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The Relationship between the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Socioeconomic Background of Children

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Abstract

The quality of early childhood education (ECE) schools and classrooms have been studied by many researchers. The results indicated that there is a considerable gap in terms of quality among ECE schools and classrooms. There is inequality among children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in attending high-quality ECE. It is known that a high proportion of the child population is currently attending public ECE schools. Therefore, the current study aims to get comprehensive data about the quality of public ECE classrooms and descriptive data about children's socioeconomic backgrounds. Based on this, the current study aims to assess whether there is a relationship between these two factors and whether there is a gap among children in terms of reaching high-quality public ECE. This study is correlational research. The Non-random purposive sampling method is used for the data collection. The results show that there is a significant positive correlation between parents' socioeconomic factors and the quality of ECE classrooms. The study contributed to the ECE literature by identifying the factors related to children, parents, teachers, and the quality of ECE classrooms. There is a need for further research in Turkey that defines and investigates the quality of ECE from a multidimensional perspective and particularly including families, schools, educational programs, and culture.

Keywords: Early childhood education, quality of education, young children

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, educational specialists and policymakers globally have paid more attention to education, especially in early childhood years. Scientists in the fields of education, psychology, and other related areas conduct numerous applied research to gain insight into factors that have long-standing impacts

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on child development and bring people's attention to the issue. As Abbott (2014) suggested, high-quality education beginning from the early years of life is vital to be successful in the twenty-first century as it helps individuals to develop skills that are content knowledge and 21st-century themes; learning and innovation skills; information, media and technology skills; life and career skills (The Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2015).

In the year 1995, The National Association for the Education of Young Children Governing Board set goals related to early childhood education and its long-lasting impacts on later in life. In Goal I, The Board focused on the importance of early years for children's readiness of learning in school stating: "all children will start school ready to learn" (NAEYC Governing Board, 1995). In 2001, the United States did an educational reform named as No Child Left Behind Act. This educational reform aimed to improve the quality of education not only for individual children but also for the welfare of society (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Rhode Island KIDS COUNT (2005) also pointed out the importance of making investments in the early years to have children who read successfully, healthy teens, and productive adults. In this regard, Heckman (2006) found that investing in early childhood education provides higher returns for society, families, and individuals sustainably and comprehensively. These global educational trends have led to some educational changes in Turkey as well.

From the beginning of the 21st century, the Turkish Ministry of National Education has started to give more importance to public early childhood education to provide center-based education services for children and their families (MoNE, 2021). Turkish MoNE had worked very hard to make public early childhood education compulsory and wider for 5- and 6-years old children before the introduction of a new educational system "4+4+4" in 2012. To do this, the number of public early childhood education schools and classrooms was increased. The aim was to make the rate of schooling in early childhood education increase from 12% to 25%. However, the rate of schooling in early childhood education increased to 16.1% in the year 2005 (Derman & Başal, 2010). In 2009, educational policymakers underlined the importance of attending a public early childhood education program for young children, especially for five years old children before elementary education (60-72 months). With these policies, early childhood education schooling and enrollment rates for young children have increased dramatically. However, the Turkish MoNE has been criticized for not emphasizing early childhood education sufficiently after the new educational system of 4+4+4 (Anne Çocuk Eğitim Vakfı [Mother Child Education Foundation] [AÇEV] & Eğitim Reformu Girişimi [Education Reform Initiative] [ERG], 2013). Within the regard of this new educational system, attending early childhood education was not compulsory for children before elementary school. Parents had to register their children to the first grade when their children reached 66 months of age. Additionally, families had the option for registering their children to early childhood education or registering them to the first grade if their children were between 60 and 66 months old (MoNE, 2012). Within this regard, families mostly choose to register their children to elementary school instead of early childhood education because of financial issues (AÇEV & ERG, 2013; AÇEV & ERG, 2016). Therefore, the schooling rates and the enrollment rates to center-based

early childhood education programs have dropped down to be lower than the rates of the year 2013 (MoNE, 2021). However, the schooling rates and the number of children who attend early childhood education began to increase dramatically after the 2014 year.

Although there are several factors influencing why early education is receiving greater attention, there is one main reason for this. The reason is that findings of applied research have documented clearly that the experiences and environment of children's early childhood years have substantial effects on children's readiness for school and achievement throughout their education and life (Romano et al., 2010; Pianta et al., 2002). In Canada, a nationwide school readiness survey was applied to see the importance of children's school readiness for their later education life (Romano et al., 2010). At the end of this nationwide survey, Canadian educational scientists found that kindergarten math, reading, and socioemotional skills are predictors for 3rd-grade school achievement. They also found that there is a strong positive correlation between early and later socioemotional skills of children (Romano et al., 2010). In the United States, educational specialists and policymakers conducted an Early Childhood Longitudinal Study between the years 1998-2000 to assess children's readiness for school and to see the effectiveness and appropriateness of early childhood education for children's later achievement. They used a large sample to collect data from early childhood education schools and elementary schools. Findings of this research suggest that children who have multiple risk factors have lower points than children who have no risk factors in terms of reading and mathematics skills, general knowledge, motor skills, and social skills, and they show fewer positive attitudes towards learning activities (Denton & West, 2002; U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001).

