Portrait of Rejected Children: The Case of Preschool Years

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Abstract

Social status is a complex and multi-dimensional concept in society. Individuals with different social status have different experiences and assume different roles in society. Social rejection of children can cause both individual and collective problems in the short or long term. It is important to draw attention to the problems experienced by rejected children and raise awareness in society, improve their well-being and enable them to reach their potential. For this reason, the research initially aimed to identify the social status of the children and obtain in-depth information on why they were rejected in their social environment. This study was conducted using qualitative research methodology. The research design included a basic qualitative research design based on an interpretive perspective. The research group consisted of 16 children selected from a classroom that was easily accessible and temporally accessible to the researcher. The data collection process included the classical sociometric situation classification system. This enabled the categorization of children's social status into categories such as "rejected", "popular", and "neglected". Children were also asked to draw portraits of their "least favorite" friends. The drawings were analyzed in depth through one-on-one interviews with the children. The portraits were analyzed through content analysis and the characteristics of rejected children were transformed into themes. Accordingly, four main headings emerged as elements in children's drawings, undesired behaviors, social contact, and expression of emotions. Aggressive behaviors, disturbing behaviors, behaviors associated with autism, gender-based differences, and behaviors perceived as inappropriate in the social environment came to the forefront in the expressions of the rejected children. In addition, children reported that rejected children were often angry or had moods that were not clearly understood. Children also reflected their emotional states in their artworks and did not like to draw friends they did not prefer. In line with these results, some recommendations for institutions, teachers, and families regarding some social status are presented.

Keywords: preschool education, sociometry, drawing, portrait drawing, rejected children

Reddedilen Çocukların Portresi: Okul Öncesi Dönem Örneği
Öz

Sosyal statü, toplumda karmaşık ve çok boyutlu bir kavramdır. Farklı sosyal statülere sahip bireyler farklı deneyimler yaşar ve toplumda farklı roller üstlenirler. Çocukların toplumsal olarak reddedilmesi kısa ya da uzun vadede hem bireysel hem de kolektif sorunlara neden olabilir. Reddedilen çocukların yaşadıkları sorunlara dikkat çekmek ve toplumda farkındalık yaratmak, iyi olma hallerini iyileştirmek ve potansiyellerine ulaşmalarını sağlamak önemlidir. Bu nedenle araştırmada öncelikle çocukların sosyal statülerinin belirlenmesi ve sosyal çevrelerinde neden reddedildiklerine dair derinlemesine bilgi edinilmesi amaçlanmıştır. Bu çalışma, nitel araştırma yöntemi kullanılarak gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırma tasarımı, yorumlayıcı bir perspektife dayanan temel nitel bir araştırma tasarımını içermektedir. Araştırma grubu, araştırmacının kolaylıkla ulaşabildiği ve zamansal açıdan erişiminin kolay olduğu bir sınıftan seçilen 16 çocuktan oluşmaktadır. Veri toplama süreci klasik sosyometrik durum sınıflandırma sistemini içermektedir. Bu durum, çocukların sosyal durumlarını "reddedilen", "popüler", "ihmal edilen" gibi kategorilere ayırmayı sağlamıştır. Ayrıca, çocukların "en az sevdikleri" arkadaşlarının portrelerini çizmeleri istenmiştir. Çizimler, çocuklarla birebir gerçekleştirilen görüşmelerle derinlemesine analiz edilmiştir. Portreler, içerik analizi ile incelenmiş ve reddedilen çocukların özellikleri temalara dönüştürülmüştür. Bu doğrultuda çocuk çizimlerindeki unsurlar, istenmeyen davranışlar, sosyal temas ve duyguların ifadesi olarak dört ana başlık ortaya çıkmıştır. Reddedilen çocukların tercih edilmemelerinde sıklıkla saldırgan davranışlar, rahatsızlık veren davranışlar, otizm ile ilişkili davranışlar, cinsiyet temelli farklılıklar, sosyal ortamda uygunsuz olarak algılanan davranışlar çocukların ifadelerinde ön plana çıkmıştır. Ek olarak çocuklar reddedilen çocukların genellikle kızgın ya da net olarak anlaşılmayan duygu durumlarına sahip olduklarını belirtmişlerdir. Çocuklar aynı zamanda kendi sanat ürünlerine de duygu durumlarını yansıtmışlar ve tercih etmedikleri arkadaşlarını çizmekten hoşlanmamışlardır. Bu sonuçlar doğrultusunda kurumlara, öğretmenlere ve ailelere bazı sosyal konumlara ilişkin bazı öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar Sözcükler: okul öncesi eğitim, çizim, sosyometri, portre çizim, reddedilen çocuklar

