverse	No School	Elementary/ Middle	High School
Boy	10	4	6	1	6	3
Girl	16	6	10	3	12	1
Age (3-4)	10	5	5	0	8	2
Age (5-6)	16	5	11	4	10	2

Low family income was a common characteristic of the participant children in this study. The children have also been facing such adversities like their parents' mental health issues, residence in underserved neighborhoods, and living with single mother or older relatives due to prisoned father, abandonment, or divorce (Diverse family structure). In this study, ten children had a nuclear family structure. The majority of their parents had less than high school education; parents were not working or they had irregular jobs (e.g., house cleaning). Although the majority of the family members were mothers, one father and three grandparents also participated in the original large-scale research. This study used the word ‘parent’ for all family participants.

In the process of accessing the school and recruiting the participants, the researcher complied with ethical principles. The Ethics Review Board and the affiliated public

<sup>4</sup> One of the mothers had twins.

<sup>5</sup> The number of family participants were higher in the original research than this study. Since the researcher limited the child-interviews to the children attending the summer school, the parent-interview data from the respective families was used to make comparisons between children and families' accounts for this study.

institution approved this project. The researcher provided detailed information for the participants and invited them to participate in the research. Assigning pseudonyms and blurring the photos were the main measures to protect the participants' identities.

#### *Research Instruments and Procedures*

The researcher adopted multiple data collection techniques, including indoor and outdoor observations and audiovisual records in the school, collection of various documents and semi-structured interviews with staff, families, and children in the original project. The researcher wrote ongoing journals during and after data collection. The documents included field notes, attendance sheets, photos, and family information forms. Child interviews lasted between 10-30 minutes. The researcher used a voice recorder and a large size doll during the interviews with children (Mac Naughton & Hughes, 2009). Figure 1 shows the doll and sample questions from the interviews with children.



Cindy decided to go to school. Do you think Cindy would like this school? Why?

Cindy wants to know what you are doing at school. Would you tell her what you do here?

Cindy wonders what you like to do the most in this school. What is it?

**Figure 1.** *The Doll Cindy and Sample Questions for Child Interviews*

In preparing interview questions, the researcher consulted the literature and used peer debriefing and piloting. Based on the flexible nature of qualitative research, the researcher continued crystalizing the interview questions in the field (Creswell, 2007). In the present study, the child interviews were the primary sources of data; the interviews with parents, daily observations, and institutional documents supplemented the data analysis. The researcher chose only the parallel questions related to children's school experiences from the parent interviews (e.g., what/how does your child talk about the school when s/he comes home.).

#### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis involved systematic steps of preparing and organizing data, repeated reading of printed documents, coding subsamples of data, application of codes to the rest of the documents, making changes as new insights developed through comparison and categorizing codes under themes and interpreting the results in light of the researcher journal. The researcher utilized constant comparison and induction for the analysis (Corbin, & Strauss, 2008; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The research question, the raw data, and the interview questions guided initial ideas for coding the data. Using ATLAS.ti 7, the researcher developed the code structure in two

cycles that consisted of several rounds (Friese, 2014; Saldana, 2015). The first cycle of coding included breaking down the data into descriptive and n-Vivo codes. The second cycle involved searching for relationships, classifying the codes under thematic categories. The researcher continued keeping journals during the analysis and constantly compared the data for negative cases.

### *Trustworthiness*

The concept of trustworthiness replaces the validity and reliability in qualitative research, and it requires using multiple strategies during different stages of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish trustworthiness in qualitative research, Creswell (2007) also suggests using two or three different strategies. In light of these perspectives, the researcher applied systematic and careful procedures and kept researcher journals during this research. Triangulation of data sources and the participants and detailed description of the research process, the setting and the data also increase the trustworthiness of this study as well as presenting quotes as evidence from different participants' perspectives and sharing negative cases in the report. The researcher's engagement in the school for a prolonged period also supports drawing informed conclusions and valid interpretations in the study.

## **Results**

This section presents the disadvantaged children's schooling experiences in three related dimensions that emerged from the data: 1) *Attitudes toward the school*, 2) *Engagement in the classroom activities*, 3) *Echoes of school experiences at home*. The code networks, provided for each dimension of schooling experiences, serve as visual guides for the reader and shows the density of the codes for each theme. The comparisons for children's perspectives on specific child attributes offer a backdrop for the findings. Table 2 provides the overall distribution of these attributes.

