



Characteristics of the Preschool Education Program: Administrator and Teacher Opinions

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Okul Öncesi Eğitim Programının Özellikleri: Yönetici ve Öğretmen Görüşleri

Abstract

Objective: This study aimed to investigate administrator and teacher opinions on the characteristics of the preschool education program. **Method:** This phenomenological study was conducted with the participation of 5 school administrators and 35 preschool teachers. In the study, data about the administrators and the teachers were gathered with the Demographic Information Form and the semi-structured interview form was used in the determination of the opinions of the administrators and the teachers on the characteristics of the preschool education program. The study data gathered with the qualitative interview form were analyzed with MAXQDA software. **Results and Conclusion:** The study results showed that administrators were aware of teacher training needs and that both administrators and teachers needed to be supported with additional training on the Preschool Education Program updated and piloted in 2012 and implemented in 2013.

Keywords: Preschool Education, Program, Administrator, Teacher

Özet

Amaç: Araştırmada, yöneticilerin ve öğretmenlerin okul öncesi eğitim programının özelliklerine yönelik görüşlerinin incelenmesi amaçlanmıştır. **Yöntem:** Nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden olgu bilim deseninde gerçekleştirilen araştırma 5 okul yöneticisi ve 35 okul öncesi öğretmeni ile yürütülmüştür. Çalışmada okul yöneticileri ve öğretmenlere ilişkin bilgi elde etmek amacıyla "Kişisel Bilgi Formu" ile okul öncesi eğitim programının temel özelliklerine yönelik yönetici ve öğretmenlerin düşüncelerini belirlemek amacıyla hazırlanan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu kullanılmıştır. Araştırma kapsamında çalışma grubundan nitel görüşme formu ile elde edilen verilerin çözümlenmesi için, MAXQDA programı kullanılmıştır. **Bulgular ve Sonuç:** Araştırmanın sonucunda okul öncesi öğretmenlerin 2012 yılında güncellenerek pilot çalışmaları yapılan ve 2013 yılında uygulanmaya başlanan Okul Öncesi Eğitim Programı ile ilgili eğitim ihtiyaçlarının yöneticiler tarafından farkına varıldığı, hem öğretmenlerin hem de yöneticilerin güncel program konusunda destek eğitime ihtiyaç duydukları bulunmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Okul öncesi eğitim, program, yönetici, öğretmen

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INTRODUCTION

One of the key elements in achieving the objectives in every stage of education is the implementation of an effective education program. Planning, as an educational term, is the determination of which teaching activities will be selected, how and why these activities will be implemented, what sort of study aids and materials, as well as, supplementary sources will be used and how evaluation will be conducted, in order to attain specific educational objectives and program goals. A planned and programmed education ensures effective learning and allows the swift achievement of goals (Demirel, 2004). The preschool period is a critical stage in which children have the greatest learning potential and their basic habits and intellectual abilities develop and take form most rapidly. The preschool education program was developed to ensure healthy growth, and to promote development in all domains, development of self-care skills and readiness to primary school in preschool students through rich learning experiences (MEB, 2013). In order to attain these goals, the “Preschool Education Program for Children Aged 36 -72 Months” implemented in 2006 was updated in 2013 within the context of national and international studies in the field, feedback from teachers and the Project for Strengthening Preschool Education. The preschool education program updated in 2013 aims to promote healthy growth, development in all domains, development of self-care skills and readiness to primary school in preschool students through rich learning experiences (MEB, 2013). The Updated Preschool Education Program is a multifaceted program (i.e. supportive and preventive) that aims to support children’s development and prevent deficiency in all domains of development. It is the teachers in these programs who have the major responsibility for implementing a new curriculum and for sustaining its use (Lieber et al., 2010). Acknowledging and implementing the updated education program in accordance with these characteristics is essential. Administrators are also tasked with great responsibilities to facilitate the effective implementation of the program. Determining the opinions of administrators and teachers on the education program would promote its effectiveness. When the researches conducted abroad are examined, the preschool education program and practices (Reschke and Ruhland, 2020; Brodin and Renblad, 2015; Mligo, 2016; Lieber et al., 2010; Sofou and Tsafos, 2010;

Lieber, et al., 2009), there are studies examining the problems and experiences (Mligo, 2018) faced by teachers during these practices. Although a review of literature yielded studies on the opinions of preschool teachers on the current preschool education program (Arslan and İlkay, 2015; Köksal et al., 2016) and studies investigating the implementation of the child-centered approach (Kaya and Aytar, 2015), we did not encounter any studies conducted with preschool teachers and administrators on the characteristics of the current preschool education program. In addition, determining the opinions of administrators and teachers on the subject would contribute to the elimination of implemental issues and the achievement of program objectives. Accordingly, this study was aimed at determining administrator and teacher opinions on the characteristics of the preschool education program.

Methods

This phenomenological study was aimed at determining administrator and teacher opinions on the characteristics of the preschool education program. In phenomenological studies, sources of data are individuals or groups of people who have experienced, and can express or externalize, the subject phenomenon. Interviews are conducted with these individuals or groups to reveal their experiences and meanings regarding phenomena (Büyüköztürk et al., 2016). Acceptable size of samples in qualitative studies also increases the quality of the research (Başkale, 2016). In the research, it was aimed to take a sample from the whole universe and not to make a sample selection.

As the study was to be carried in Kırşehir city center, the necessary legal permits were obtained from the Directorate of National Education in Kırşehir province. The study objective was conveyed to the teachers and the administrators and face-to-face interviews were conducted with those who agreed to participate voluntarily. During the interviews, the replies were recorded on paper by the interviewer as audio recording was not permitted. The study was conducted with the participation of 5 school administrators and 35 preschool teachers. The number of female/male administrators and teachers were 3/2 and 34/1, respectively. The number of administrators aged 26-30, 31-35 and 36-40 were 1, 1 and 3 while the number of teachers aged 26-30, 31-35, 36-40 and 41 and older were 17, 10, 5 and 3, respectively. 4 of the