INTRODUCTION

School is the place where preschool children experience their first social relationships after their families. With the beginning of preschool education, the social environment that the child will interact with expands with teachers and peers (Ekinci Vural, 2006). The interactions of children in this period shape the structure of peer relationships. Children's characteristics before their social skills affect their peer relationships and form the general structure. Therefore, individual characteristics affect social relations as well as social skills. For children to develop positive peer relationships, attention should be paid to the development of positive social skills as well as personality development. There is evidence that children's early social skills predict peer acceptance in later years (Blandon vd., 2010). From this point of view, there are also studies aimed at developing social skills and competencies necessary for effective interpersonal relationships in children with low social status (Asher & Coie, 1990; Coie & Cillesen, 1993). Positive peer relationships can reduce some problems, while negative peer relationships can increase problem situations. The early years are important in terms of the long and short-term effects of peer relationships and experiencing the first examples. For example, it has been observed that hyperactivity and exposure to peer violence have a significant negative relationship with social position, whereas positive behaviors have positive effects on peer relationships (Gülay, 2009). Children's prosocial behaviors, pragmatic language skills, and gender are related to their social position among their peers (Paulus, 2017). Children who are rejected by their peers miss out on the opportunity to interact with other children and thus fail to acquire social skills. In the following years, they may face problems such as delinquency, depression, and substance abuse (Hay, 2006; Ladd & Burgess, 2001). In addition, the presence of peer-related loneliness in childhood and its continuation over the years shows that it creates an interpersonal stress factor that predisposes children to adolescent depressive symptoms (Qualter vd., 2010). In addition, longitudinal studies suggest that peer rejection in childhood may predict more severe internalizing and externalizing problems in adolescence, especially for both aggressive and rejected boys (Coi, etc, 1995). Negative peer experiences in childhood predict adjustment difficulties in adolescence and adulthood (Mikami, Lerner & Lun, 2010). On the other hand, socially accepted children tended to have disabilities that were less likely to affect social problem solving and emotional regulation (Odom, etc, 2006). Behaviorally, rejected children can be uncommunicative, rebellious, and less friendly, with some displaying hypersensitivity due to feelings of insecurity. Observations have categorized the maladjusted behaviors of rejected children into groups such as Impulsive Aggression, Immaturity/Depression, Withdrawn/Distractible, Hostile/Aggressive, and Psychomotor Difficulties (Morgan, 1978; Pemberton & Benady, 1973) For this reason, it is critical to support children with low acceptance in the preschool years, that is, children with negative social positions, and to create positive changes for their social position by improving their social skills (Choi & Kim, 2003). The undeniable importance of social position in early years makes it valuable to investigate the determinants of social position in preschool classrooms. Since research has shown the long-term effects of peer relationships, it is important to evaluate the sources of positive or negative peer relationships in terms of both prevention and social skill development practices. For this reason, it is necessary to examine their relationships with their peers and the reasons for them from primary sources by providing them with the most appropriate methods of expression.

Accordingly, this study aims to determine the social status of children in a classroom and to examine the social position of rejected children in depth through art. Children were given the opportunity to express themselves through art. Thus, detailed information was obtained on why rejected children are in this position. According to Fox and Schirrmacher (2012), art is an effective and unique method that allows children to express themselves. Therefore, it was envisaged that art would be an appropriate data collection method for why children prefer their peers, especially because it allows them to express themselves. The art products created by the children can also be handled under the title of personal documents from the document analysis method put forward by Merriam (2015). Here, the participants' works are evaluated. Similarly, Mills (2003) considers almost every conceivable product created by the participants as data and states that the classroom environment is a very rich source of data for this. This study aims to reveal peer preferences during preschool period and explain the reasons for these preferences; in terms of data collection methods, children's self-expression of their preferences in accordance with their development as a primary source provides unbiased information about negative peer preferences.

METHOD

Research Design

Qualitative research method was used in this study. Qualitative method is a research methodology that focuses on understanding and interpreting subjective experiences and meanings in a holistic and in-depth manner (Koopman, 2017). According to Merriam (2015), a basic qualitative research design was applied from an interpretive perspective.

