

Preschool Teachers' Views of Environmental Education *

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Abstract

In this study, it was aimed to determine preschool teachers' views of environmental education. Descriptive survey model was used and sample of the study involved 72 preschool teachers in central Agri city, Turkey. A written reflection form consisting of five open-ended questions was used as the means of collecting data and the findings obtained were analyzed through descriptive analysis method. The teachers participating in the study stated that environmental education is necessary in order for children to be familiar with nature and environment and gain environmental consciousness, and that the curricula of preschool education is not suitable to environmental education.

Keywords: Early child education, environmental education, teacher education.

Okul Öncesi Öğretmenlerinin Çevre Eğitimiyle İlgili Görüşleri

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı okul öncesi öğretmenlerinin çevre eğitimiyle ilgili görüşlerini belirlemektir. Tarama modelinin kullanıldığı çalışmada örneklem olarak Ağrı il merkezinde görev yapan 72 okul öncesi öğretmeni seçilmiştir. Veri toplama aracı olarak beş açık uçlu sorudan oluşan yazılı görüşme formu kullanılmış ve elde edilen veriler betimsel olarak analiz edilmiştir. Çalışmanın sonuçları okul öncesi öğretmenlerinin çocukların doğayı tanıyabilmeleri ve çevre duyarlılığı kazanabilmeleri için çevre eğitiminin gerekliliğine vurgu yaptıkları ve okul öncesi eğitim programının çevre eğitimi açısından yetersizliğine dikkat çemişlerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Okul öncesi eğitim, çevre eğitimi, öğretmen eğitimi.

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1. Introduction

Advancements in technology and industry, population rise, and changing living conditions brought about by urbanisation have caused the natural balance to break up, caused nature to lose its characteristic of revitalizing itself and led to the rise of environmental problems. It is possible to eliminate environmental problems, which are caused by human activities, and subsequent problems they create only through education. The reason for this is that environmental problems are not those that could be solved through legislative acts or technological innovations and they are only solved by the changes created in human behaviour as the main factor in the emergence of these problems is human himself. And the changes in attitudes and/or behaviour are possible only through education. Educating environmentally-conscious human beings is an essential way of solving related problems. Environmental education is more than education; it is a living style. Through environmental education, intended to raise environmental consciousness in people about the future and protection of nature they are part of, transfer of ecological information, increase of level of information about and awareness of nature and improvement of related attitudes are made possible. The earlier environmental education starts, the more efficient it will be. As far as the gains environmental education provides are concerned, it might be argued that the best period to start environmental education is the pre-school years, when the personality of a human being begins to be shaped. For a child, environment refers to the whole setting he is in. The most correct message for a child who tries to be familiar with his environment will be given by providing him with the understanding that he himself is a part of the environment and raising his environmental consciousness. The studies carried out also prove that the environmental consciousness raised in preschool period is effective in taking a positive attitude towards environment (Gülay Ogelman, 2012; Smith, 2001; Taşkın & Şahin, 2008; Fetihi & Gülay, 2011; Erten, 2004; Diken & Sert Çıbık, 2009; İleri, 1998). There are two fundamental aims on which environmental education is based in preschool period. These are enabling a child to interact with outside world and supporting healthy development of a child (Wilson, 1996; Wilson, 1994; Kesicioğlu & Alisinanoğlu, 2009). Children who are familiar with nature and their environment will turn out to be individuals who are at peace with themselves and who have self-respect. The reason is that human beings need to communicate with nature not only for physical reasons but for psychological and emotional reasons as well (Wilson, 1996; Yoleri, 2012; Gülay & Ekici, 2010).

A quality environmental education for children is dependent on their relations with natural world in their real life experiences. Children have a natural sense of discovery and curiosity, which might be utilized by teachers in improving their knowledge of nature and raising their awareness of environment. However, this might only be done by teachers who are eco-friendly (Güler, 2009). Because interests and attitudes that

are formed in preschool and school years provide the base for terminal behaviour in the future, it is realized that the attitudes of preschool teachers towards environment highly affect the process in which consciousness of environment; positive environmental attitudes and behaviour towards environment are supported and formed in children. Environmental education in preschool period might be given in such places as nursery schools, zoos, home and school gardens, and picnic sites where children can directly communicate with nature. Education outdoors will especially help children to view life from different respects compared to education indoors. While giving environmental education in this period, activities which will make children remain active and help them feel safe and which will enable them to focus on the faultlessness and beauty of natural world and understand that they communicate with all their components must be carried out and families or parents must be involved in these activities. The important point here is to provide children with a facility that will help them communicate with nature (Buhan, 2006; Wilson, 1996; Öztürk Aynal, 2013).