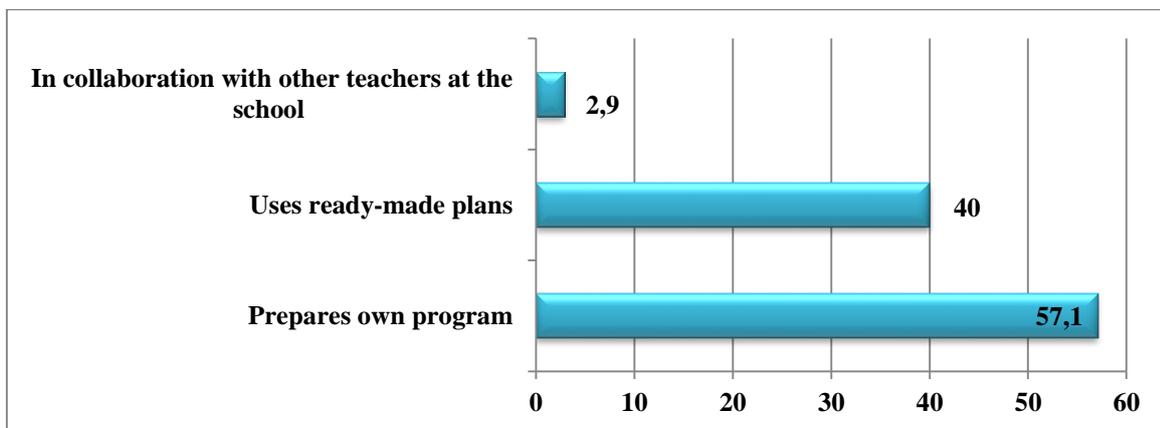
administrators had an undergraduate degree and one had a postgraduate degree, while all the teachers had an undergraduate degree. The number of administrators with a length of service of 1-5, 6-10, 11-15 and 16-20 years were 1, 2, 1 and 1, while the number of teachers with a length of service of 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20 and 21 and more years were 1, 15, 12, 1 and 6, respectively.

In the study, data about the administrators and the teachers were gathered with the Demographic Information Form and the semi-structured interview form was used in the determination of the opinions of the administrators and the teachers on the characteristics of the preschool education program.

The draft interview form constructed after a review of literature was submitted to four domain specialists for review and the draft form was finalized to be employed in administration. The study data gathered with the qualitative interview form were analyzed with MAXQDA software. In qualitative data analysis, administrator and teacher replies were categorized and analyzed separately.

Results

The results of the study carried out to determine administrator and teacher opinions on the characteristics of the preschool education program are given below:

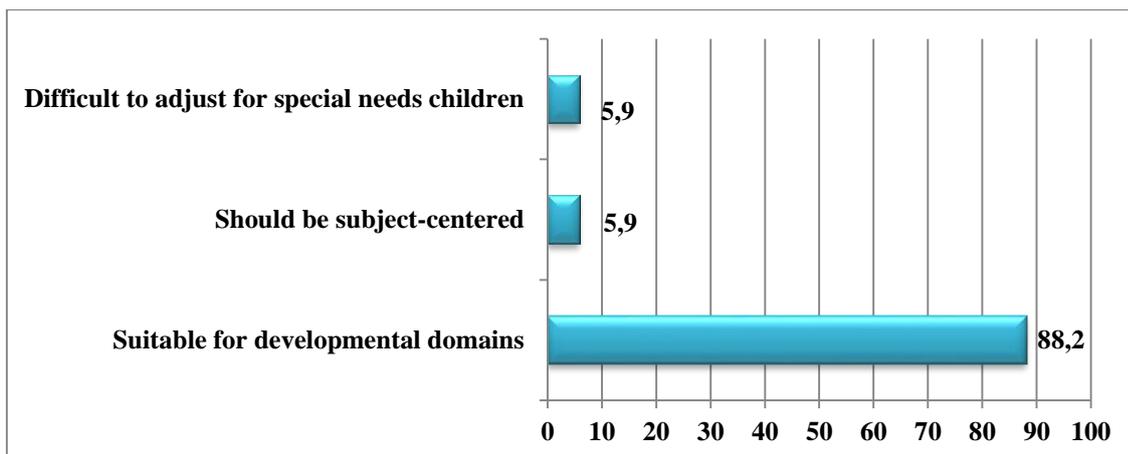


Graphic 1. Distribution of teacher replies to “Who prepares your education program?”

Graphic 1. Distribution of teacher replies to “Who prepares your education program?”

The majority of the teachers participating in the study reported preparing their own program

by making adjustments to a ready-made plan, while 40% of the teachers used a ready-made plan as is and a few teachers (2.9%) said they prepared the program in collaboration with the other teachers at the school.