***Study Group*:** Within the scope of the research, the convenience sampling method was preferred. The convenience sampling method refers to situations in which groups that are easy to reach and easy for the researcher to access in terms of time and transportation are selected (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). In this direction, a classroom in the school where the researcher conducts Teaching Practice I and II courses and 16 children in this classroom were selected as the study group. Since it was necessary for the sociometry application for the children to know each other very well, it was determined as a criterion that the children had been in the classroom since the beginning of the academic year. One of the children was not included in the study because he started school in the second semester and was not well known by his friends. 5 of the children in the study group were girls and 10 were boys. The oldest of these children was born in November 2016 and the youngest was born in February 2018. In this case, the ages of the children vary between 61 months and 76 months. It is thought that the fact that the children know the researcher will facilitate the data collection process by their developmental characteristics and that they will give sincere answers. First of all, permission was obtained from the families of the children to participate in the study. In addition, permission was also obtained from the children for their voluntary participation in the data collection process.

Data Collection

Sociometry: The classical sociometric status classification system proposed by Coie et al. (1982) was used in the study. According to this system, the students were asked to choose 3 friends they like most and 3 friends they like least. Considering their development, they were shown a table with photographs of their classmates and were allowed to choose among their friends. With this technique, a measurement could be made in the classroom and the social status of the children was evaluated in 5 different areas within the framework of the scores they received. After the choices were made, like most and like least scores were calculated for each child. The calculated scores were standardized and converted into z scores. Then, Social Impact (SI) and Social Preference (SP) scores were calculated for each child. Social preference was calculated as the difference between like most and like least scores, and social impact was calculated as the sum of these scores (Coie et al., 1982). The criteria used to determine social status were:

SP> 1.0; L>O, D<O is popular,

SP<-l,0; L<O, rejected if D>O,

SI<-1.0; L<O, D<O is neglected (excluded),

SI>1.0; L>O, D>O is controversial (Gülay Ogelman, 2018).

Portraits of Children: After this technique was applied for each child in the class, a one-to-one drawing study was conducted with each child in the same week. Children were asked to draw a portrait of their "like least" friend in line with their answers to the sociometry technique. Children were allowed to use any of the paints they used in the classroom. The drawings were conducted one-on-one in an isolated environment outside the classroom. After the drawings were completed, each child was interviewed about the portraits. Children were asked to describe the drawings and their opinions about their "like least" friend were learned in depth. Children's drawings and their explanations about their drawings were recorded. Children's drawings and interviews lasted between 15-30 minutes.

Data Analysis

First of all, the frequencies of children's peer preferences were revealed. Then, as described in the data collection tools, children's social status were determined based on their z scores. Accordingly, the portraits of children whose social status was "rejected" as drawn by their friends were evaluated. Interviews about children's portraits were content analyzed. In line with the content analysis, ideas about rejected children were brought together in themes and presented. The basic process in content analysis is to bring together similar data within the framework of certain concepts and themes and to interpret them by organizing them in an understandable way (Yıldırım ve Şimşek, 2021). In order to increase the reliability of the content analysis, the coding was checked by two more preschool education scholars.

Research Ethics

In this study, permission was obtained from the ethics committee, parents and children participating in the study. At the beginning of the process, the permission of the university and the research description were shared with the families. After obtaining permission from the parents, permission to participate in the process was requested from the children during one-to-one interviews. The researcher explained to the children what they were going to do and asked them to draw a smiley face on the form if they wanted to do these activities and the researcher signed the same form.

FINDINGS

This section first presents descriptive analyses of children's negative peer preferences. Then, the characteristics of rejected children that emerged from the content analysis were presented as themes. At the same time, the prominent elements in the children's drawings were also evaluated. The table below shows the 3 least favorite friends of each child.

Table 1. Children's "like least" Friend Choices

Children	First One	Second One	Third One
P1	P7	P3	P9
P2	-	-	-
P3	P11	P4	P7
P4	P11	P8	P15
P5	P11	P2	P4
P6	P4	P2	P10
P7	P15	-	-
P8	P2	P4	P7
P9	P11	P10	P2
P10	P4	P7	P1
P11	P7	P4	P2
P12	P7	P2	P1
P13	P2	P4	P7
P14	P7	P2	P10
P15	P11	-	-