**Table 2**

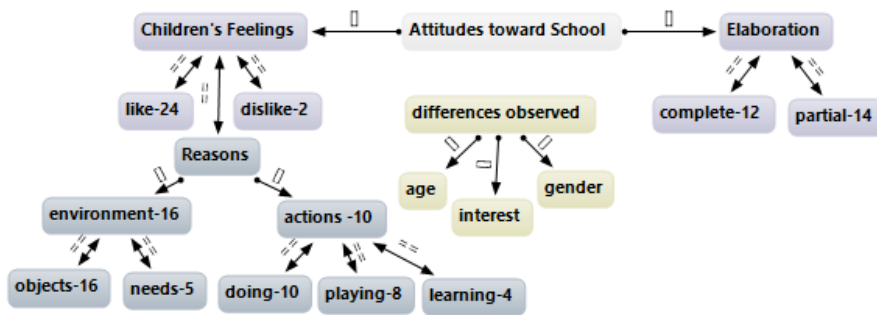
### *The Attributes of Children*

	N	Cognitive Milestones		Language Milestones		Social-Emotional Milestones	
		Reached	Support	Reached	Support	Reached	Support
	26	12	14	10	16	10	16
Boys	10	5	5	5	5	4	6
Girls	16	7	9	5	11	6	10
Age (3-4)	10	5	5	7	3	6	4
Age (5-6)	16	7	9	3	13	4	12
Continuous interest	18	11	7	10	8	10	8
Dispersed interest	8	1	7	0	8	0	8
Low Absenteeism	15	8	7	7	8	5	10
High Absenteeism	11	4	7	3	8	5	6

The researcher created these attributes using institutional documents and the observations, after noticing ambivalent attitudes among children during daily activities in school. The observations identified one-third of the children having dispersed interest and the rest having continuous interest. That is, some children (grouped as *continuous interest*) appeared more interested and involved in activities than other children (grouped as *dispersed interest*) did. The researcher also identified two groups of children based on a review of children’s developmental reports that the classroom teachers had prepared at the end of the school year. According to these reports<sup>6</sup>, some children reached expected milestones, while other children still needed support in certain developmental domains.

*Attitudes toward School*

The first dimension of disadvantaged children’s experiences of schooling consisted of their attitudes toward school revealed by their feelings for the school and their level of elaboration in describing<sup>7</sup> the school. Comparing their narratives based on age, interest in activities and gender indicated specific differences (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Children's Attitudes toward School

*Children's Feelings and Reasoning.* The data showed that the majority of the children appeared to like the school but they had different reasons for these feelings. Two children disliked it, but they still liked to play with the toys in the school. Two salient themes emerged from the children’s responses to the question of why they liked the school: the *environment* and the *actions* (Figure 2). That is, the children found the school appealing for either touchable or doable things.

Sixteen children’s reasons involved the *environment* theme, focusing on the objects (i.e., the toys, educational materials, learning centers) and the basic needs (i.e., food, bed, drinks). This group liked the school for the availability of toys and other concrete things in the school. The following excerpt from a girl illustrates this theme:

R: Cindy has decided to start this school. Would she like this school?

<sup>6</sup> Except two children, all children reached developmental milestones in self-care and psychomotor domains.  
<sup>7</sup> The researcher did not correct errors in children and parents’ quotes.

Ceyda (5)<sup>8</sup>: She would like it.

R: Why would she like it?

Ceyda: This school is beautiful. There is food; there is bed.

Ten children explained their reasons to like the school involving *actions* theme. They focused on the opportunities to play, different activities to do, and the things they learn at the school. This group emphasized the things they do in the educational process. Comparing children's reasons based on some attributes revealed differences by gender, interest in the activities, and age. The boys (8), the 3-4-year-olds (10), and children having dispersed interest (7) focused more on the environment than the actions. The rest of the participants noted both the environment and the actions while explaining why they liked the school. In sum, the majority of the disadvantaged children appeared to like the school for the physical resources available within the school as explained in the environment theme.

**The Level of Children's Elaboration.** This theme involved the scope of children's descriptions of the school. Their level of elaboration was reflective of their attitudes toward school. Some children explained the *complete* daily schedule of the school in an orderly manner (12), while other children provided *partial* descriptions, focusing on specific activities only (14). The partial describers elaborated their responses after the researcher's prompts like, 'What else? Is that all you do here all day?' The children's elaboration also differed based on their interest in activities and age. Almost all children having a dispersed interest (7) and more than half of children in the age group 5-6 (10) provided partial descriptions for the school. The following quote from a boy (5) exemplifies partial description:

R: You come in the morning, and you are here all day! Can you tell me what you are doing here until the evening?

Ahmet: We eat food...(child pauses here)

R: Hmm. What else?

Ahmet: hmm?...

R: Any other?

Ahmet: After that, we go to bed.

R: hhh...

Ahmet: We are getting up and doing lessons. We do coloring.

This boy, coming from a diverse family, had dispersed interest, and high absenteeism. According to the teachers' records, he also needed support in language development. The following response is a sample of a complete description of what children do in school:

Asena (4): We play toys, we converse a little [with the teacher], and then we do things like we do lessons. Then we go to bed, get up, eat our food, then watch some TV [cartoons], and when the service (school bus) comes, we go home.