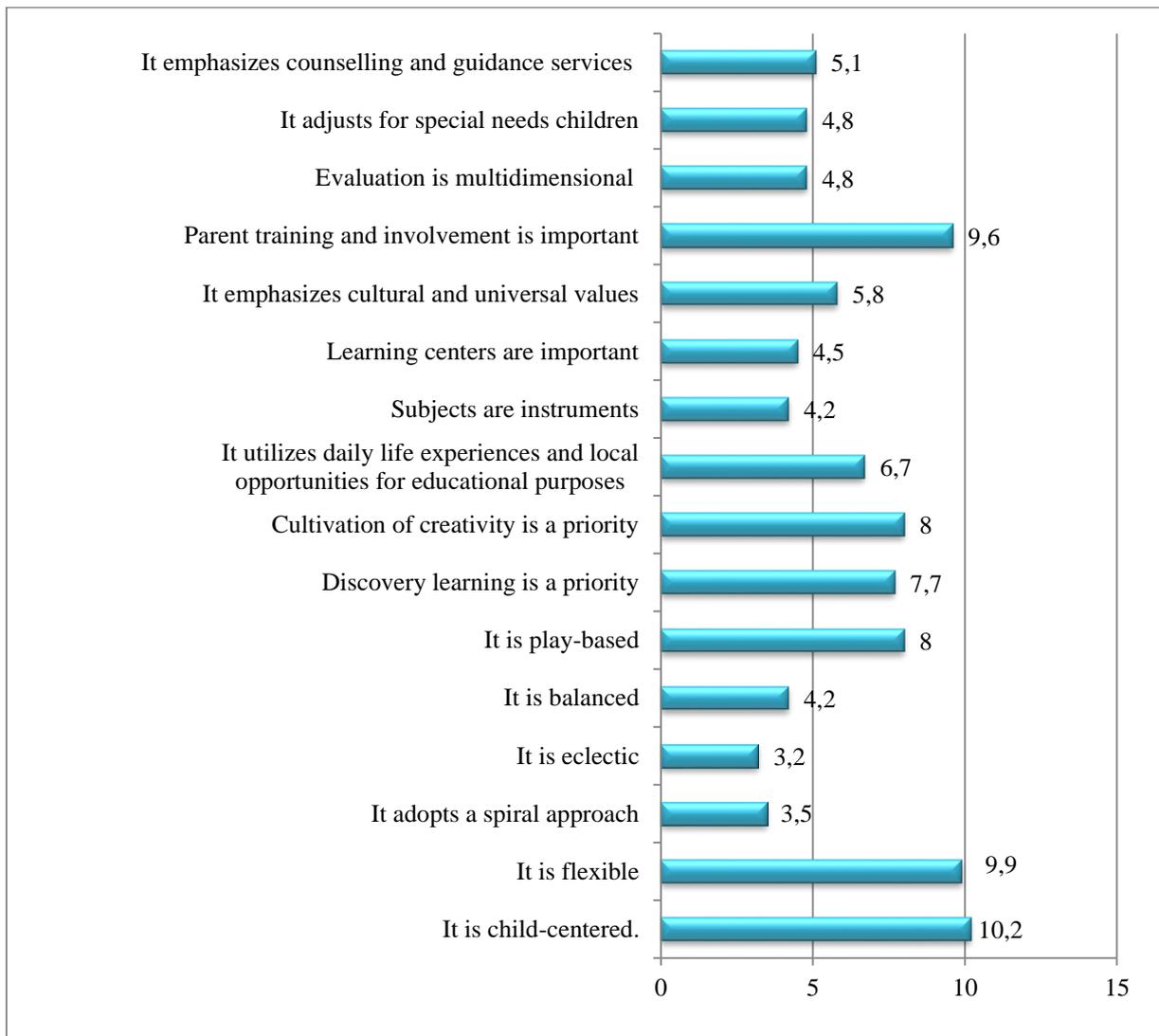


Graphic 2. Distribution of teacher replies to “What is your general opinion about the basic characteristics of the program?”

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Almost all the teachers (%88.2) opined that the preschool education program was suitable for children’s developmental domains. The teachers also wanted the program to be subject-

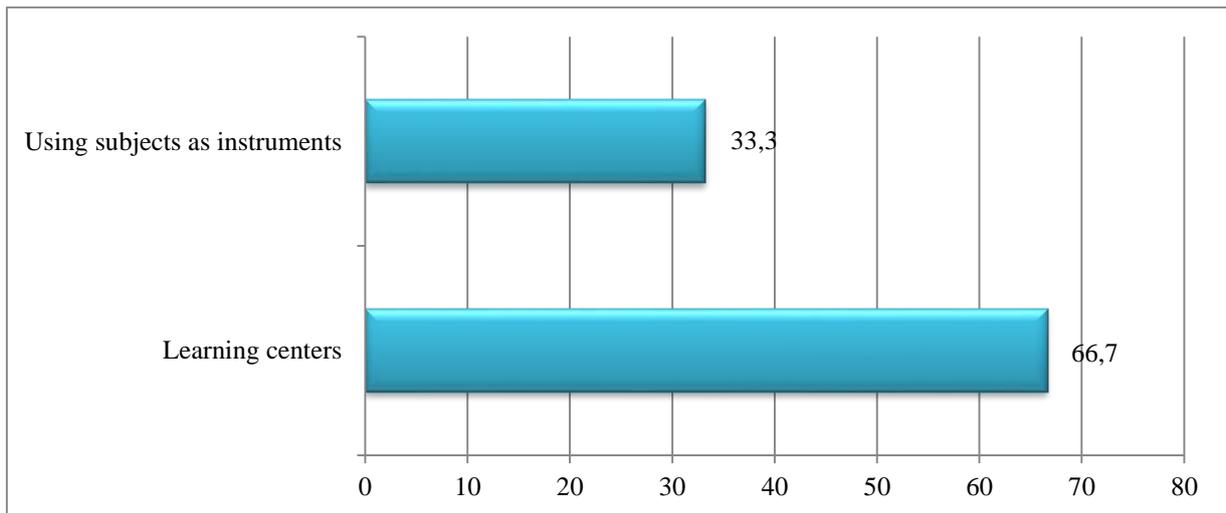
centered (5.9%) and had difficulty with adjusting the program for special needs children (5.9%).



Graphic 3. Teacher opinions regarding the actualization of the basic characteristics of the preschool education program

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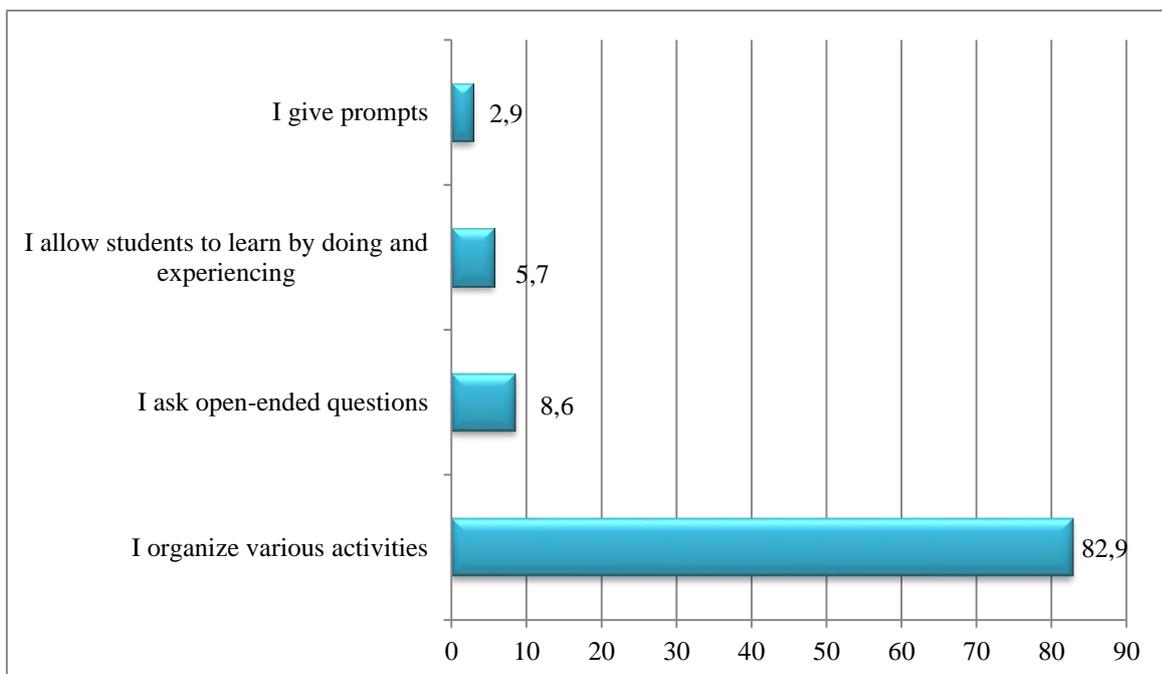
Investigation of Graphic 3. revealed that the most utilized basic characteristics of the preschool education program reported by the teachers were child-centeredness (10.2%) and flexibility (9.9%), while the least used were the spiral approach (3.5%) and eclecticism (3.2%).