Although the quality of ECE is receiving greater attention more recently, there has been some applied research on the quality of ECE in Turkey. Like the rest of the world, researchers in Turkey are also trying to clarify factors that are significantly related to the quality of ECE as well as how the socioeconomic backgrounds of children are associated with the quality of ECE (Adagideli, 2018; Cinkılıç, 2009; Erkan & Kırca, 2010; Erkan, 2011; Gündüz & Çalışkan, 2013; Tozar, 2011; Yazıcı, 2002). Those studies have shown that there is a strong positive relationship between the quality of ECE and the socioeconomic status of children's families. Those empirical research provide evidence that is crucial and has great potential to impact early childhood education policies in Turkey in terms of making center-based publicly supported ECE programs and services wider, more accessible, and of higher quality.

With the consideration of the educational system in Turkey that does not include early childhood education within compulsory education, it is essential to conduct research that assesses the relationships between the quality of public early childhood education programs and the socio-economic background of children, because majority of the children (91.6 %) who are attending ECE programs in Turkey are currently attending public ECE classrooms and schools. (MoNE, 2021). This way, policymakers can be informed about the significance of early education and development for later school achievement.

Early Childhood Education in Turkey

In Turkey, processes of determining and applying educational standards, policies, and aims are carried out by the National Ministry of Education (MoNE, 2013). Therefore, educational activities about early childhood are under the responsibility of MoNE. According to MoNE (2013), early childhood education programs are for children between 36 and 66 months and attending an early childhood education program is optional in Turkey.

The general aims and the principles catalog of MoNE (2013) suggest the aims of early childhood education in Turkey: preparing children for elementary school, encouraging children's creativity and analytical thinking, supporting children's whole development, supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds, making children respectful to differences, and encouraging children to learn reforms and principles of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. It was emphasized that these essential aims should be provided through a child-centered approach considering children's age-related characteristics, concerns, needs, individual characteristics, individual differences, and environmental factors. Also, MoNE stated that it is essential for children to gain specific achievements that are comprehensive and appropriate for children's developmental levels. The educational program should be flexible for children's diversities, and it should be applied appropriately. The program provides independence for teachers in teaching. Also, the program aims to make assessment and evaluation more comprehensive. The Ministry of National Education suggests that the ECE program of Turkey prepared by the ministry itself identified certain developmental achievements and indicators for children considering children's ages and different developmental domains so that teachers can prepare lesson plans and provide experiences for children and assess children's developmental process appropriately. Furthermore, it emphasized the importance of providing young children with high-quality early childhood education with physically, cognitively, and socioemotionally rich environmental stimuli for children to have positive experiences that would foster positive attitudes towards learning.

In the catalog published by MoNE, preschools are defined as schools for children who are between 36 and 66 months, and preschool classrooms are defined as classrooms that provide formal education to children between 36 and 66 months of age (MoNE, 2013). In this catalog, types of early childhood education institutions were divided into three categories. These were: independent preschools, preschools that are bounded to public primary education schools, and educational practice classrooms that are bounded to other educational organizations.

There has been an increase that ECE received since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, peaking especially in 2009 because MoNE announced that attending ECE was mandatory for children who are between 5 and 6 years of age (Derman & Başal, 2010). However, a new educational system (4+4+4) was accepted in the spring semester of the 2011-2012 educational year and was launched in the fall of 2012. In this

system, the first eight years of education are defined as primary education (the first four years were a primary school and the second four years were middle school), and the last four years of the compulsory education system are named high school education. It is explained in the guidebook of the new educational system that early childhood education is for children who are 36 to 66 months old, but it is not compulsory. Children who are 66 months old have to begin elementary school, but families whose children are between 60 and 66 months old have an option to register their children to elementary education or early childhood education based simply on their preference (MoNE, 2012). Although attending an early childhood education program was made optional for young children in the new educational system, The Ministry of National Education stated that it was its aim to make formal early childhood education accessible to the whole country for children who are between the ages of 3 and 5. In 2016, The Turkish government announced that attending formal early childhood education would become compulsory for five years of children in the 2019 year. However, this policy was begun to be implemented in 22 pilot provinces that have already high enrolment rates for early childhood education. In conclusion, families from disadvantaged backgrounds were not benefited from this policy (Göl-Güven, 2018). In accordance with the concerns that these changes were going to negatively affect the schooling attendance rates of young children in preschools in Turkey, the rate of increase had dropped down after the change in the educational system in 2012. However, according to the recent statistics of MoNE (2020), the number of students who attend early childhood education has begun to increase again in the 2014 year as a result of increasing the age of primary school enrollment to 66 months.

There have been a number of criticisms from educational specialists and organizations in Turkey regarding the approval of the new educational system (4+4+4). According to the report of AÇEV and ERG (2013), a new educational system may cause inequalities among children because socioeconomically disadvantaged children may not have a chance to attend preschools when they are not provided by the government free of charge. It is known that early childhood education is expensive in private education centers. Families who have better socio-economic opportunities can afford to register their children in private early childhood education centers. Most families choose to register their children in public education schools, because of the lower educational fees. Even though these amounts of the educational fees are lower than in private early childhood education schools, these amounts are high for families from lower socioeconomic status (Karlıdağ-Dennis et al., 2022).