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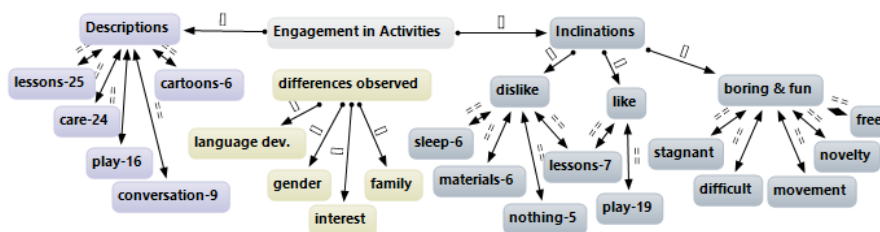
<sup>8</sup> Child's age



This girl had a nuclear family and a continuous interest in school activities. She reached developmental milestones in the language domain. These observed differences in children’s descriptions according to their interests and age may be a sign of changing attitudes in time.

*Engagement in Classroom Activities*

The disadvantaged children’s explanations of what they do at the school illuminate their experiences at the level of engagement in the classroom activities. The way they describe the activities, their inclinations based on what they like at the school, and the words they choose revealed the nature of their engagement at the activity level. There were some differences in children’s narratives about certain activity types based on family structure, language milestones, gender, and interest attributes (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Children’s Engagement in Activities

**Activity Descriptions.** When describing what they do in school, children talked about five types of activities, including lessons, care routines, free-play, and conversation with the teacher and watching cartoons. Almost all children most frequently mentioned lessons, care routines, and play but the emphasis, content and the order of these activities in children’s narratives differed. For instance, the children most frequently mentioned the lesson as an activity, but many children remembered it after asking, ‘What else do you do here?’ They often referred to coloring just before the word ‘lesson’ indicating how they perceived lessons. A few children commented on counting and numbers. Figure 4 and Figure 5 show sample works from the age group (5-6). The researcher also observed that the teachers would say, ‘Now, we will do some lesson’ to work on coloring, arts-crafts, and worksheets. The teachers’ leading role and verbal transition in these activities appear to explain children’s construction of the lesson as something that the teacher asks them to do. Unlike the lessons, the care routines and free play came in the first order in children’s narratives. Care routines included having three meals and a prolonged sleep-time. When talking about free play, children noted playing in ball-pool, using toys and going to the playground.

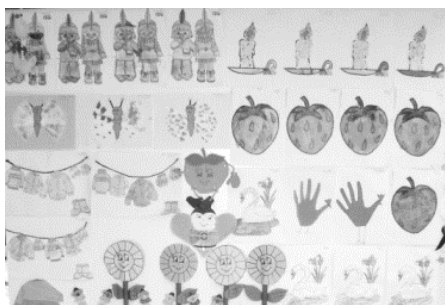


Figure 4. Sample Child Products

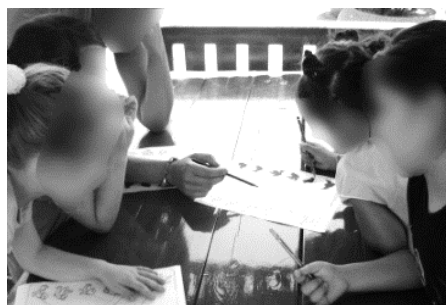


Figure 5. Sample Lesson

Only nine children talked about language-related experiences under the theme of conversation activity. Conversations included morning discussions and a review of new concepts in a didactic manner. Sometimes the teachers also read books. A noteworthy finding is that only three children reported reading or listening to books in the context of conversation activity. After searching the interviews for the word 'book,' the researcher found an additional eight children referring to the book corner or the coloring-books in the age group (5-6). They were mostly girls, children from diverse families, and children who needed support in language development. Finally, six children talked about watching cartoons at school. Children who mentioned watching cartoons were children from nuclear families, had continuous interest, and they appeared to reach developmental milestones in the language domain. During the fieldwork, however, children were watching cartoons at least once a day. Therefore, the researcher asked all children when and how often they watched cartoons at school. A sample response is as follows:

Selin (6): When we had nothing to do, my friends tell the teacher, 'should we watch cartoons?' and she would start TV, and we watch cartoons. Then, after we get up, my friends have nothing to do, we watch cartoons. When the service comes, we leave and watch the rest tomorrow.

Other children provided similar responses and said that they watched cartoons as they waited for the school bus in the morning and afternoon. It appears that children regard watching cartoons as an idle-time routine in school.

***Inclinations of Children for Activities.*** When describing the kinds of activities, children also explained the most liked and the least liked activities as an indication of their inclination. As Figure 3 shows, the majority of children (19) liked the free play, and a minority (7) liked lessons. Except for five children, they all had something that they *disliked* at the school<sup>9</sup> (i.e., some lessons (7), sleeping (6), and some materials (6), such as puzzles, books, and cars). Young children emphasized sleeping while the older group mentioned lessons and playing with specific materials as disliked activities.