As seen in Table 1, only two children made one choice in peer preferences. Although the researcher tried to ask in different ways during the interview, both children stated that there was only one friend they did not like. Child coded P2 was diagnosed with autism and had problems with receptive and expressive language. For this reason, a reliable answer could not be obtained from him and he was not included in the analysis process. He could only say the name of his favorite friend and repeated it continuously. In light of the data shown in Table 1, the social status of the children was determined based on their z scores as described in the data collection tools.
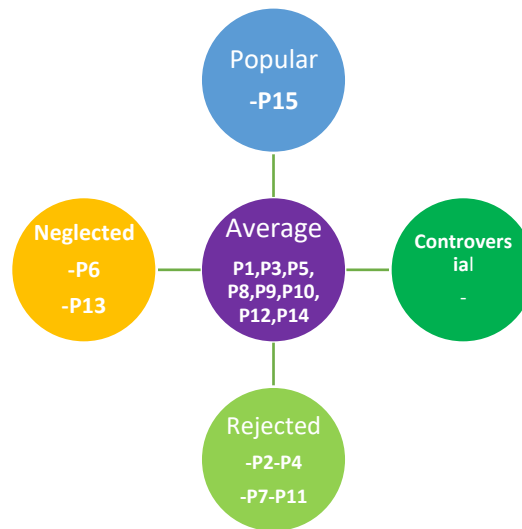
Figure 1. Social status of children

The social status of the children is shown in Figure 1. There is no child in the class whose social status is controversial. One child has a popular social status, while two of them are neglected. Finally, the 4 children who are the subject of this research have rejection status. The remaining children (N=8) have an average social status.
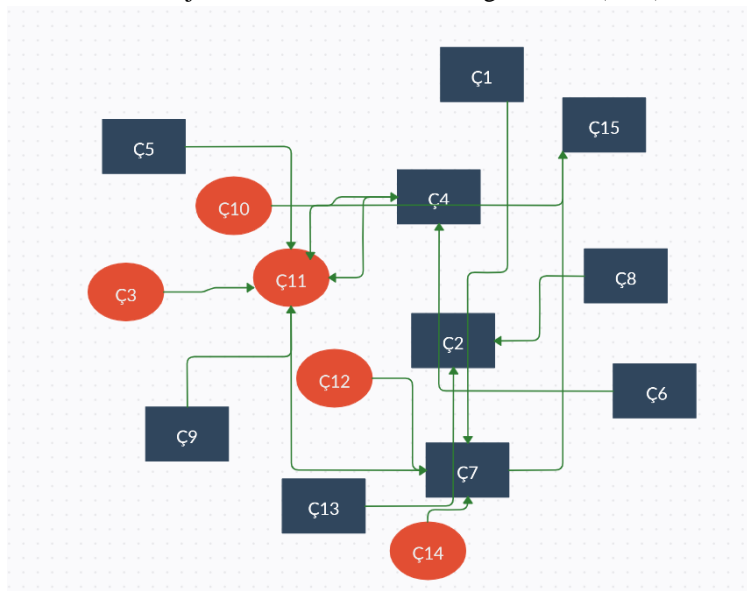

Figure 2. Children's first "like least" friend preferences

Figure 2 above shows the children's first choice among their least favorite friends. Among the rejected children, it was observed that P2 and P4 were the first choices of only two children. P7 was chosen as the first choice by four children. P11 was chosen as the first choice by five of his friends. P11 was the child who was the least frequently but the most frequently selected as the first choice among the rejected children (Table 1 and Figure 2). In Figure 2, the children represented by rectangles are boys and the children represented by ellipses are girls.