Although the studies on environmental education in preschool period have increased in number in recent years, there are still limited studies in the field. In studies by Fetihi and Gülay (2011), Gülay Ogelman (2012), and Özdemir and Uzun (2006), it was realised that environmental education in preschool period positively affected children's attitudes towards nature and increased their level of awareness in this subject. As for the studies carried out by Taşkın and Şahin (2008) and Gülay and Ekici (2010), it was emphasized that educational curricula of preschool period are insufficient in terms of environmental education and that environmental education must be given a higher seriousness in preschool education. Buhan (2006) examined environmental consciousness of preschool teachers on the basis of their attitudes and behaviour and found teachers' attitudes towards environment positive. In their study, Kandır, Yurt and Cevher Kalburan (2012) focused on preschool teachers and teacher candidates and realised that there was a significant difference between teachers and teacher candidates. In their study with primary school teachers, Şimşekli (2004) and Diken and Sert Çibik (2009), examined these teachers' environmental attitudes and their environmental consciousness, and found that there was not a significant difference among teachers of differing branches. Therefore, the results of the present study, intended to reveal the views of preschool teachers about environmental education, are thought to contribute to the literature in the field.

2. Method

In the study, Survey model was used. It is a model in which views, attitudes, interests, skills and abilities of a group are determined in order to describe present situation of the studied topic by scrutinizing (Büyüköztürk et al. 2014).

2.1. Sample Population

The sample of the study was determined according to availability sampling method and consists of 72 preschool teachers in central Agri city, Turkey.

2.2. Data Collection Means

The data of the study were collected from written reflection forms including five open-ended questions as prepared by the researchers to be directed to the participants. The questions in the form were intended to take the views of preschool teachers about such issues as the significance of environmental education in preschool period, activities teachers carry out related to environmental education, factors they take into consideration while organizing these activities and limitations, and applicability of the activities related to environmental education as they exist in the curriculum, and these questions were checked and found valid by a preschool field specialist and a science teacher.

2.3. Analysis of the Data

The data collected from the study were analyzed through descriptive analysis method. All questions in the form were analyzed one by one and similar expressions were classified under the same category. Findings obtained were presented in tables together with their frequency and percentages. Analysis was repeated by all the researchers in the study and a consistency of 85 % was reached by each one of them in the assessment and evaluation.

3. Findings

The results of descriptive analysis were given according to the teachers' responses for each question of environmental education. Findings are as follows:

Table 1.

Views of The Teachers on The Necessity of Environmental Education in Preschool Years

	f	%
Environmental education is necessary	70	100
• In order for children to have an environmental consciousness and be eco-friendly	36	51
• In order for children to be familiar with nature and learn about the rules they need to pay attention to	30	42
• Because it supports all developmental aspects of children, especially the social aspects	4	6

All the preschool teachers participating in the study find it necessary to give environmental education in preschool years. 51 percent of the teachers find it necessary in that it enables children to have an environmental consciousness and be eco-friendly; 42 percent of them support it in that it helps children be familiar with nature and learn about the rules they need to pay attention to; and 6 percent of them find it necessary in that it supports all developmental aspects of children, especially the social aspects.

Table 2.
Views of The Teachers on The Activity Types They Carry Out For Children Related To Environmental Education

	f	%
Visits to the parks and institutions near school	25	35
Using stories, games, dramas and/or songs	20	28
Collecting garbage	15	21
Examining snow, leaves, stones and carrying out various science activities	14	19
Planting trees	9	13
Growing plants	9	13
Examining plants and animals in school garden	7	10
Watching videos and slides related to nature	7	10
Tidying school material and items, teaching different rules	7	10
Teaching the ways of using re-cycled materials	5	7

As can be seen, paying visits to the parks and institutions near school comes first among the activities of the teachers with a percentage of 35. This is followed by such activities as taking children's attention towards nature by the use of stories, games, dramas and/or songs with a percentage of 28, collecting garbage with them (21%), helping children examine snow, leaves and stones (19%), planting trees and growing plants (26%), watching with them videos and slides related to nature (10%), examining plants and animals in school garden (10%), teaching children how to tidy school material and items (10%).