<sup>9</sup> Two children disliked not getting prizes from the teacher; therefore, the researcher coded them elsewhere.

Some children indicated their inclinations using the adjectives ‘boring’ and ‘fun,’ and others implicitly merged these words into their verbal expressions. The following excerpt is from a boy:

Gokhan (4): We do not do anything here. We go to our class; then, we eat bread, then, we come to our class, then, we play toys, then we eat lunch, then we sleep, we sleep, we get up, then we eat, then we go back to our class, wait, and wait until the service comes.

The tone of this expression reveals a sense of triviality about what happens at school. For children, describing the activities using the words ‘fun’ or ‘boring,’ the pleasure appeared to be linked to play and some lessons if they involved free choice, novelty, and physical movement. For instance, they described going to field trips and playing in the ball-pool using the word ‘fun’ and shared their excitement with their parents at home, too. Children used the word boring, however, to describe sleeping, coloring, or counting objects, and they referred to the stagnant or ambiguous nature of these activities. In sum, the disadvantaged children were interested in free play and some activities, involving new learning and physical movement.

*Echoes of School Experiences at Home*

The disadvantaged children’s home life was the third dimension in their experiences of schooling. To understand how the children interacted with their family about their school experiences and to see how these experiences reflected at home life, the researcher asked questions about home context to parents and children. Parents reported their informal observations of children at home, and children talked about their home life during the interviews. These accounts revealed the echoes of children’s school experiences at home interactions. Drawing from the parents’ reported observations at home, Figure 7 shows these echoes in three areas: Children’s feelings about school, the effects of school for children and the content of conversations children and parents have at home interactions.

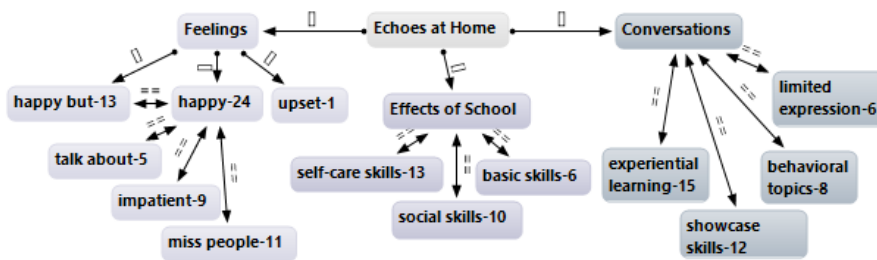


Figure 7. *Echoes of School Experiences at Home*

**Parental Observations of Children’s Feelings.** The parents’ observations verified children’s positive feelings about the school. They thought that the children were happy at the school (24). Only one parent noted that her son was not happy and said, “Ahmet (5) says, Mom, don’t send me tomorrow! I get very bored there ... They force me to eat olives and cheese.” The researcher also observed this boy throwing up once

when he had to eat olives for breakfast. The rest of the parents thought that children were generally happy at the school. Parents reported that when children were home, they talked about the school, were impatient to go to school, and missed their classmates and teachers (people). The following parent's observation exemplifies children's general reactions to the school at home:

Zara (6) is bored at home. She asks, 'When will the school start? When will I go to school?' She talks about her teachers all the time, wonders her friends, counts the days for school, in the morning, and evening, she wants school she loves it.

However, some parents (13) reported children's positive feelings with reservations and added that their children were *happy but* sometimes reluctant to go to school. They provided different reasons for this occasional attitude, including child's sickness, boredom, sleep patterns, school recess and need for maternal affection. Parents' reports of happy but reluctant explanations were consistent with children's absenteeism patterns, which added up to 96 days for some children. Indeed, the attendance sheets showed that the majority of these reluctant children that parents reported also had a high level of absenteeism. These findings are parallel with children's low inclination in some classroom activities. Although the children did not mention not liking the school during the interviews, some children mentioned boredom during certain activities and the majority had something they disliked at school.

**The School Effects Reflected at Home.** As for the effects of the school on children, the parents described the outcomes of schooling for their children and the joint activities they do at home. For the outcomes of schooling, the parents reported three areas of visible learning for their children. These areas included learning *self-care* skills (13), *social skills* (10), and *basic skills* (6). Only a few parents touched upon more than one area. As an example of self-care and social skills, the grandparent of Ali (6) said,

"He was a grumpy child, he wouldn't talk to anyone, would fight...he isn't grumpy any more (...) he learned how to eat and drink." For the basic skills, another parent noted, "Tuncer (4) didn't know how to hold a pair of scissors in the beginning. When I gave him a pen, he was scratching only. Now he doesn't have these differences, and he can draw now.

Parents' observations on the effects of the school are consistent with the teachers' developmental reports. The high frequency of care routines and the teacher-centered nature of 'lessons' in the school also appear to explain parents' observations of the effects of schooling.