Graphic 4. Distribution of administrator replies to “What are the basic characteristics that teachers can’t utilize?”

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The administrators stressed learning centers (66.7%) and use of subjects as instruments (33.3%), when inquired about the basic program characteristics the teachers could not utilize.

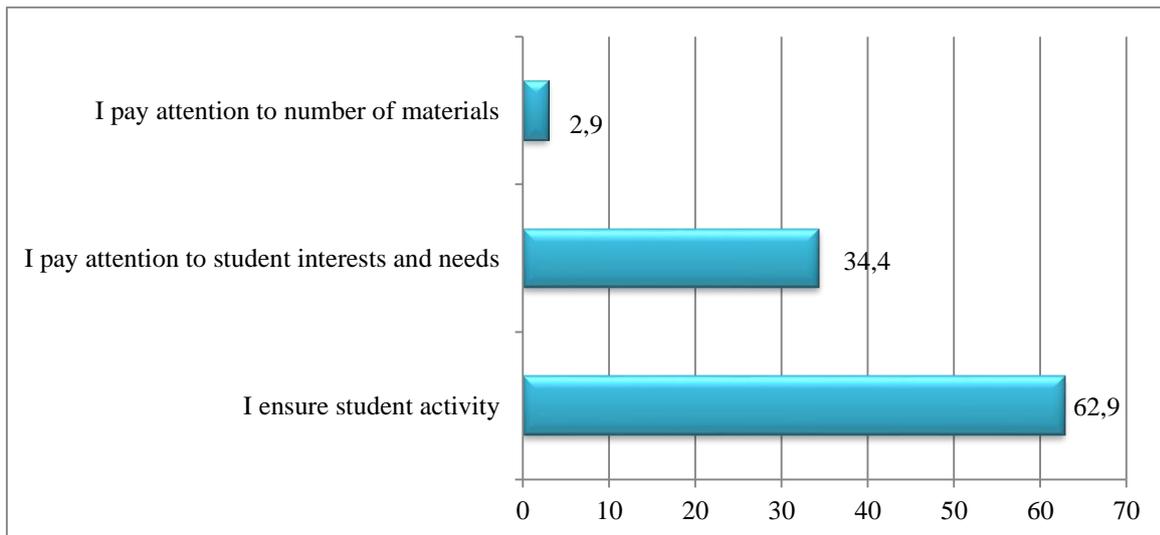


Graphic 5. Distribution of teacher replies to “What do you do to help students learn by discovery?”

Graphic 5. Distribution of teacher replies to “What do you do to help students learn by discovery?”

The teachers reported organizing various activities (82.9%), asking open-ended questions (8.6%), letting students learn by doing and experiencing (5.7%) and giving prompts (2.9%) in

order to promote learning by discovery. On the other hand, the administrators gave different replies. They reported that students were asked questions, structured activities were administered, students were observed by teachers, parental involvement was ensured, and field trips were organized.

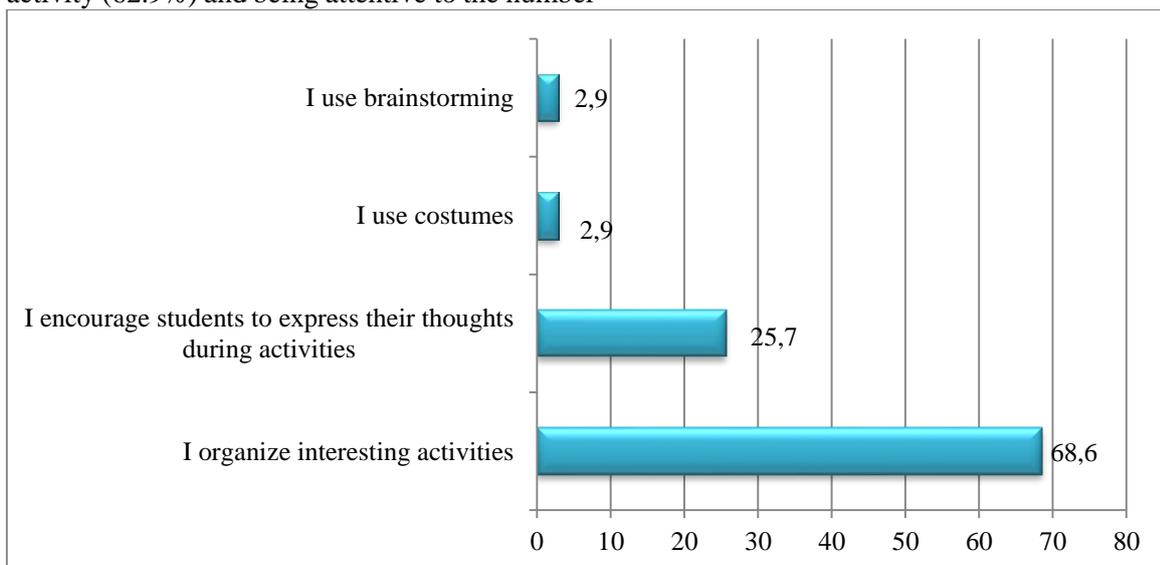


Graphic 6. Distribution of teacher replies to “What do you do to make the program child-centered?”

Graphic 6. Distribution of teacher replies to “What do you do to make the program child-centered?”

The teachers revealed ensuring student activity (62.9%) and being attentive to the number

of materials (34.3%), as well as, to student interests and needs (2.9%), while the administrators reported being attentive to children’s interests and desires (75%) and trying to be flexible (25%), in order to attain a child-centered program.