Elements Prominent in the Drawings

As mentioned before, there are 15 children in the class. One of these children did not draw (child coded P2 who was diagnosed with autism). In addition, no information could be obtained from him about the friends he disliked. Secondly, the social status of the child whose portrait was drawn by P7 was determined as "popular". As a result, all of the remaining 13 drawings belong to children who were rejected because they were shown as first-degree "like least" children. Some of the portraits of rejected children are shown below.
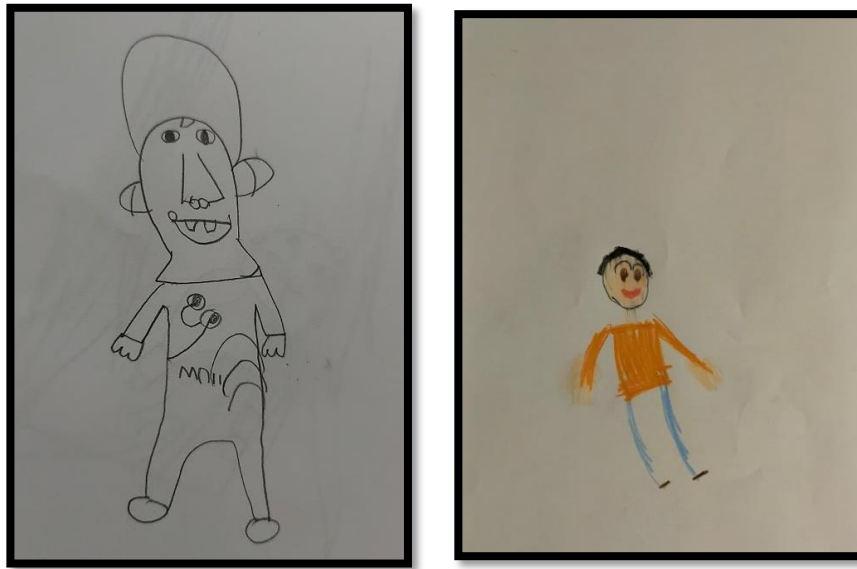
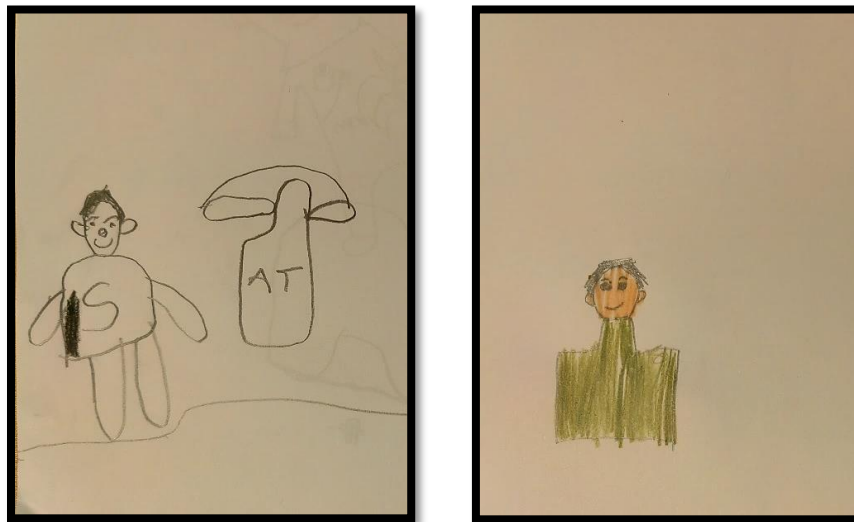**Figure 3.** Examples of P2's portraits

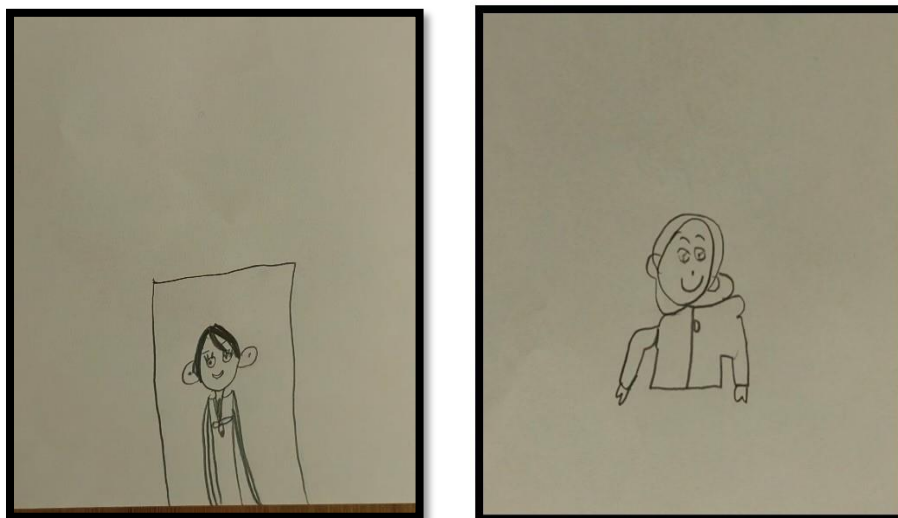**Figure 4.** Examples of P4's portraits

Figure 5. Examples of P7's portraits

Figure 6. Examples of P11's portraits

When the children's expressions through the drawings were analyzed, some elements stood out clearly. Four basic categories can be identified when interpreting the codes. These are parts of the body, clothes, and accessories, detailed descriptions, and the use of color.

In the expressions used by the children in their drawings and in their explanations of how they drew, it was observed that they focused on the body of the person due to the nature of portrait drawing. It was seen that they emphasized the hair the most in the parts related to the body. While the face was seen in every drawing, the eyes, ears, and mouth were often emphasized in the parts of the face, while the nose, eyelashes, lips, and eyebrows were rarely seen. Fewer portraits included the lower part of the body. These usually included the hands and feet, but there were also children who verbally emphasized the details of the knees and arms.