For the possible home-enrichment using children's experiences in the school, the researcher asked children and parents about the activities and interactions they had after school. The data indicated a lack of stimulating experiences and limited enrichment at the home context. Both parents and children stated two to five different activities children do at home. The majority of children mentioned *playing* (23) and

*watching* TV (20) at home. Some children also reported *coloring/homework* activities (11), helping in *housework* (10) and *going out* with their family (6) (e.g., playground in the neighborhood, visits to doctor or relatives, and running errands). Neither children nor parents mentioned books or early literacy activities at home. Besides, children did not have toys or other tools, except a few, mentioning a bicycle, parents' phones or brother's computer. The accounts of parents and children were consistent with a few exceptions (Table 3).

Children also reported limited interactions with adults during these activities at home. Helping housework and going out were the only things that involved parent-child interaction for the majority of the children. Children and parents did no specific activity together in nine families. This case was specific to the families having infants, grandparent care, or parents with mental health issues. Almost half of the children had rivalry and conflicts with siblings at home, but they mentioned doing these activities with the siblings. The majority of children watch TV at home without the supervision of an adult.

**Table 3**

*Children's Activities at Home*

Activities	Children's activities at home		Interactions with Parents		Children's favorite activities at home	
	Children	Parent	Children	Parent	Children	Parent
Accounts by						
Playing	23	23	2	2	14	15
Watching TV	20	18	2	2	7	5
Coloring/ Homework	11	20	2	9	5	10
Housework	10	6	9	4	4	3
Going out	6	17	6	15	-	14

As for the most favorite activities at home, the children and parents frequently reported playing. The children played indoors or outside with their siblings, classmates, or other peers in the neighborhood. As was the case in the school, only a few children and parents mentioned watching TV as a favorite activity at home. While children's perspectives about the home activities were similar to their inclinations in classroom activities, there was a discord between children and parents' accounts regarding coloring, housework and going out. Parents mentioned coloring/homework and going out more often than children did. The final disagreement was about children helping housework. Although the girls reported helping parents in housework, parents did not mention this activity as much as children did. From these findings, the traces of home enrichment using educational experiences were only visible in coloring/homework activities for a limited number of children (11), and only five children showed school-related activities among their favorite activities at home.

*The Content of Conversations about the School.* The children's conversations about the school appear to differ when they go home. For the question of how, and if children talk about the school at home, each parent provided one to four different

topics that children shared with their parents during daily interactions. These involved four main themes, including *experiential learning* (15), *showcase skills* (12), *behavioral topics* (8), and *limited-expression* (6). The following quote illustrates a case in which a girl touches upon the behavioral topics about the school when her parent asks:

Jale (5) talks about the school if we ask (...) I am asking, how was your day? She says, 'Mom, my teacher gave me this gift; she gave me this prize. As you advise I did not piss my teacher off today, I slept, they gave me a prize, she says. I ate my food, and they gave me a prize', she says. I'm asking somehow, and then she explains.

Although each parent mentioned a mix of these themes for their child, their accounts indicated that the majority of children either excitedly talked about activities when they involved the use of multiple senses (e.g., field trips, planting); or liked to show what they learned at school (e.g., singing new songs). Some children also explained the prizes or punishments they got. Besides, six parents stated that their children were not verbally expressive. As the quote provided above had shown, these children only talked about the school if their parents asked.

#### Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

This qualitative case study explored the early schooling experiences of disadvantaged children at the Happy Ants Preschool. The basic dimensions of schooling experiences included children's attitudes toward school, engagement in daily activities, and echoes of school experiences at home. Compared to other schools in the Turkish education system, the school had more than sufficient physical and human resources for preschool education. However, the findings suggest that access to resources does not mean quality educational experiences for all children, and there is room for improvement. Nearly half of children missed school days much above official limits, needed extra support for different developmental domains, and all had inadequate stimulation and low-quality interactions with the parents regarding the school experiences. Comparing children's experiences based on gender, age, developmental milestones and family structure yielded some differences in their accounts. Although disadvantaged children appeared to have positive attitudes toward school, their experiences involved limited engagement in certain activities. The echoes of school experiences at home context were congruent with children's preferences, and nature of engagement in school activities and their home life enrichment through schooling was poor. These findings, mainly derived from the children's perspectives, contribute to emerging research with disadvantaged groups and add to the growing body of literature emphasizing child voice in early education settings.