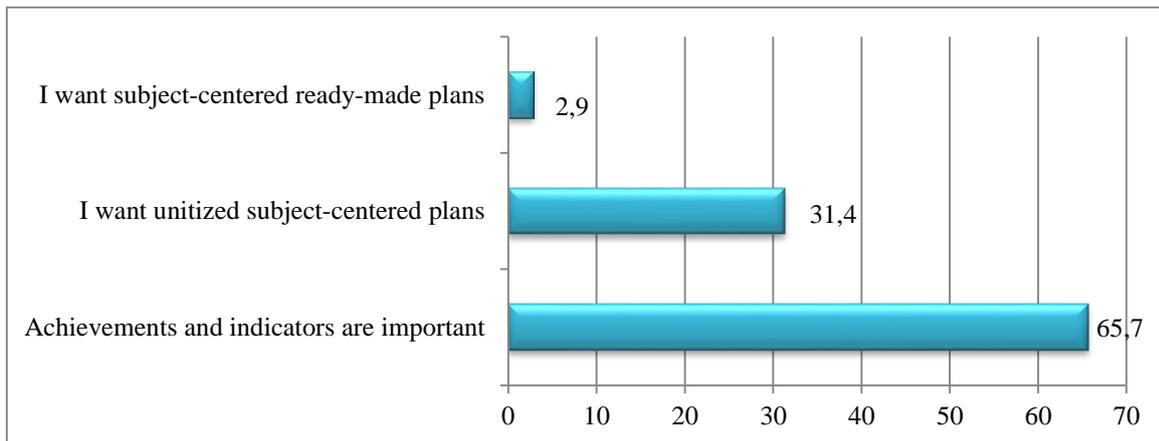


Graphic 7. Distribution of teacher replies to “What do you do to promote children’s creativity?”

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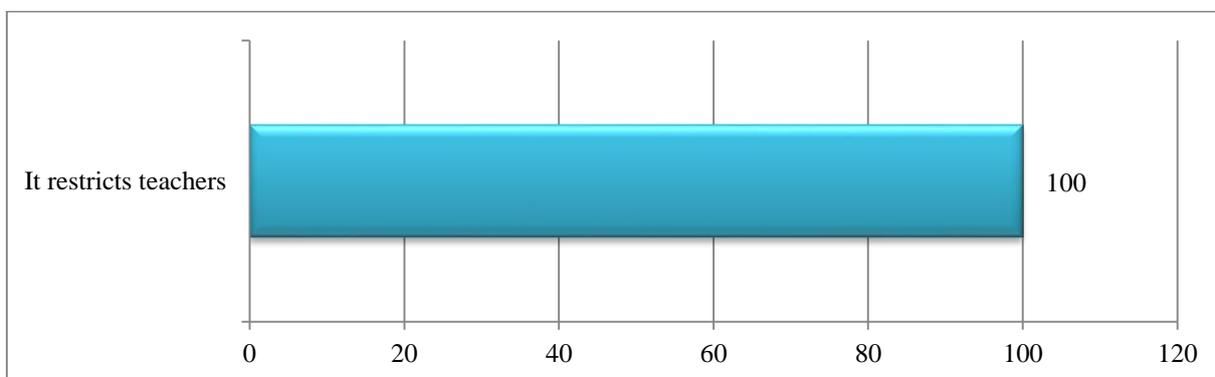
Investigation of the teachers’ replies to the question “What do you do to promote children’s

creativity?” showed that most of the teachers organized interesting activities (68.6%) and encouraged students to express their thoughts during activities (25.7%). In addition, some teachers declared using costumes (2.9%) and the brainstorming technique (2.9%).



Graphic 8. Distribution of teacher replies to “What are your opinions on using subjects as instruments?”

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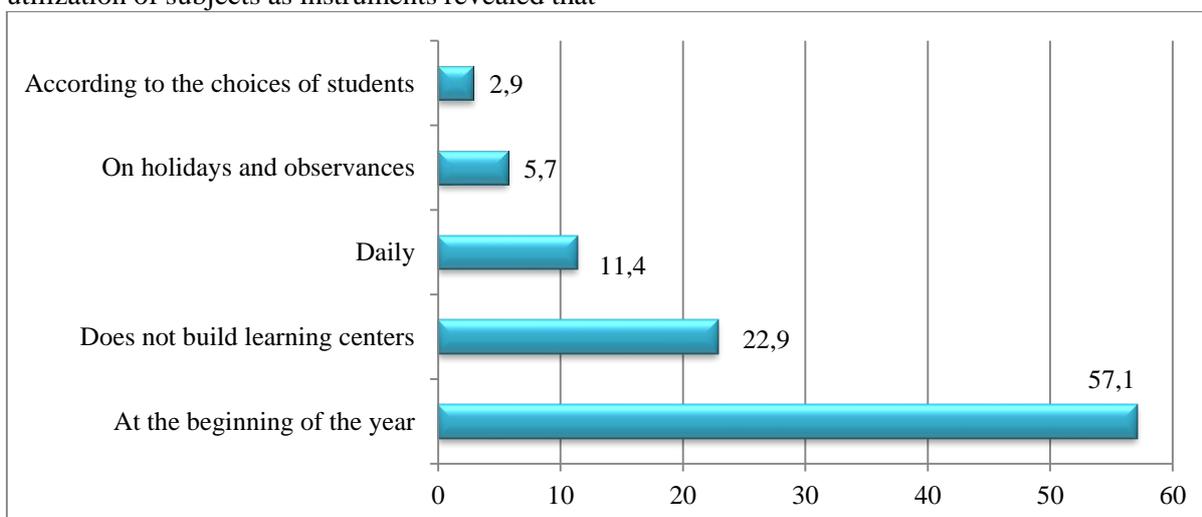


Graphic 9. Distribution of administrator replies to “What are your opinions on using subjects as instruments?”

Graphic 9. Distribution of administrator replies to “What are your opinions on using subjects as instruments?”

65.7% of the teachers regarded achievements and indicators as essential, while 31.4% wanted subject-centered plans and 2.9% wished to use subject-centered ready-made plans. All the administrators opined that using subjects as instruments restricted teachers.