Table 3.
Factors Taken Into Consideration By The Teachers While They Decide Upon Which Environmental Activity To Do, And Limitations And Difficulties They Face

	f	%
Geographical conditions and climate	43	60
Age of the child	24	33
Financial conditions	17	24
Child's curiosity, interests and needs	12	17
Approval of families	8	11
The fact that the activity is easy-to-do, especially in classroom	7	10
Activities with tangible qualities	6	8
Teachers' knowledge of environmental education	5	7
Unfavourable climatic conditions	23	32
The fact that activities could not be done in classroom as physical facilities are not suitable	17	24
The fact that what is taught at school is not reinforced at home or that the opposite of what is taught at school is advised at home	13	18

Difficulty of keeping children together safely	11	15
Inability of obtaining necessary equipment	6	8
Financial conditions	5	7
Reflection of families' unwillingness onto children; children's unwillingness to take part in activities	4	6
No difficulty at all	13	18

60 % of the teachers stated that they took into consideration geographical and climatic characteristics of the area while deciding upon an activity; 33 % of them took into consideration the age of children; 24 % of them considered financial conditions; 17 % of them paid attention to what children are curious about and what they are interested in. For 11 % of them families' approval is significant while for 10 % of the teachers activity should be carried out in classroom conditions and be easy-to-do. 7 % of the teachers stated that their professional knowledge and experiences were enough and 8 % of them stated that they preferred tangible activities. As for the difficulties they face, 32 % of the teachers stated that they had difficulty because of unfavorable climatic and environmental conditions while 24 % of them stated that they could not carry out out-of-classroom activities especially and that the activities in the classroom proved insufficient. The teachers also complained about the fact that what is taught at school is not reinforced at home or that the opposite of what is taught at school is advised at home, which make the activities unsuccessful (18%), that they had difficulty keeping the children together and safe during activities (15%), and that financial problems turn out to be an obstacle especially in environmental trips (7%).

Table 4.
Teachers' Views on The Suitability of Activities In The Curriculum of Preschools Related To Environmental Education

	f	%
Activities are suitable since the curriculum is flexible	33	46
Activities are not suitable	39	54
The activities have been prepared without taking into account climatic and geographical conditions. Therefore, they can only be done in developed cities	23	32
Activities are mainly trips; there are no visits to museums and monuments	2	3

54 % of the teachers think that the activities related to environmental education in preschool curriculum are not suitable; 32 % of the teachers believe that these activities seem to be more suitable with respect to application in developed cities and/or cities with better climatic conditions and forests. Another point is that 46 % of the teachers find the activities related to environmental education in preschool curriculum suitable and applicable.

4. Results and Discussion

In the present study, it is concluded that environmental education is considered necessary by teachers in order for children to have a consciousness of environment, to be environment-friendly and to be familiar with nature. In the study carried out by

Gülay Ogelman and Güngör (2015), it has been emphasized that environmental education positively affects children's attitude towards nature and their awareness in this matter. Preschool years prove to be an opportunity that should not be missed by both teachers and parents in that these years provide the basis for the education of individuals who have positive attitudes, who can think creatively and develop original ideas, who can support their own thoughts and provide solutions to problems, who will prove to be eco-friendly, conscious of their own responsibilities and self-confident. The educational environment provided for children in these years and the curricula to be designed are significant for raising generations on strong bases (Buhan, 2006).