The finding that disadvantaged children liked the school, and they were happy despite the occasional reluctance of some children, corroborates with previous research investigating children's perspectives about early childhood settings. These studies reported children's positive feelings or dispositions about the early education settings in different countries (Krag-Muller & Izbell, 2011; Perry & Dockett, 2012; Puroila et al., 2012; Trudgett & Grace, 2011). However, there were also instances of

unhappiness for disadvantaged children. Grace et al. (2018) studied young children's experiences of educational settings in disadvantaged communities of Australia and pointed out that more than half of children had negative emotions for the center. Similarly, Ceglowski and Bacigalupa (2007) reported some children's negative experiences of child-care and gave an example of an Ethiopian boy preferring to be at home rather than being in the childcare center. In the present study, two children had negative feelings for the school. One child with special needs and the other child being forced to eat disliked food. Parents reported occasional reluctance about attending school for some children. Despite the reported happiness of children, high absenteeism and dispersed interest in activities, as well as observed developmental needs of children, indicate gray areas in their attitudes toward the school. Taking into account the findings for the weak enrichment in children's home life using schooling experiences and parents' observations of children's learning only in self-care, social and basic skills, the children appear to be not reaching their actual potential. These findings highlight the need for more supportive and inclusive educational practices for all disadvantaged children. Otherwise, the schools may act as additional sources of adversity for disadvantaged children.

Puroila et al. (2012) emphasized the positive characteristics of the material environment, adults, friends, and activities for children's happiness in early care and education settings. However, it is not clear if the presence of some of these elements could be a measure of happiness in schools for disadvantaged children. The finding that more children were focusing on the physical resources in the school environment than the children focusing on the schooling processes is a unique contribution of the study to the literature. Children liked the school for resources, such as toys and food, and they described the school as a beautiful place. Their explanations also differed based on gender, observed interest and age. Disadvantaged children's focus on the environment while explaining why they liked the school may relate to their inadequate living conditions at home.

Preoccupation of the 3-4 year-olds with toys and the boys' dispersed interest in activities extend the results of some other studies. In similar lines, King and Howard (2014) noted preferences of young children for object play. Winer and Phillips (2012) emphasized boys' experience of lower quality childcare compared to girls. However, the finding of children's changing levels of elaboration in school descriptions, either as being complete or partial, is somewhat inconsistent with previous research. Wiltz and Clein (2001) explored children's experiences of child-care in different settings and noted that children in low-quality centers tended to describe activities in a rigid order, whereas children in high-quality environments only emphasized some crucial events. The older age group and those with dispersed interest provided partial descriptions in this study. These children's partial elaboration may relate to their prior experiences in school.

The disadvantaged children's inclination for play was an expected result of the study. Play is the most essential and valuable engagement for children regardless of where they play, whether it is at home or school, and if it is indoors or outdoors. In the present study, children focused on free play as their favorite activity. They

reflected these experiences in their interactions with their parents as well. Children's descriptions of activities showed their preferences for play and thirst for novelty and physical movement in school activities. These findings consistent with earlier studies noting the play as a valuable part of school experiences for children (Krag-Muller & Izbell, 2011; Kyronlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2012; Perry & Dockett, 2012, Wu, 2019). However, a few children did not like some play materials in the classroom and a few did not even mention play. Children have an internal motivation for play and its learning outcomes for children may be higher if teachers make open-ended play materials available in classrooms. The findings on children's enjoyment from physical movement and field trips resonate well with previous research emphasizing the importance of outdoor spaces for children's engagement and wellbeing (Blanchet-Cohen, & Elliott, 2011; Moore, Morrissey, & Robertson, 2019). Occupying children with simple coloring activities and developmentally inappropriate worksheets may be a source of boredom for disadvantaged children in this study. Involving children in outdoor activities more frequently and opening further space for field trips may contribute to disadvantaged children's further engagement in other school activities.

The findings related to children's the least liked activities also illuminate their experiences of schooling at the activity level. Although some children disliked lessons for being stagnant or difficult, still the majority of the children mentioned the lessons as part of the daily schedule in the school. This result is at odds with some studies noting the absence of structured and teacher-led activities in children's narratives about the school (Einarsdottir, 2008; Grace et al., 2018). Even though children frequently mentioned care routines in the classroom, sleeping was also among disliked activities. This finding contributes to the critiques that recent studies make about sleep-rest times (Gehret et al., 2019; Nothard et al., 2015). Offering choices and providing flexibility to children in sleep-rest times may support their learning and engagement.

The results related to the language-related activities are notable for disadvantaged children in this study. Children's low frequency of responses, including the word 'book' was reflective of the condition of the books and teachers' frequency of reading books in the classroom. The finding that very few children mentioned the books in the context of the conversations with the teacher is somewhat similar to the findings of Grace et al. (2018). In their study, the children in disadvantaged communities did not talk about books although they had plenty of books and reading activity in the classrooms. However, in the present study, 5-6 year-olds children had access to quality books during the project implementation in the original research (Arikan, 2016); and notably, only these children mentioned the books. This finding suggests that having sufficient books and open-ended discussions have the potential to attract disadvantaged children's attention. Also, the girls from diverse families and those who needed language support mentioned the books. This finding may be an opportunity window for children with limited language skills. We know that children from low-income families need support in developing their language skills (Golcuk, Okur, Berument, 2015; Hayakawa & Reynolds, 2014). In this sense, increasing teachers' capacity to foster disadvantaged children's language development should be a priority (Dickinson, 2011).