In the educational system of Turkey, early childhood education is not compulsory and public early childhood education programs take some educational fees from families based on the educational expenses of the schools. Consequently, families with low socio-economic status choose to register their children for first grade when they become 60 months old. Children begin school without readiness for learning in terms of whole developmental domains. This makes the achievement gap between children wider (AÇEV & ERG, 2013; AÇEV & ERG, 2016; Karlıdağ-Dennis et al., 2022).

To conclude, policies governing the state of ECE in Turkey are constantly changing and making it very difficult for children, parents, and teachers to adjust. In fact, these structural changes in the system seem to take all the attention and, as a result of this, improving the quality of early childhood education becomes somewhat of a neglected phenomenon. Therefore, it is still unknown how the quality of public early childhood education institutions is and if and how young children who attend such institutions are ready to learn at school.

The Quality Term in Early Childhood Education Settings

Quality of early childhood education is vital for children's development. When schools meet children's needs and expectations, children can feel belonging to their school and have better relationships in the classroom. Also, in high-quality early childhood education schools, children have opportunities to acquire meaningful learning (AÇEV & ERG, 2016; NAEYC, 1995; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002).

Different quality standards are set by educational specialists and educational institutions including physical properties of the learning environment (teacher-child ratio, equipment of class, and educational materials), teachers (teacher features, pre-service, and in-service training), school administrators, education program, community and family involvement to the education process, socio-emotional process (teacher-child and child-child interactions), features of staff, and health-nutrition-security services of institutions (AÇEV & ERG, 2013; NAEYC, 2005; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002).

Kıldan (2010) divided quality standards of education into two dimensions: Physical Equipment and Environment Quality, and Pedagogical Quality. According to Britto and Limlingan (2012), physical environment quality is significant for the safety and health of children and adults. Researchers and educational specialists suggest that schools should have areas that support children's physical development both indoors and outdoor spaces of the school area (Britto & Limlingan, 2012; Kıldan, 2010; MoNE, 2013). While building these places, space for movement, safety, and health of children, active Engagement of children, and the quality and the quantity of the materials should be considered. Moreover, an early childhood education school should be in an appropriately accessible location. This is important for children's safety and accessibility to school.

In terms of pedagogical quality, Britto and Limlingan (2012) emphasized that the educational experiences of teachers are linked to the quality of education and learning of children. Therefore, it is vital to have teachers who are specifically trained in the early childhood education field for children's sustainable and appropriate learning. Also, Kıldan (2010) suggested that having an academically and socially effective curriculum is an indicator of high-quality education. Ponitz, Rimm-Kaufman, Grimm, and Curby (2009) emphasized that educational activities should be comprehensive and should touch all developmental domains to support the development of children so that they can have better learning and achievement.

According to research, the quality of education is positively associated with the developmental outcomes of children (NAEYC, 2005; NICHD, 2006; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002). In fact, as Fryer and Levitt (2004) suggested, the quality of schools, especially early childhood education schools, may have a crucial role in closing the achievement gap between children who come from various backgrounds, particularly those from disadvantaged environments. However, the results of the research showed that more students in a class are positively associated with a less child-centered climate in the classroom, the income level of families is positively correlated with attending a higher child-centered climate, and higher levels of mother's education are positively related with instructional climate, child-centered climate and teacher's positivity in the classroom (Phillips et al., 2000, Pianta et al., 2002).

Researchers place a substantial emphasis on the quality gap among schools, especially between private and public ECE programs. In the literature, many research studies assessed the inequality in the quality of ECE programs and compared high- and low-quality schools (Britto & Limlingan, 2012; Burchinal et al., 2010). They assessed the quality of early childhood education in schools in terms of educational activities, the physical environment, and the social-emotional climate. They found that the higher quality of an early childhood education classroom is positively related to children's language, reading, and math skills. Results also showed that children from low-income families are more likely to attend lower-quality early childhood education centers (Burchinal et al., 2010; Pianta et al., 2002; Stipek et al., 1998; Tremblay et al., 2001). According to Britto and Limlingan (2012), inequality between children in terms of accessing higher quality early childhood education programs may make the school readiness and achievement gap wider. Since the quality of class instruction predicts children's academic achievement and social-emotional development, researchers suggested that states and countries should make an effort to provide high-quality early childhood education for low-income children to contribute to their whole developmental outcomes (Burchinal et al., 2010).

When it comes to the quality of early childhood education in Turkey, researchers emphasize that overall levels of quality in early childhood institutions in Turkey are low and there are significant gaps between schools that are high and low quality (Derman & Başal, 2010). According to the statistics for the year 2020, a great part of the budget in early childhood education institutions is spent on personnel expenses. The proportion given from the national budget for education is too small and not enough to meet the needs of the schools and the children (MoNE, 2013). In addition to problems that are associated with the budget early childhood education receives, Kıldan (2010) stated that Turkey fell behind all the European Countries in terms of attendance rates of children in early childhood education. Researchers and educational specialists suggest that while making center-based early childhood education classrooms expand, setting comprehensive and sustainable high-quality standards is very crucial (AÇEV & ERG, 2016; Derman & Başal, 2010; Kıldan, 2010). Unfortunately, Turkey does not achieve high-quality ECE because of inadequacy in the number of teachers, and inappropriate physical settings for early childhood education classrooms (Derman & Başal, 2010; Kıldan, 2010). Overcrowded classrooms, inappropriate locations of

schools, inadequate learning materials, less educated teachers, and higher child-teacher ratios are indicators of low-quality ECE programs (Britto & Limlingan, 2012).