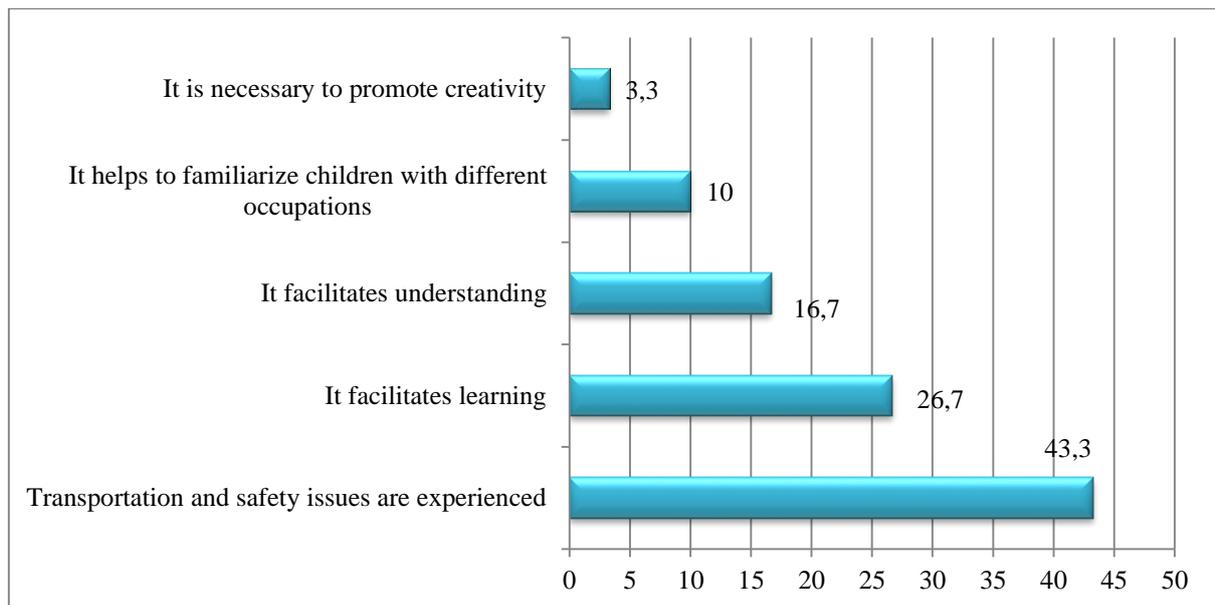
Examination of teacher opinions on the utilization of subjects as instruments revealed that



Graphic 10. Distribution of administrator replies to “When do you build the learning centers?”

Graphic 10. Distribution of administrator replies to “When do you build the learning centers?”

57.1% of the teachers built learning centers and used it throughout the year.

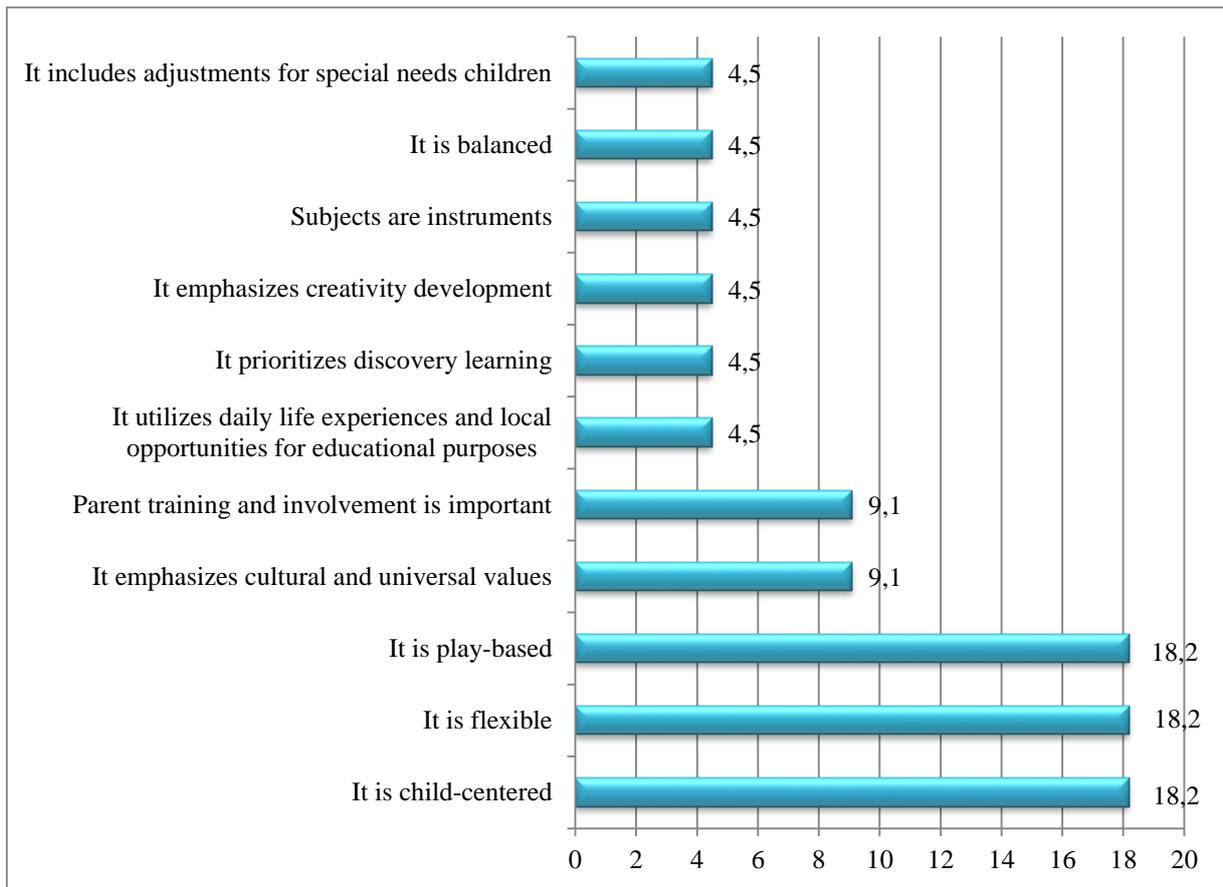


Graphic 11. Distribution of teacher replies to “What do you think about utilizing daily life experiences and local opportunities for educational purposes?”

Graphic 11. Distribution of teacher replies to “What do you think about utilizing daily life experiences and local opportunities for educational purposes?”

Regarding educational use of daily life experiences and local opportunities, the teachers

reported experiencing difficulties with transportation and security in general (43.3%) and said educational use of daily life experiences and local opportunities were necessary to promote creativity (3.3%), helped to familiarize children with different occupations (10%), and facilitated understanding (16.7%) and learning (26%).