It was a surprising finding that children often watch TV/cartoons in both home and school settings, but there were very few who liked watching TV. This finding parallels children's limited quality interactions with their parents at home. In a previous study, Ceglowski and Bacigalupa (2007) reported 'widespread viewing of videos and the use of video games' among young children in childcare settings. If selected carefully, viewing the digital content under the guidance of teachers in preschools may support children's language and cognitive development (Lee, Spence, & Carson, 2017). The finding on the meaning of watching TV/cartoons as an idle-time activity for children, however, implies a lack of cognitive stimulation and waste of valuable learning time in both school and home contexts. Although it may not be a common practice in other early education settings, children meet TV during infancy, and it becomes an inseparable part of their daily routine at home (Aral & Dogan Keskin, 2018). Increasing child-friendly educational content in free channels of the TV may provide disadvantaged children with necessary language exposure and cognitive stimulation at home.

The echoes of school experiences at home showed that children had inadequate stimulation, limited interactions with their parents and poor enrichment at home. While this was an expected result, it is a significant contribution to the limited literature on school-home connections for disadvantaged children (Kuger, Marcus, & Spiess, 2019). Increasing the number of quality activities and involving families in education through using culturally relevant practices may contribute to disadvantaged children's home life and future success in elementary school. These can also build strong bridges between school and home for sustainable outcomes in education.

This paper described young children's schooling experiences in a preschool designed for disadvantaged groups. Some children's boredom from specific activities, prolonged periods of care routines, high absenteeism and the occasional reluctance of some children, and children's preoccupation with the resources may be a sign for the need to increase quality in the school. Offering stimulating, concrete and challenging experiences to disadvantaged children may support their development and increase their engagement in different activities in preschool (Arikan & Kimzan, 2016). For this, educators need to listen children's voices and observe their interests in different activities. They should also pay attention to children's absenteeism during school days (Arikan, 2015).

This study was limited to children who attended summer school; therefore, the findings may not be applicable for other children who chose a recess in the school. Still, the results obtained from the participating children's perspectives highlight the need to reflect on changing educational discourses around the world on inclusive, universal and child-centered practices (Haan et al., 2013; Harris, 2015). In this sense, decision-makers may aim for policy changes to move toward inclusive educational experiences for disadvantaged children. Besides, teacher education programs should support prospective teachers to meet the challenge of teaching in diverse settings (Lampert & Burnett, 2016; Jensen, 2009). Future research may investigate

disadvantaged children's educational experiences in mixed schools and further examine home-school connections in these contexts.

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## Okul Öncesinde Dezavantajlı Çocukların Okullu Olma Deneyimleri: Tutumlar, Katılım ve Etkileşimler

### Atf:

Arikan, A. (2020). Schooling experiences of disadvantaged children in preschool: Attitudes, engagement and interactions. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Sciences*, 86, 1-24, DOI: 10.14689/ejer.2020.86.1

### Özet

*Problem Durumu:* Geçmişten bugüne risk altında, kırılğan, düşük gelirli, yoksul, dezavantajlı gibi sıfatlarla tanımlanan çocukların özgün yaşam koşulları, eğitim ihtiyaçları ve bu koşulların çocuklar üzerindeki etkileri pek çok araştırma ve politika girişimine konu olmuştur. Çoğunlukla dezavantajlı gruplardan çocuklarla yapılan bu çalışmalarda kısa vadeli gözlenebilir etkiler konusunda bir fikir birliği vardır. Uzun dönemli etkilere yönelik ise çeşitli sorunlara işaret edilmektedir. Bu gruplarda çocukların eğitim kaynaklarına erişimini sağlamak yeterli olmayıp aldıkları eğitimin her açıdan nitelikli olması gerekmektedir; çünkü bu, çocukların uluslararası sözleşmelerle güvence altına alınmış temel haklarından. Bu çalışma da hak temelli bir çerçeveden hareketle bu tür kurumlarda eğitimin niteliğinin tartışılmasında çocukların bakış açılarının dikkate alınmasını vurgulamaktadır. Çocukların bakış açılarına dayalı çeşitli araştırmalar olmakla birlikte dezavantajlı çocukların okul konusundaki deneyimlerine odaklanan çalışmalar sınırlıdır.

*Araştırmanın Amacı:* Bu çalışmanın amacı dezavantajlı koşullarda yaşayan çocuklara hizmet veren bir anaokulunda çocukların eğitim deneyimlerini betimlemektir.