It has been concluded in the study that teachers do such activities as organizing trips, utilizing games, stories and drama, planting trees and growing plants, collecting garbage and doing scientific research on behalf of environmental education. In the principles of child-centred approach of preschool education, it is intended to provide children with information and experience through living experiences. A child will be familiar with his surrounding by touching, seeing, walking around, watching and, before all, being curious about it. Outer design of educational buildings on an eco-friendly and child-centred basis is significant with respect to that (Talay, Arslan & Belkayalı, 2010). In the study done by Şimşekli (2004), it is emphasized that it is necessary to choose themes that will enable children to be aware of his surrounding and the changes in that surrounding, to employ these themes within the scope of a certain curriculum and support them not only with research, examination, experiments, but also with colouring, puzzles, pictures, games etc., and thus draw children's attention to environment for a good environmental education. Most of the teachers who participated in the study have stated that they carry out the activities for environmental education outside school buildings where children are more active. Education outside classroom and in nature, in gardens, rural areas, in city centers, museums or villages, that is, education outside closed and covered places will help children to view life from a broader perspective and be more familiar with their surroundings (Aynal, 2013). In their study, Kesicioğlu and Alisinanoğlu (2009) express that children living in rural areas and having an active communication with their surrounding have a higher level of consciousness of environment compared to those living in urban areas, and that activities which enable children to be in close contact with nature are a significant factor for the development of a positive attitude towards environmental consciousness in children.

It has been detected in the study that teachers take into consideration such factors as geographical and climatic conditions, and age of children while choosing activities for environmental education. In addition, it has been concluded that geographical structure of the related area and climatic conditions of it negatively affect activities since out-of-classroom activities are therefore done inside classroom and this makes it difficult for teachers to teach the related subjects and concepts. It takes about one

week to get the necessary permits for doing an out-of-class activity with children in preschool institutions, which is another problem faced by teachers. In trips, it is essential for a teacher to have enough professional skill and experience in order to discipline children and run an effective organization, which may be a reason for the cancellation of plans for trips. It might be thought that preschool teachers may not sufficiently observe children's direct-learning since they do not reflect what they have learnt at university on practice (Kandır, Yurt & Cevher Kalburan 2012). In their study, Taşkın and Şahin (2008) stated that such factors as age of the child, the place the child lives in, family's level of income and education cause the children to have differing perceptions of their surroundings. Therefore, while teachers plan activities, they should do so by taking into account the variables that might affect child's perception of environment. Environmental education is not an education that covers school only; all the environments a child is in are suitable for this education. Local and regional activities could be organized and carried out in order for children to be familiar with their surrounding and might benefit from it consciously (İleri, 1998).

It is realized in the study that preschool curriculum is not found satisfactory in terms of environmental education, that environmental activities have been put into the curriculum without taking into account physical conditions of schools, and that teachers find these activities not suitable for all schools. Therefore, school curricula prepared by taking into consideration geographical characteristics of areas and/or regions are very significant for children's familiarity with and protection of their surrounding (Gülay Ogelman & Güngör, 2015). In addition, Yalçın (2013) also states that well-prepared educational curricula are significant in the raising of environmental consciousness. As far as the curriculum of preschools is concerned, it is realised that related aims, learning outcomes, concepts and certain days/weeks are not sufficiently covered by that curriculum. This might be explained by the fact that there are a few studies related to environmental education in preschool period and that most of these studies were done in recent years. It might therefore be argued that environmental education should be given more significance in preschool curriculum. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that practitioners of curricula are more important than the curricula. Therefore, teachers should prove to be willing role models who are eco-friendly, who believe in the necessity of environmental education, and who have enough knowledge and skill in this matter (Gülay & Ekici, 2010; Şimşekli, 2004, Erten, 2004). It is realised that environmental education of preschool period in our country is intended to help students acquire some age-based, not-so-important skills, and that is mainly under the initiative of form teachers (Gürçüoğlu, 2013). In their study, Diken and Sert Çıbık (2009) found that teacher candidates studying at primary school teacher training departments, which also graduate preschool teacher candidates, insufficiently show eco-friendly behaviour although they have cognitive and affective knowledge about environmental consciousness. Geçikli (2013) also reached similar conclusions in her study. In order to compensate for the lack of

teachers in this matter and support them, courses relating environmental education must be placed into the curricula of faculties of education and teachers must be supported by other institutions who might contribute to this application. In addition, families must be taught about the significance of environment and nature, and activities must be organized in collaborations with families. The number of easily-applicable activity examples related to environmental education must be increased in preschool curriculum and out-of-classroom activities must be brought to the fore.

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