Objectives and Research Questions

Providing early public childhood education services is very important for the accessibility of those services for children and families (AÇEV & ERG, 2013; Laosa, 2005). Despite early childhood education not being mandatory including kindergarten education, over half the children in Turkey attend publicly funded early childhood education programs that are located either within an elementary school setting or an independent preschool (MoNE, 2013). Since more children have access to publicly funded early childhood education, it is crucial to conduct research assessing the quality of these schools which is a significant factor contributing to children's holistic development outcomes (Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta et al., 2002).

Previous research has shown that there are significant correlations between the socio-economic status of families (educational status, occupational status, age of marriage, number of children in the home, marital status, monthly income), developmental outcomes of children, and educational opportunities that children can access (Coley, 2002; Erkan, 2011). Therefore, the current study aims to get comprehensive data on how children's socio-economic background is associated with the quality features of public ECE classrooms in terms of teachers' occupational experience and physical and pedagogical quality features. The research questions are asking: "Is there a relationship between children's socio-economic background and the quality of ECE classrooms" and "Does the quality of early childhood education differ based on the socio-economic background of children?".

Method

This study is correlational research attempting to assess the relationship between the different variables. The data is collected in two districts of the metropolitan area of İstanbul, Turkey. These districts are Beşiktaş and Kağıthane and located on the European side of the city of İstanbul and thought to represent diverse backgrounds of families. Although the non-random purposive sampling method is used to select these districts of İstanbul (Büyüköztürk et al., 2017; Creswell, 2009), these districts are large, growing continuously, and have a more heterogeneous population of families in terms of socio-economic background and neighborhood characteristics. These districts constitute neighborhoods that are both high and low socio-economically and have the potential to provide rich data for this study (İstanbul Rehberi, 2015).

After obtaining consent from the parents, school administrators, and the teachers to participate in the study, demographic information sheets were distributed to parents to be returned to their classroom teachers in a sealed envelope. Two hundred seventeen parents gave permission to participate in the research, filled out the demographic information sheets, and returned those forms to classroom teachers in

sealed envelopes. Additionally, in order to assess the quality of early childhood programs the children of these parents were attending, 8 public primary education schools were visited and observed. These observations allowed for the assessment of the quality of the ECE environment and demographic information data that were collected from 22 early childhood education classrooms provided background information about the teachers. Of the six schools that had half-day programs, the observation took two school days in each of the classrooms constituting a total of ten hours per classroom. In the remaining two schools that had full-day programs, observation in each classroom was completed again in two days, taking sixteen hours. To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and the participating schools, names of the schools, teachers, parents, and children were not used; codes were given by the researcher for each child, teacher, and school.

Participants

In the current study, there were 217 preschool children who attend public preschool programs for 48-66 months old children. Of these children, 107 of them were female while 110 of them were male children. Additionally, children's parents (both mothers and fathers) filled out demographic information forms to collect data on the background of the participating children.

After receiving approval from The Primary Education Department of the Educational Faculty of Boğaziçi University and the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Graduate Studies in Social Sciences (file no: SBB-EAK 2016/15) for conducting research, the İstanbul City Administration Department of the Ministry of Education was contacted to get permission to collect data from preschool classrooms of public schools in the İstanbul metropolitan area. Then, 8 public schools that are located in the two districts of İstanbul (Beşiktaş and Kağıthane) were selected and visited.

Of those schools selected for the study, one of them was an independent ECE public school that is located in Beşiktaş and the children were attending this school for a full day (8 hours). Other schools were primary education public schools that had ECE classrooms. Two of them were located in Beşiktaş, but the others were located in Kağıthane. The duration of a school day had two types: half-day program and full-day program (See Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1

Percentage Distribution of the Duration of a School Day

Type of the school program	*N*	Percent
half-day program (5 hours)	6	75 %
full-day program (8 hours)	2	25 %
Total	8	100 %

Table 2

Percentage Distribution of Children's Attendance to the Different School Programs

Type of the school program	*N*	Percent
half-day program (5 hours)	176	81.1 %
full-day program (8 hours)	41	18.9 %
Total	217	100 %

Examination of the demographic information of 22 ECE teachers, who were all female, revealed that all the teachers had undergraduate degrees in Early Childhood Education (See Table 3).

Table 3

Percentage Distribution of the Participant Teachers' Graduation Schools

Type of the graduation school	*N*	Percent
Distance education faculty	1	4.5%
Four-year university	19	86.4 %
Master's degree	2	9.1 %
Total	22	100 %

Instruments

The demographic information form for parents included questions about parents' monthly income, their educational status, their occupational status, the number of children that they have, their marital status, languages that they know, and their age.

Also, this form included questions about the age and gender of children, children's attendance duration to formal early childhood education, and languages that children know. Similarly, the demographic information form for early childhood education classroom teachers included questions about teachers' age, gender, and educational and occupational backgrounds.