*Araştırmanın Yöntemi:* Bu çalışma farklı yöntemlerin sentezlendiği büyük çaplı bir nitel araştırmanın parçası olup, durum çalışması deseninde elde edilen verilerin bir kısmının işlenmesine dayanmaktadır. Çalışmanın katılımcılarını dezavantajlı gruplara hizmet veren bir anaokuluna kayıtlı 3-6 yaş aralığındaki çocuklar arasından belirlenen toplam 26 çocuk ve aileleri oluşturmuştur. Veri toplama tekniği olarak çoklu yöntemlere başvurulmuştur. Bu çalışma kapsamında çocukların bakış açılarına odaklanıldığından çocuklarla yapılan yarı-yapılandırılmış görüşmeler temel veri olarak kullanılmıştır. Ebeveyn görüşmelerinden bazılarında, gözlemler, yoklama listeleri, çocuk ve aileye ait bilgiler içeren kurum belgeleri ve araştırmacı günlüklerine ise çocukların bakış açılarına destekleyen ikincil veri kaynağı olarak başvurulmuştur. Çocuklarla yapılan görüşmelerde büyük boy bir dolgu bebek kullanılmıştır. Veri analizinde sürekli karşılaştırma ve tümevarım yaklaşımına başvurulmuş ve ATLAS.ti 7. Yazılımı kullanılmıştır.

*Araştırmanın Bulguları:* Araştırmanın gerçekleştirildiği anaokulu, her sınıfta iki öğretmen olmak üzere okul öncesi eğitim için yeterli fiziksel kaynaklara ve insan kaynaklarına sahiptir. Bununla birlikte, görüşmelerden ve kurumsal belgelerden elde edilen bulgular, kaynaklara erişimin tüm çocuklar için kaliteli eğitim deneyimleri anlamına gelmediğini ve eğitimde geliştirilmesi gereken yönler olduğunu göstermektedir. Çocukların neredeyse yarısı resmi sınırların üzerinde devamsızlık yapmış, farklı gelişim alanları için ekstra desteğe ihtiyaç duyduğu belirlenmiş ve hepsinin evde yetersiz uyaran ortamında yaşadığı anlaşılmıştır. Çalışmaya katılan dezavantajlı çocuklar okula karşı olumlu tutumlara sahipmiş gibi görünse de, deneyimlerinin belirli etkinliklere seçici katılım ve ebeveynlerle okul konusunda sınırlı etkileşimler içerdiği bulunmuştur. Ev ortamında eğitim deneyimlerinin yansımaları çocukların etkinlik tercihleri ve okuldaki çalışmalara seçici katılımı ile uyumlu olmakla birlikte çocukların okul deneyimlerinin ev yaşamını zenginleştirme yönünden zayıf olduğu görülmüştür. Cinsiyet, yaş, gelişimsel kazanımlar ve aile yapısına göre yapılan çeşitli karşılaştırmalarda çocukların deneyimlerinde dikkate değer farklılıklar gözlenmiştir.

Dikkat çekici bulgulardan en önemlisi çocukların çoğunun okulu sevme sebebi olarak fiziksel ortama vurgu yapmış olmasıdır. Bu bağlamda, oyuncaklar ve yiyecek gibi öğelere konuşmalarında yer vermişlerdir. Öğrenme, etkinliklere katılma ve oynama gibi eylem içeren, sürece yönelik öğelere vurgu yapanlar ise daha az sayıdadır. Çocuklar en fazla oyun etkinliğine dikkat çekmiş, uyku rutini konusunda hoşnutsuzluklarını dile getirenler olmuştur. Çocuklar okulda ve evde sıklıkla TV izlemelerine karşın hoşlandıkları etkinlikleri açıklarken TV'den bahsetmemişlerdir. Çocuklardan bazıları kitap ve okuma gibi dil etkinliklerine konuşmalarında yer vermiş; yenilik/farklılık ve fiziksel hareket içeren etkinliklerde eğlendiklerini ifade etmişlerdir.

*Araştırmanın Sonuçları ve Öneriler:* Çocukların bakış açılarına dayalı olarak elde edilen araştırma bulguları öncelikle dezavantajlı gruplarla ilgili yeni gelişmekte olan araştırmalara ve erken eğitim ortamlarında çocuk bakış açısını vurgulayan alanyazına katkıda bulunmaktadır. Araştırmadan elde edilen sonuçlar, dünya çapında kapsayıcı ve çocuk merkezli felsefeler yönünde değişen eğitimsel söylemler üzerinde yansıtma yapmanın gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır. Dezavantajlı çocukların eğitimi konusunda öğretmen eğitiminde boşluklar olduğuna dikkat çekilmiş ve kapsayıcı eğitime yönelik politika değişikliğine gidilmesi yönünde karar vericilere çağrıda bulunulmuştur.

*Anahtar Sözcükler:* Erken çocukluk eğitimi, çocuk katılımı, düşük gelirli aileler, yoksulluk, durum çalışması, kapsayıcı eğitim.