Another category that stands out in the drawings is clothes. T-shirts are the most frequently mentioned in the drawings. While more than half of the children used t-shirts in their portrait drawings, very few mentioned shoes, coats, hats, and pants.

It was also observed that children used some details in the drawings. These are especially the details used to make the drawing realistic. For example, transferring the pattern on the child's t-shirt to the drawing is an example of an effort to convey the portrait realistically. Apart from these, paying attention to the color of the clothes worn by the children and mentioning details such as eyelashes and lips are seen in the drawings. Another detail used to create a photographic effect is that some children place the portrait in a frame.

Finally, another element that stands out in the drawings is the use of color. Although children were given the opportunity to use any color they wanted, remarkably, the majority of the children preferred to use pencils. Only 5 of the children preferred to use color in their drawings. The children who used color first completed the drawing with pencil and then preferred to paint some parts such as t-shirts. All of these coloring activities were used to create a realistic effect. For example, painting the face of the drawn portrait in skin color.

Undesired Behavior

Three categories emerged under this theme. The first is uncomfortable contact. This can also be described as aggressive behavior in general. When asked why rejected children were not preferred, hitting and pushing behaviors came to the fore. In this context, although to a lesser extent, children reported squeezing, pulling, and damaging games and toys. For example, in the portrait drawing of P2; *P13: Sometimes he holds my arm like this (shows by squeezing his arm). I don't like it either.* P13 uses these words to explain why he does not like his friend.

Another category is disturbing behavior. This category includes behaviors that do not involve contact, but cause discomfort to the environment and the person. For example, the most commonly mentioned behavior in this category is "talking. Being uncomfortable with talking is more likely to occur when it is preferred not to talk, such as when the teacher is reading a story. The following disturbing behaviors that follow talking are annoying the teacher, misinterpreting instructions, misbehaving, and being a brat. Most of these behaviors are also behaviors

that make it difficult for the teacher to manage the classroom. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the situations in which children are most disturbed are also the moments in which classroom management becomes difficult. Behaviors that disrupt the social order suggest that children's peer preferences are affected. As an example of this situation, while describing the portrait of P7, "*P1: Some of them, when we come to school, then when we finish eating, we switch to reading books. Then they do a lot of slap-dab, I mean, they disturb me and my teacher gets angry with them*".

Autism-related behaviors are a special category that stands out in this context. There are some disturbing behaviors that are expressed specifically for the child diagnosed with autism in the classroom and are not expressed for any other child. Repetitive behaviors can be given as an example of this. As an example, P13 said, "*For example, he walks around like this (pointing), one day he said poo poo poo poo. He says poop poop poop all the time*." Other disturbing behaviors mentioned included raising voices and inappropriately addressing teachers or friends. There were also behaviors that children referred to as "spoiling" that they did not know how to define. For example, P2's repeating some incomprehensible words to himself and not responding to the calls of others were referred to as "spoiling".

Social Contact

One of the categories that emerges under social contact is gender. It was observed that children emphasized gender with a strong expression regarding the friends they disliked. For example, a child who was very enthusiastic when he heard that he was going to draw about his friends and even wanted to take his drawing home, was very disappointed when he received instructions to draw his friend of the opposite sex. Before he started drawing, he showed resistance and the following dialogues took place (the child in this dialogue is also a rejected child).

P4: Am i a girl (reproachful and reluctant). I want a boy, a boy, a boy.

P4: Ouch, why did you come P11, am I a girl, ouch, ouch

P4: But I won't take the paper I drew her on.

During the interview after the drawing process, the children also stated that their friends with rejected status had, particularly "sexist" attitudes. For example; "*P12: No, he never plays with girls.*" Not only in plays, but also in the daily processes in the classroom, the children stated that they preferred friends of their own gender and therefore could not make friends. For example, *P10: "He never sits next to girls, he always sits next to boys.*" Another notable finding under this heading is that 3 of the rejected children were boys and 1 was a girl. The children reported as having "sexist" behavior were all boys. No data was recorded on the rejected girl child that she did not prefer boys.

Social preferences is another heading that emerged in this theme. Social preferences can generally be expressed as an orientation in the classroom. For example, the most common expression under this category is the preference for different games and toys. Similarly, activity preferences can also be considered in this context, for example; "*P15: Because I play soccer, she plays other games.*" Within the scope of game and toy preference, a specific finding was obtained for the child diagnosed with autism. It was observed that P2 was not preferred by his friends because he did not play with toys or participate in games. Another finding was that children did not sit next to each other. The children stated that they did not communicate with each other because they never sat next to each other in the classroom. The teacher was informed that children sitting next to each other are often related to the order of the classroom, but it is also a flexible situation.