The quality of ECE classrooms was assessed with the "Environment Rating Scale Self-Assessment Readiness Checklist" by the researcher via non-participant classroom observations (Center for Early Childhood Professional Development, 2003). The researcher visited the schools, and she did non-participant classroom observations to complete the classroom quality checklist. The quality checklist included information about the name and location of the school, class size, and age group of class. The quality checklist had 7 sub-scales: space and furnishings, personal care routines, language and reasoning, activities, interactions, program structure, and parents and staff. Center for Early Childhood Professional Development (2003) constructed this checklist by reviewing the "Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms et al., 1998)", "Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale (Harms et al., 2003)", and "School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (Harms et al., 1996)".

The quality checklist consisted of 4-Point-Likert type items: 0 for "Not Apply", 1 for "Not Met", 2 for "Partially Met", and 3 for "Fully Met". The internal reliability scores of the checklist were computed with Cronbach's Alpha. The reliability score of the checklist was .952. Also, the internal reliability scores of the checklist's sub-scales were calculated (See Table 4).

Table 4

Internal Reliability Scores of the "Environment Rating Scale Self-Assessment Readiness Checklist"

Sub-scales of the checklist	N of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Space and furnishings	12	.845
Personal care routines	17	.725
Language and reasoning	8	.882
Activities	10	.819
Interactions	5	.898
Program structure	5	.238
Parents and staff	12	.765

Results

There were 107 female children whose mean age (monthly) was 64.5 months (*SD* = 5.546), and 110 male children whose mean age (monthly) was 64.68 months (*SD* = 4.793). Children's age (monthly) ranged from 47 to 76 months; female children's age (monthly) ranged from 49 to 76 months, and male children's age (monthly) ranged from 47 to 73 months. Fifty-four-point eight percent of these children had been attending a formal early childhood education classroom for one year, 25.8% of them for two years, 16.1% of them for three years, and 3.2% of them for four years.

Examination of the employment status of the parents revealed that almost forty percent of mothers were working and 59.4% of them were not working. Ninety-two percent of fathers were working, 5.5% of them were not working, and 1.8% of them were retired. The educational status of the parents is presented in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5

Educational Status of the Mothers

Educational status	N	Percent
Primary education	73	33.6 %
High school	67	30.9 %
Bachelor's degree	68	31.3 %
Master's degree	7	3.2 %

Table 6

Educational Status of the Fathers

Educational status	N	Percent
Primary education	76	35 %
High school	64	29.5 %
Bachelor's degree	61	28.1 %
Master's degree	10	4.6 %
Doctoral degree	2	9 %

The number of children that parents had ranged from 1 to 6 (See Table 7) with the majority of them having 2 children. Also, parents rated their socio-economic status by selecting their total monthly income (See Table 8).

Table 7

Percentage Distribution of Number of Children that Parents Had

Number of children	N	Percentage
1	67	30.9 %
2	116	53.5 %
3	26	12 %
4	6	2.8 %
5	1	5 %
6	1	5 %
Total	217	100 %

Table 8

Percentage Distribution of Parents' Total Monthly Income

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Less than 800 TL	3	1.4	1.4	1.4
801-1300 TL	28	12.9	12.9	14.3
1301-1800 TL	31	14.3	14.3	28.6
1801-2300 TL	33	15.2	15.2	43.8
2301-2800 TL	23	10.6	10.6	54.4
2801-3300 TL	24	11.1	11.1	65.4
3301-3800 TL	13	6.0	6.0	71.4
3801-4300 TL	5	2.3	2.3	73.7
4301-4800 TL	9	4.1	4.1	77.9
4801-5300 TL	18	8.3	8.3	86.2
5301-5800 TL	5	2.3	2.3	88.5
5801-6300 TL	5	2.3	2.3	90.8
6301-6800 TL	5	2.3	2.3	93.1
6801-7300 TL	4	1.8	1.8	94.9
7301-7800 TL	2	.9	.9	95.9
7801-8300 TL	1	.5	.5	96.3
8301-8800 TL	2	.9	.9	97.2
8801-9300 TL	1	.5	.5	97.7
9300 TL and higher	5	2.3	2.3	100
Total	217	100	100	

The average age of the early childhood education classroom teachers was 33 (M = 33.18, SD = 6.745) with ages ranging from 25 to 54. Those teachers' mean length of experience in teaching occupation was 9.95 years (SD = 5.964) and it ranged from 3 to 25 years.

The mean class size of all 22 early childhood education classrooms was 19.55 (SD = 2.988) and their class sizes ranged from 13 to 25. All of the twenty-two classrooms provided education for children whose age was between 48 and 66 months. Sixty-eight-point two percent of classrooms had a half-day program (5 hours), and 31.8% of them had a full-day program (8 hours). Total quality scores of the early childhood education classrooms from the "Environment Rating Scale Self-Assessment Readiness Checklist" were ranged from 103 to 162 points. The points of different sub-scales of the "Environment Rating Scale Self-Assessment Readiness Checklist" were also calculated (See Table 9).

The research question of the current study was asking whether there was a relationship between children's socioeconomic background and the quality of early childhood education classrooms. Results of the study showed that there was a significant positive relationship between the educational level of children's mothers and total quality scores of the early childhood education classrooms from "Environment Rating Scale Self-Assessment Readiness Checklist", r = .454, p = .000. Also, there was a significant positive relationship between the educational status of the fathers and the total quality scores of the classrooms, r = .420, p = .000. These results indicated that children whose parents had higher educational status were more likely to attend higher-quality early childhood education classrooms (See Tables 10 and 11).