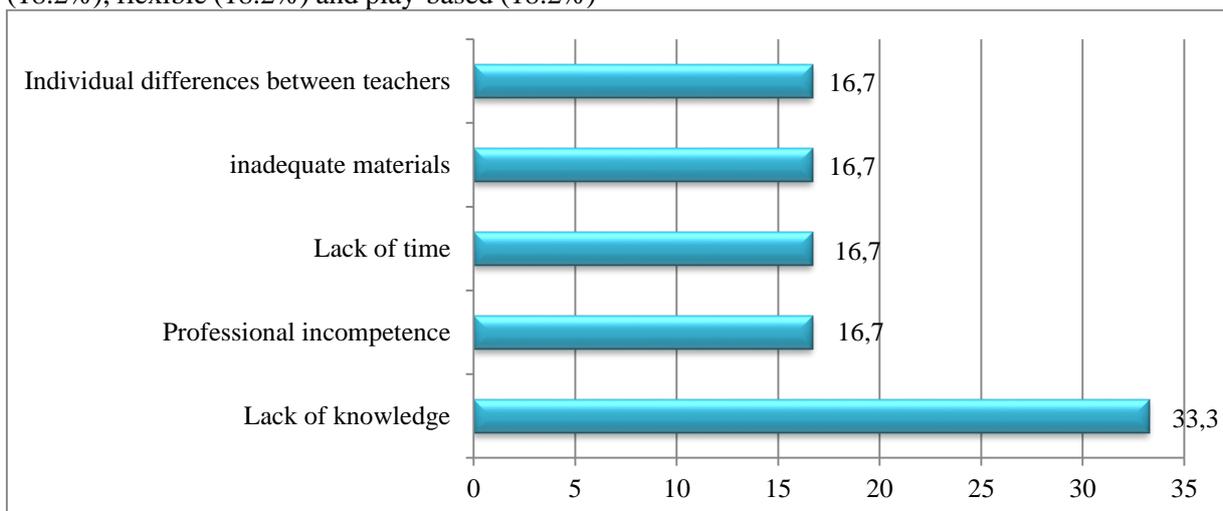


Graphic 12. Administrator opinions regarding the actualization of the basic characteristics of the preschool education program

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Figure 12 shows that most of the administrators reported that being child-centered (18.2%), flexible (18.2%) and play-based (18.2%)

were basic characteristics that were actualized. In addition, the percentages of the administrators who replied, “It emphasizes creativity development,” (9.1%) and those who said “Parental training and involvement is important,” (9.1%) were equal.



Graphic 13. Distribution of administrator replies to “Why can’t teachers implement the basic characteristics?”

Graphic 13. Distribution of administrator replies to “Why can’t teachers implement the basic characteristics?”

The administrators opined that lack of knowledge (33.3%), professional incompetence (16.7%), lack of time (16.7%), inadequate

materials (16.7%) and individual differences among teachers (16.7%) were the reasons underlying teachers' failure to utilize basic program characteristics.

Discussion

The majority of the teachers participating in the study reported preparing their own program by making adjustments to a ready-made plan, while 40% of the teachers used a ready-made plan as is and a few teachers said they prepared the program in collaboration with the other teachers at the school. Provision of high-quality education requires planning and program development, and teachers are expected to be planners and program developers. Therefore, it is important for teachers to be involved and have a voice in program development. Although teachers perceive ready-made plans as a convenience, their utilization is not desirable due to differences between regions, cities, schools, classes and students. Planning, in general, is determining how educational activities can be conducted in a well-organized manner in advance. Therefore, albeit making use of ready-made plans, teachers should be involved in plan development. The fact that almost half of the teachers used ready-made plans may be an indication of their failure to adjust to the updated education program. The study by Bağ (2015) found that teachers reported feeling less competent and needing in-service training in program development in comparison to other areas. Early childhood programs are increasingly using new curricula that emphasize skills related to school readiness. It is the teachers in these programs who have the major responsibility for implementing a new curriculum and for sustaining its use (Lieber et al., 2010). Policy planners need to provide initial teacher education, professional development, and conducive teaching and learning environments with available resources for effective teaching and learning practices (Mligo, 2016).

Almost all the teachers opined that the preschool education program was suitable for children's developmental domains. The teachers also wanted the program to be subject-centered and had difficulty with adjusting the program for special needs children. These teacher opinions suggest the lack of a thorough understanding of the preschool education program. The study by Brodin and Renblad (2015) reported that teachers perceived the curriculum as an instrument to improve quality in preschool education.

Investigation of Graphic 3. revealed that the most utilized basic characteristics of the preschool education program reported by the teachers were child-centeredness and flexibility, while the least used were the spiral approach and eclecticism. The program is a developmental program that is based on children's developmental level and characteristics and that aims to promote all developmental domains. As learning is a cumulative process, the program adopts a spiral approach. In this sense, the achievements and indicators must be addressed through various activities throughout the process as required, in order to ensure the realization, reinforcement and retention of achievements. The preschool education program has an eclectic model and child-centered practices from various learning theories and models were used in the development of the program (MEB, 2013). Spiral approach and eclecticism may have been less familiar concepts to the teachers, contributing to their less frequent utilization.

The administrators stressed learning centers and use of subjects as instruments, when inquired about the basic program characteristics the teachers could not utilize. The similarity between administrator and teacher replies can be attributed to the administrators' knowledge of the opinions of the teachers about the program and the administrators' sensitivity toward the problems the teachers experienced. Teachers must firstly internalize the philosophy of the updated program in order to be able to equally implement the entirety of the basic program characteristics. More importantly, in addition to being aware of teachers' lack of knowledge or training needs, administrators should be able to deliver solutions.

The teachers reported organizing various activities, asking open-ended questions, letting students learn by doing and experiencing and giving prompts in order to promote learning by discovery. On the other hand, the administrators gave different replies. They reported that students were asked questions, structured activities were administered, students were observed by teachers, parental involvement was ensured, and field trips were organized. Discovery learning was adopted as a learning strategy in the preschool education program. In discovery learning, students should actively participate in the learning process, transfer new knowledge to different situations and use new knowledge in new situations. The fundamental goal of discovery learning is to help children become independent individuals with

self-efficacy and students should be allowed to choose activities suitable to their natural interests and to discover and satisfy their curiosity. Instead of telling or showing the answer to students, opportunities should be created for them to find the answer on their own or in small groups (Aral and Can Yaşar, 2015). Teachers should organize various activities with every opportunity to facilitate the implementation of the program. Furthermore, children's active participation must be supported by providing opportunity to ask questions, explore, discover and learn through play (MEB, 2013). The teachers revealed ensuring student activity and being attentive to the number of materials, as well as, to student interests and needs, while the administrators reported being attentive to children's interests and desires and trying to be flexible, in order to attain a child-centered program. Kaya and Aytar (2012) found that the opinions and self-perceptions of teachers about adopting and implementing a child-centered approach differed from their actual practice, where teachers failed to observe the child-centeredness characteristic of the program. In order to provide for a child-centered program, teachers should create as many opportunities for students to plan, implement, question, research, discuss and produce as possible during the learning process. It is also critical for children to develop a positive sense of self and self-esteem, and to engage in mutual interaction with peers and teachers. Moreover, students should be given the freedom to choose which activities to participate in and which materials to play with in educational environments (MEB, 2013). For the realization of these goals, active student participation and responsiveness towards student interests and needs play an important role. Therefore, attention to active student participation is a favorable characteristic in teachers.