Another category that emerges in the social context can be expressed as inappropriate behavior. These behaviors occurred less frequently than other categories. However, since it could not be included under other categories, it was evaluated as a separate issue. Another finding similar to the preference for games and toys is not sharing games and toys. Children's preferences are affected by the fact that they do not include each other in the games they set up, or that they have problems sharing the same toy when they want to play with the same toy. Blocking each other's requests is also one of the behaviors that children exhibit toward friends they do not prefer. A notable finding, expressed by only one child, was the display of negative behaviors when warned about behaviors perceived as wrong. These negative behaviors include complaining to the teacher or threatening the person and holding a grudge because of the warning. As an example of this dialog, P6: *"He's lying. I mean, he told the teacher, mmmm, I didn't say I would hit you, but he said P6 would hit me.*

Similarly to other themes, the findings specific to children with autism are also present under this heading. Children who could not understand the topic of autism expressed their inability to communicate with P2 as "he is younger than us" and "he cannot think like us". At the same time, children stated that they tried to support P2 in

the classroom, but these efforts were not reciprocated. An example of this expression is the following *P8: I show him a little bit, but he doesn't understand*.

Expression of Emotion

Emotional state emerged in the data in two different ways. The first is the emotional state of the children interviewed towards their "least like" friends. The second is to understand the emotional state of the child being talked about. Two main situations were identified in relation to the emotional states felt by their friends. The most frequently mentioned state is "being angry". The children's primary interpretation was that they were generally angry about the emotional state of the rejected children. Another interpretation of the emotions is that they are not able to "understand" the emotions of these children. For example, P5 said directly about P11: "*I don't understand what she thinks and what she feels*".

The emotions that children directed at their least favorite friends were a disappointment at having to draw that person and sloppy drawing. Another finding was that the children were generally indifferent to what their least favorite friend was feeling. One of the children used unhappy facial expressions to decorate the drawing of the disliked friend. He explained this as follows: "*P1: I wanted to draw an unhappy face here because I don't like P7*". One of the children was reluctant to draw the portrait and said that he did not want to draw at all. As can be seen, the children's feelings towards their disliked friends were generally negative. Only one child described a positive emotion towards a disliked friend.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to identify children's peer preferences and to investigate the reasons for negative peer preferences. To this end, children were given the opportunity to express themselves through drawing. After taking sociometric measurements, the children drew portraits of their negative peer preferences.

As a result, it was found that in a class of 15 children, 4 children had a rejected position after sociometric evaluation. Of these children, 1 was a girl and 3 were boys, and 1 of the boys was diagnosed with autism. Among these children, the child who was reported as the first choice among the rejected friends was a girl (P11). When analyzing the children's drawings, four basic categories can be identified when interpreting the codes. These are body parts, clothes and accessories, detailed descriptions and the use of colors. It is a normal result of the nature of portraiture that children usually focus on the face and facial organs. In the drawings, it is noticeable that very few children prefer the use of color. In general, only pencil was used in the drawings. The children generally showed a realistic attitude in their portrait drawings. Both the effort to use details and the effort to create a realistic composition can be explained by the fact that the children have passed through the developmental stage of realistic drawing (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1987).

One of the themes that emerged about the rejected children was undesired behaviors and there were 3 categories under this theme (uncomfortable contact, disturbing behaviors, autism-related behaviors) The first category included mostly aggressive behaviors, and this is consistent with the literature. It has been observed that children with aggressive behaviors are rejected by their peers and these two variables are related (Erol & Gülay Ogelman, 2020; Monks, Ortega Ruiz, & Torrado Val, 2002; Paulus, 2017). It has also been observed that boys exhibit more aggressive behaviors in kindergarten and these behaviors negatively affect peer status (Keane & Calkins, 2004). This finding is also consistent with the fact that the majority of rejected children are boys. According to teachers' opinions, in many preschool classrooms, classroom rules are determined at the beginning of the semester in consultation with children, and classroom needs, the requirements of social life, and disruptions in the classroom are taken into consideration in determining the rules. For example, there are rules such as being quiet during activities and not damaging toys (Saltali & Arslan, 2013). In early childhood education, children's daily practices largely revolve around order and discipline (Odenbring, 2014). A socialized individual behaves in accordance with the rules and expectations of the society in which he/she lives (Çağdaş & Seçer, 2002). The classroom is also a small social space for children. Therefore, behaviors that disrupt the classroom order can be considered as an obstacle to socialization. Behaviors that disrupt classroom order can be considered as a result of not being preferred by their peers.