Based on the results of the data analyses, the total monthly incomes of children's families were significantly and positively correlated with the total quality scores of the early childhood education classrooms, r = .391, p = .000. Children whose parents had higher monthly income were more likely to attend early childhood education classrooms, which got higher educational quality. Furthermore, the relationships between the number of siblings that children had and the total quality scores of the classrooms were analyzed. The results of the analyses showed that there was a significant negative correlation between those two variables, r = -.232, p = .001. This result indicated that children who had more siblings were more likely to attend early childhood education classrooms that got lower quality scores (See Tables 10 and 11).

Within the scope of the current study, the relationships between children's socioeconomic background variables including total monthly income of the families, number of siblings that children have, educational status of mothers, and educational levels of fathers, and different parts of the "Environment Rating Scale Self-Assessment Readiness Checklist" including "Space and Furnishings", "Personal Care Routines", "Language and Reasoning", "Activities", "Interactions", "Parents and Staff" and "Program Structure" were calculated. The results illustrated that even if the schools are public, children who had better socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to attend higher-quality early childhood education classrooms in terms of various quality standards (See Tables 10 and 11).

Table 9

Quality Scores of the Early Childhood Education Classrooms (N=22)

Code of the School	Code of the Teacher	Space and Furnishings	Personal Care Routines	Language and Reasoning	Activities	Interactions	Parents and Staff Relations	Program Structure	Total Quality Score of ECE Classroom
1	1.1	21	30	20	18	15	10	21	135
1	1.2	17	26	14	13	10	7	19	106
2	2.1	19	30	11	16	8	7	19	110
2	2.2	22	30	16	16	10	8	20	122
2	2.3	20	29	12	17	6	7	19	110
3	3.1	29	39	24	24	15	11	20	162
4	4.1	17	29	10	17	8	7	16	104
4	4.2	15	30	15	16	11	7	16	110
4	4.3	17	29	12	16	7	6	16	103
5	5.1	21	31	13	15	14	7	18	119
5	5.2	20	31	16	16	11	8	18	120
6	6.1	25	32	21	18	15	9	21	141
6	6.2	21	32	17	17	13	8	21	129
7	7.1	32	34	18	23	14	11	26	158
7	7.2	29	32	13	18	8	9	25	134
7	7.3	32	35	17	23	10	9	26	152
7	7.4	29	33	18	19	13	9	26	147
8	8.1	21	31	13	17	10	8	16	116
8	8.2	19	30	14	17	10	6	18	114
8	8.3	20	30	15	17	10	6	18	116
8	8.4	21	31	15	17	10	6	17	117
8	8.5	19	30	13	17	7	6	18	110

Table 10

Correlations between Children's Socioeconomic Background and Quality of the Classrooms

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
		Space and Furnishings	Personal Care Routines	Language and Reasoning	Activities	Educational Status of Mother	Educational Status of Father	Number of Siblings	Total Monthly Income Families
1	Pearson Correlation								
	Sig. (2-tailed)								
2	Pearson Correlation	.807(**)							
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000							
3	Pearson Correlation	.626(**)	.778(**)						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000						
4	Pearson Correlation	.840(**)	.910(**)	.725(**)					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000					
5	Pearson Correlation	.507(**)	.315(**)	.302(**)	.349(**)				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000				
6	Pearson Correlation	.473(**)	.301(**)	.238(**)	.337(**)	.660(**)			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000			
7	Pearson Correlation	-.240(**)	-.193(**)	-.194(**)	.176(**)	-.303(**)	-.162(*)		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.004	.004	.010	.000	.018		
8	Pearson Correlation	.435(**)	.214(**)	.231(**)	.285(**)	.553(**)	.543(**)	-.158(*)	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.002	.001	.000	.000	.000	.020	

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 11

Correlations between Children's Socioeconomic Background and Quality of the Classrooms

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
		Interactions	Parents and Staff Relations	Program Structure	Total Quality Score of ECE Classroom	Educational Status of Mother	Educational Status of Father	Number of Siblings	Total Monthly Income Families
1	Pearson Correlation								
	Sig. (2-tailed)								
2	Pearson Correlation	.356(**)							
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000							
3	Pearson Correlation	.720(**)	.643(**)						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000						
4	Pearson Correlation	.727(**)	.745(**)	.903(**)					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000					
5	Pearson Correlation	.257(**)	.515(**)	.366(**)	.454(**)				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000				
6	Pearson Correlation	.256(**)	.479(**)	.341(**)	.420(**)	.660(**)			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000			
7	Pearson Correlation	-.164(*)	-.206(**)	-.160(*)	-.232(**)	-.303(**)	-.162(*)		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.016	.002	.019	.001	.000	.018		
8	Pearson Correlation	.249(**)	.496(**)	.368(**)	.391(**)	.553(**)	.543(**)	-.158(*)	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.020	

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Discussion, Conclusions, and Future Directions

Children's adaptation to school and success have long been serious concerns for parents and the states alike (Karoly et al., 2006). Parents want to see their children succeed and thrive, and also want to make sure that the schools support children's efforts and prepare them for success. Similarly, states want to have successful citizens who contribute to the welfare of their states in the future. In this regard, Heckman (2006) suggested that for individuals to carry on personally fulfilling and successful lives and benefit the states and the community is all related to investing in children's early childhood years. Moreover, investment in the early years would allow for the disadvantaged children who lack support in their homes for optimal development to receive cognitive and emotional support and compensatory care during early childhood education (Karoly et al., 2006). Thus, providing high-quality and mandatory early childhood education for children and their families is one of the first and crucial steps to invest in the early years that will help children to develop to their fullest and disadvantaged children close the gaps before primary school begins (Heckman, 2011). In fact, there is vast literature suggesting that there exists a positive relationship between children's development and their later success (Romano et al., 2010; Pianta et al., 2002).