Investigation of the teachers' replies to the question "What do you do to promote children's creativity?" showed that most of the teachers organized interesting activities and encouraged students to express their thoughts during activities. In addition, some teachers declared using costumes and the brainstorming technique. It is important to create the necessary opportunities to ensure children can express themselves in their own unique and different ways in environments suitable for their learning needs and learning styles by supporting children's individual differences through different materials, methods and techniques during the learning process. In the

program, creativity was not addressed as a distinct domain but emphasized in achievements and indicators. Teachers also need to be creative to properly implement the program (MEB, 2013). Therefore, teachers should initially strive to improve their own creativity before utilizing methods and techniques to promote creativity development in their students; they should follow certain publications, have a flexible personality that is open to change and improvement, and be eager to put different ideas into practice. Teachers should regard a child's development as a whole and remember the significance of every developmental domain (İnan, 2017).

Examination of teacher opinions on the utilization of subjects as instruments revealed that 65.7% of the teachers regarded achievements and indicators as essential, while 31.4% wanted subject-centered plans and 2.9% wished to use subject-centered ready-made plans. All the administrators opined that using subjects as instruments restricted teachers. The teachers' emphasis on the achievements and indicators is desirable; however, a significant number of teachers wanted a subject-centered plan and the administrators reported that using subjects as instruments restricted teachers, which are both unfavorable. This finding indicates that teachers were unable to amend and update previously learned incorrect or obsolete knowledge. Early childhood programs are increasingly using new curricula that emphasize skills related to school readiness. It is the teachers in these programs who have the major responsibility for implementing a new curriculum and for sustaining its use (Lieber et al., 2010). Preschool education is a process based on learning, not instruction. Therefore, the aim is not teaching a particular theme or subject, but to help children attain the achievements specific to their age, development and individual characteristics, which indicates the lack of a subject- or theme-based teaching for the acquisition of the achievements and indicators. Various subjects may be utilized in planning and a particular subject or theme may be revisited in different aspects, at different times and in different activities. Everything in the child's life and environment can be studied as long as this principle is observed. Thus, although the subject is not taught, the achievements and indicators determined through the instrumentality of that subject is attained (Aral and Can Yaşar, 2015).

57.1% of the teachers built learning centers and used it throughout the year. Learning

centers are critical areas of learning separated by different materials to meet individual student needs, where students can interact in small groups, concentrate and play (MEB, 2013). Teachers are expected to update learning centers in accordance with the achievements in the daily educational schedule by addition, removing or replacing some materials. It is noteworthy that only 11% of the teachers made daily adjustments to learning centers. In their study on teacher opinions and practices regarding learning centers, Aysu and Aral (2016) concluded that teachers generally required support on the program and its implementation.

Regarding educational use of daily life experiences and local opportunities, the teachers reported experiencing difficulties with transportation and security in general and said educational use of daily life experiences and local opportunities were necessary to promote creativity, helped to familiarize children with different occupations, and facilitated understanding and learning. The most important general teaching principles in any education level and activity are known to unknown, concrete to abstract, near too far, clarity and economy principles. The program characteristics concerning educational use of daily life experiences and local opportunities are based on these general teaching principles. Utilizing daily life experiences and local opportunities both enriches and facilitates learning. Use of local opportunities also contributes to variety and economy in material procurement. Therefore, it is critical for teachers to be well-acquainted with local facilities and opportunities and observe children's daily life experiences (Aral and Can Yaşar, 2015).

Most of the administrators reported that being child-centered, flexible and play-based were basic characteristics that were actualized. In addition, the percentages of the administrators who replied, "It emphasizes creativity development," and those who said "Parental training and involvement is important," were equal. Teacher and administrator replies converged on the importance of parent training and involvement, flexibility, child-centeredness and the quality of being play-based, which indicates the similarity of teacher and administrator opinions.

The administrators opined that lack of knowledge, professional incompetence, lack of

time, inadequate materials and individual differences among teachers were the reasons underlying teachers' failure to utilize basic program characteristics. These answers indicate that the administrators were aware of teachers' lack of knowledge about the updated education program. In their study investigating preschool teacher opinions on the new curriculum, Sofou and Tsafos (2010) stressed that teachers needed help to familiarize themselves with the new curriculum. Although promotional activities for the Preschool Education Program updated in 2013 were organized in every province of Turkey, it is obvious that teachers who could not participate or failed to internalize the program need additional training. According to the study by Arslan and İlkay (2015), only 24% of the teachers had attended an introductory seminar for the 2013 Preschool Education Program and found the seminar adequate. On the other hand, 38% had attended an introductory seminar for the 2013 Preschool Education Program but reported that the seminar was inadequate in various aspects. In addition, 38% of the teachers did not attend an introductory seminar for the 2013 Preschool Education Program. The same study also emphasized the need to organize practical introductory seminars rather than detailed and theoretical, and to gather teacher feedback. In addition, Köksal, Balaban Dağal and Duman (2016) suggested organizing seminars and in-service training courses to improve teacher quality would promote program functionality. Turan (2016) determined that, although the number of permanent staff was adequate in public preschools, teachers employed at private preschools had greater attendance to professional development and in-service training activities and emphasized the imperative to plan and implement in-service training activities for administrators and teachers employed at both public and private preschools. Administrator replies stressing lack of time, professional incompetence, inadequate materials and individual differences between teachers once more highlighted their awareness of the training needs for preschool teachers regarding teaching competence and professional development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study results revealed that administrators were aware of teacher training needs and that both administrators and teachers needed to be supported with additional training on

the Preschool Education Program updated and piloted in 2012 and implemented in 2013.

In view of the study results, the researchers would like to make the following recommendations:

- Teachers and administrators should follow the latest developments, particularly concerning program updates.

- Teachers should be provided with greater opportunity to practice program development beginning from undergraduate education.

- The shortcomings of teachers and administrators, particularly those concerning implementation, must be continuously supported and assessed with regular and well-planned in-service trainings developed in collaboration with universities, and full attendance to these trainings must be ensured.

- Efforts to adequately equip school administrators and inspectors should be increased to help them support teachers about the current education program.

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