The categories addressed in relation to the social contact exhibited by rejected children were gender, social preferences, and inappropriate behavior. Gender has a significant impact on children's friendships. Some studies found that Friendships were found to be more likely to occur between same-gender peers (Hooijsma, etc, 2020). Research shows that young children typically have same-sex friendships, but there is growing recognition of gender-integrated friendships in schools and the benefits of gender integration for social-emotional development

(Mulvey, etc, 2020). Gender plays a role in children's friendships, as children tend to be similar to their friends in terms of gender and participation in gender-type activities (Braun and Davidson, 2017; Braun, 2014). Individual differences in friendships with children of the other gender can reduce gender bias and lead to more positive attitudes and influences when interacting with the other gender (Halim vd., 2021).

In this study, children's social preferences were found to be a reason for peer preference. Social preference was also found to be independent of gender. The data obtained showed that gender was also a factor in children's preferences for games, toys and seating in the classroom. This situation also supports the studies on the effect of gender on children's play and toy preferences (Carter & Levy, 1988; Özdemir, 2015; Özyürek, 2015; Sezici & Yiğit, 2019). Since this situation is perceived and maintained in a similar way by the community, it is also reflected on children (King vd., 2020). Sharing behavior is important within the scope of inappropriate behavior, which emerges as another subcategory in social contact. It was found that children did not prefer friends who did not share their toys. Similarly, research shows that sharing is an important aspect of social competence and plays an important role in children's peer acceptance and that children are more likely to be accepted by their peers (Paulus & Moore, 2014). Children who are liked by their classmates are more likely to share more with their best friends, while disliked children share less with all recipients (Asscheman vd., 2020). Children's social status was found to be positively related to their sharing behavior in their own group (Sabato & Kogut, 2021). Therefore, these results are supported by the research results.

The fact that a child who was rejected by his/her friends had autism was also a striking finding in the findings. Research has shown that the social status of children with autism is generally rejected among their peers (Metin vd., 2015). In another study, it was stated that the child with autism had a neglected status and similar to this study, children with normal development thought that the child with autism was younger than them (Menteş & Arnas, 2021). Parents of children with autism reported problem behaviors and repetitive behaviors (Hall & Graff, 2012; Töret vd., 2014). In the current study, they stated that the children also made meaningless sounds and made repetitive movements and that they were disturbed by this. Families of children with autism stated that they encountered hostile attitudes when their children exhibited behaviors considered inappropriate in a public space (Gray, 2002). In addition, since the child with autism has limited verbal communication skills, making incomprehensible sounds and repeating certain words are among the reasons for the negative peer preference. A study found that children with poorer verbal communication proficiency were more likely to be rejected by their peers, especially for boys (Van der Wilt, etc, 2016).

According to the results of this study, children generally described the emotional state of rejected children as angry. There are also results that the emotions of rejected children are not understood. Research has shown that rejected children experience anxiety, sadness and anger due to their rejection (Nergaard, 2020). Therefore, it can be thought that the consequences of mood create a cycle in the rejection process. Being angry is also associated with aggressive behaviors. The fact that rejected children are described with angry mood also supports the finding that these children also show aggressive behaviors. The results also show that children are not happy drawing friends they do not like.

This study aims to explain in detail the reasons why rejected children have this social status. The results show that studies on autism awareness of children with normal development should be planned. The social structure in the classroom should take various measures to support the inclusion of students and families and teacher training should be planned for this. In addition to awareness-raising activities on autism, programs to improve children's social competencies should be integrated into the preschool education program. Teachers should be provided with classroom management strategies that will strengthen children's social skills through in-service training. One of the most frequently encountered findings in the results of this research was gender. Studies for children, teachers, and families should be planned to minimize the negative effects of gender roles, which come to the forefront in children's play-toy preferences and friend choices, on social communication and interaction. Researchers can conduct detailed observations of rejected children during free play times and activities to explore the sources in more depth. In addition, it can be observed whether teachers have an impact on the status of rejected children. They can conduct experimental studies to identify effective intervention strategies for rejected children and evaluate the effects of these strategies on change in social status. They can conduct experimental studies to identify effective intervention strategies for rejected children and evaluate the effects of these strategies on change in social status. Longitudinal studies can be conducted to monitor and evaluate changes in children's social status over the long term. Identify the risk factors to which children are exposed and investigate how these factors affect them and ways in which they can be changed.

Limitations

This study is limited to the children who participated in the study in the spring semester of 2023. The data collected in the study is limited to the children's interviews and the answers they gave in the sociometry.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in this research.

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