Within the scope of the current study, the data about the quality of ECE classrooms were collected to assess the relationship between children's socioeconomic backgrounds and the quality of ECE schools. Different dimensions of the ECE schools' quality were investigated based on the literature suggested: space and furnishings, personal care routines, language and reasoning, activities, interactions, program structure, and parents and staff (Britto & Limlingan, 2012; Kıldan, 2010). Results of the current study indicated that all quality dimensions were significantly correlated with the socio-economic background of children like parents' educational status, monthly income, and the number of children that parents have. There is a vast amount of research asserting that difference between schools in terms of the quality leads to an achievement gap among children (Britto & Limlingan, 2012; Burchinal et al., 2010; Pagani et al., 2010). Moreover, considering that children's disadvantage starts at birth as the socioeconomic status of the families determines the resources provided at home, the quality of early childhood education becomes crucial to compensate for what families cannot provide at home (Heckman, 2011; Karoly et al., 2006). In fact, evidence suggests that high-quality early childhood education can allow for prior disadvantages to subside and allow children to catch up and give them a chance to have an equal start for later school years (Felfe & Lalive, 2018). Conversely, low-quality early childhood education could be a risk factor on its own for later academic achievement. Thus, it is essential for children, coming from all socioeconomic backgrounds to have access to high-quality early childhood education. Within this regard, however, the results of the current research showed that children who come from higher socioeconomic status environments were more likely to attend early childhood education schools which have higher quality in terms of space and furnishing, personal care routines, language, and reasoning, activities, interactions, parents and staff relations, and program structure. Specifically, children whose parents have higher educational status and higher total monthly incomes were more likely to attend higher-quality schools. Unfortunately, this

finding suggests that the disadvantaged children do not get a chance to have opportunities to catch up during early childhood education, and those with parents who have higher income and higher education attend schools having higher quality. Findings of the current research seem to coincide with the related literature suggesting that the income level of parents and their educational status are positively related to the quality of early childhood education schools children attend (Burchinal et al., 2010; Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Göl-Güven, 2018; Karlıdağ-Dennis et al., 2022, Pianta et al., 2002).

The findings of the current study also suggested that the number of siblings children had was inversely related to the quality of early childhood education children received. A similar finding was reported by Coley (2002) and Erkan (2011) that when the number of children parents have is higher, access to education and rich educational opportunities may not be easily available for children, and this as a result could have a negative impact on the developmental outcomes of children. It is reasonable to argue that as the number of children increases at home, the power of income to sustain a quality life decreases, and even the most involved parents are left with dividing their attention between more children, leaving each child with relatively less. Boonk, Gijselaers, Ritzen, and Brand-Gruwel (2018) reported that parental involvement, measured by reading, having high expectations from children to do well academically, and having dialogues with children regarding schooling, as well as encouragement and support for learning are all associated with academic achievement. Such involvement indicators definitely require more time and greater effort from parents when the number of children is high and dividing them over children may leave each child with insufficient involvement from their parents.

Early childhood education in Turkey is not mandatory and receives very little financial support and resources from the state, even if early childhood classrooms are located within state schools (Saklan & Erginer, 2016). Thus, providing high-quality early childhood education requires teachers and their principals to be dedicated and to place greater individual effort. This means that even if the curriculum used is the same across the nation in all state schools, implementation is far from being standard, relying on teachers' dedication and skills. As a result, how early childhood education is practiced at each school, and even in each classroom varies and teachers become key variables determining the quality of early childhood education. In a study, Önder and Güçlü (2014) conducted interviews with representatives of major non-governmental organizations that provide work in the field of education and educational unions asking for their opinions on how to improve the quality of early childhood education in Turkey. Their findings revealed that currently in Turkey, teachers are the key actors determining whether there is high-quality early childhood education and there is a vast amount of discrepancy in quality across the nation. They argue that even in the same school district the quality varies. This, of course, makes access to high-quality early childhood education highly competitive, and families of low income and parental education are at a greater disadvantage. As Li and Qiu (2018) also argue, where there is competition among parents to access quality education, those with better resources will have a greater advantage than those families who are already disadvantaged. Disappointingly, in the end, what we end up seeing is that early childhood education institutions that are

supposed to allow for disadvantaged children with resources so that these children can catch up and have equal start become mills that reproduce and amplify inequalities. The evidence from the present research supports the notion that families with better backgrounds and resources are the ones that also have access to hşgher quality education. It is possible that not only do these families seek and have access to higher quality early childhood education, but also they contribute to the quality of their children's schools by having higher expectations and demands from the schools as well as by being involved and providing support. The present research is limited in providing insight into understanding the mechanisms in which parents with higher income and education will have children who attend higher quality early childhood education while children of low income and education parents end up receiving low-quality early childhood education. Thus, it is thus crucial future research explores factors associated with how parental income and education are associated with the quality of early childhood education. Do these parents simply find better schools, or is it that the dynamics of the interactions between these schools and the parents contribute to the quality?

The quality of ECE is a multidimensional concept. Therefore, assessing the quality of ECE classrooms comprehensively using multiple assessment techniques and multiple observers when observations are employed has crucial importance. Although the observations were conducted spending sufficient periods of time and using a structured checklist, there was yet only one researcher conducting observations within somewhat of a limited period of time. Thus, future researchers should consider having visits to ECE classrooms at different times over at least one school semester. This way observations conducted earlier in the semester when children first start school and later could provide evidence for whether quality indicators change in time. Furthermore, although using a checklist allowed for the observation to be more structured, participant observations and researchers spending a longer period of time could allow for teacher-child interactions to be observed and understood more in-depth. To reach more accurate assessments of the quality of early childhood education classrooms, future research processes may have different observers for classrooms, and they may observe classrooms on several occasions for the duration of a school year. Therefore, more comprehensive and reliable data in terms of the quality of the educational environment can be obtained. Another issue concerning data collection of the current study is that the sample was not randomly selected. Schools, teachers, and parents of children were selected from different districts of İstanbul city purposefully based on the accessibility. Although the schools were selected to be more representative in terms of demographics and the neighborhoods were more diverse, large, and highly populated (İstanbul Rehberi, 2015), we don't know whether the selection criteria allowed for a representative sample. It would be beneficial for future research to employ random selection and results can be generalized (Büyüköztürk et al., 2017; Creswell, 2009).

For the current study, only public schools were selected because the majority of the population attend public schools (MoNE, 2013). However, there are also private schools that provide early childhood education in Turkey. Studying both public and private early childhood education schools may give a better perspective on the status of

educational quality. Also, gathering data from both public and private schools will allow for comparisons such as resources, teacher preparation, motivation, and parent-teacher interaction. Considering that private schools would have parents with higher income and education, it would be beneficial to compare the quality of various classrooms that are private and state to explore how parental income and education manifest their effects on quality. Furthermore, exploring parental goals and involvement both in public and private schools could shed light on parent-related factors that contribute to the quality of early childhood education.

In summary, despite the limitations, the findings of the current research provide meaningful and significant insights into the state of ECE in Turkey. The current research is one of the few studies in Turkey with a more comprehensive view of the quality of public ECE schools and the socioeconomic background of parents. Similar to a report by AÇEV published in 2009, the findings of the current study indicated that the socio-economic background of children is strongly associated with the quality of ECE. Therefore, public services should be aware of the results to provide more equal and high-quality educational opportunities for the whole population. The National Ministry of Education should expand public early childhood education services, invest more in improving their quality, and easily accessible to all parents. High-quality educational environments in terms of physical equipment, learning activities, and social-emotional climate (AÇEV & ERG, 2016) should not be a privilege, but a common resource used by the state to give all children chances to have an equal start in elementary school. The findings of this study are important to improve the quality of educational services in Turkey because it leads to more questions and areas of research to explore where the current educational system has deficits and potential to improve.

Authors' Note

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Erken Çocukluk Eğitiminin Kalitesi ile Çocukların Sosyoekonomik Özellikleri Arasındaki İlişki

Öz

Erken çocukluk eğitimi (EÇE) okullarının ve sınıflarının kalitesi birçok araştırmacı tarafından incelenmiştir. Bu araştırmaların sonuçları, EÇE okulları ve sınıfları arasında büyük bir kalite farkı olduğunu göstermektedir. Yüksek kaliteli EÇE'ne erişme ve devam etme konusunda farklı sosyoekonomik geçmişlerden gelen çocuklar arasında eşitsizlik vardır. Çocuk nüfusun büyük bir bölümünün halihazırda kamuya bağlı EÇE okullarına devam ettiği bilinmektedir. Bu nedenle, mevcut çalışma, kamuya açık EÇE sınıflarının kalitesi hakkında kapsamlı veriler ve çocukların sosyoekonomik geçmişleri hakkında tanımlayıcı veriler elde etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Buna dayanarak, mevcut çalışma, bu iki faktör arasında bir ilişki olup olmadığını ve çocuklar arasında yüksek kaliteli EÇE'ne erişme konusunda bir fark olup olmadığını değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma ilişkisel bir araştırmadır. Verilerin toplanmasında tesadüfî olmayan amaçlı örnekleme yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Sonuçlar, ebeveynlerin sosyoekonomik faktörleri ile EÇE sınıflarının kalitesi arasında anlamlı bir pozitif ilişki olduğunu göstermektedir. Çalışma, çocuklar, ebeveynler, öğretmenler ve EÇE sınıflarının kalitesi ile ilgili faktörleri belirleyerek EÇE literatürüne katkıda bulunmuştur. Türkiye'de EÇE'nin kalitesini çok boyutlu bir bakış açısıyla tanımlayan ve araştıran ve özellikle aileleri, okulları, eğitim programlarını ve kültürü içeren daha fazla araştırmaya ihtiyaç vardır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Erken çocukluk eğitimi, eğitimde kalite, küçük çocuklar