

## Outdoor Environment and Outdoor Activities in Early Childhood Education

### Okul Öncesi Eğitimde Dış Mekanlar ve Dış Mekan Aktiviteleri

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**Abstract:** There has been several research about the benefits of outdoor activities on preschool children’s development and learning. However, there is a lack of implementation regarding the results of the related research in early childhood settings. The purpose of this study is to investigate related literature considering what these shortcomings are, how they can be compensated and to analyze National Early Childhood Curriculum in Turkey in terms of outdoor play environments and outdoor activities. In order to reach these aims, this study indicates the types of outdoor play environments in terms of the opportunities that they offer for children’s playing, the effects of such different environments on children’s play preferences, and the barriers against children’s experiences outdoors. Moreover, it is clear that most of the studies investigating outdoor play environments in Turkey are conducted in in the field of landscape architecture rather than early childhood education field. The results showed that outdoor play environments are investigated regarding the physical characteristics of the environment and there is lack of emphasis on the impacts of outdoor play environments and activities on children’s development and learning. Therefore, this study also aims to give information about how outdoors can be used as learning settings and how outdoor activities can support children’s development and learning. Lastly, the results indicated that Turkish Ministry of National Education, Early Childhood Education Curriculum doesn’t emphasize the value of outdoor play environments and outdoor activities; therefore teachers have the responsibility on their shoulders to compensate this deficiency.

**Keywords:** Outdoor environment, outdoor activities, early childhood education

**Öz:** Dış mekan ve dış mekan aktivitelerinin okul öncesi dönem çocuklarının bütünsel gelişim ve öğrenmesi üzerinde olumlu etkileri olduğu ile ilgili çok sayıda bilimsel araştırma bulunmaktadır. Ancak bu çalışmaların sonuçlarının okul öncesi eğitim ortamlarına aktarılmasında eksiklikler görülmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, bu eksikliklerin neler olduğu ve nasıl giderilebileceği ile ilgili yazın taramasını incelemek ve Türk Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Okul Öncesi Müfredatını, konu dahilinde incelemektir. Belirlenen hedefler doğrultusunda bu çalışmada, dış mekanların çocuklara oyun oynama fırsatları sunmaları açısından hangi gruplarda toplandığı, bu gruplamların çocukların oyun tercihleri üzerindeki etkileri ve çocukların dış mekan deneyimleri kazanmaları önündeki engeller belirtilmiştir. Bununla birlikte, konu ile ilgili yapılan yazın taramasında, Türkiye’de açık oyun alanlarının, okul öncesi eğitim alanından ziyade peyzaj mimarlığı alanında araştırıldığı görülmektedir. Bu çalışmaların sonuçları, açık oyun alanlarının, çoğunlukla yalnızca fiziksel özellikler açısından ele alındığını ve dış mekan aktivitelerinin çocukların gelişim ve öğrenmesine ne derece katkıda bulunduğu konusundaki eksiklikleri ortaya konmuştur. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmanın bir diğer amacı da Türkiye’de açık oyun alanlarının eğitim ortamları olarak nasıl kullanılabilceği ve bu alanlarda yapılan aktivitelerin çocukların gelişim ve öğrenmesine nasıl katkıda bulunabileceği ile ilgili bilgiler vermektir. Son olarak, bu eksikliğin Türkiye Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Okul Öncesi müfredatında dahi görüldüğü vurgulanarak, öğretmenlere bu eksikliğin kapatmak konusunda büyük sorumluluk düştüğü belirtilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dış mekanlar, dış mekan aktiviteleri, okul öncesi eğitim

#### The importance of outdoor environment and outdoor activities for preschool children in early childhood education

The early years tremendously facilitate children’s learning and development through the help of a wide array of opportunities for children to play, investigate, and discover the world around

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them. Outdoor environment with its natural unrestricted spaces offers those opportunities by particularly providing space to move and play for children to develop different kinds of their skills (Bilton, 2002; Rivkin, 1995).

To gather the background information about the positive influence of outdoor environment and activities on children's learning and development, the valuable ideas of the pioneers of early childhood education like Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Dewey could be investigated (Wolfgang, 2004). Rousseau regarded nature as more valuable than formal schooling for children's learning. In fact, he believed that it is important not only to nurture children's cognitive development, but also to promote their physical welfare. However, his ideas could not be implemented in practical educational settings; thus other philosophers built upon new ideas to his views (Graves, Gargiulo, & Sluder, 1996). For example, Pestalozzi supported the idea that children's own endeavors to learn from nature are not sufficient for gaining necessary skills; therefore teachers should introduce natural objects that give children opportunity for sensory experiences (Wellhausen, 2002).

Similar to Pestalozzi, Froebel regarded play as the best learning method for young children and he highlighted that all kinds of outdoor activities should be considered at least as valuable as indoor activities. Since there is no original source to practically confirm Froebel's views, the effects of his ideas on educational practice begun to diminish at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century (Tovey, 2013). In essence, the progressive education approach supporting child-centered curriculum surfaced rather than more teacher-center approaches of that time (Wellhausen, 2002). As a pioneer of progressive education Dewey considered that children's intrinsic motivation to make physical exercises built more than school-like activities on their learning and development (Dewey, 1889).

Today, there is substantial scientific evidence related to contribution of outdoor environment and outdoor activities to young children's learning as well as development in early childhood education literature (Wolfgang, 2004). Most of the researchers expressed their ideas about why they considered outdoor environment as so valuable for young children's whole development including gross and fine motor skills, intellectual skills, social skills as well as sensory skills since they believed that the whole development of children could be well supported in outdoors as long as they are appropriately adopted for children (Davies, 1996; Haas, 1996; Henniger, 1993; Louv, 2005). For instance, Davies (1996) indicated that outdoor activities, naturally, offer children a chance to do exercise by using their fine and gross muscles and mostly require being active within the environment. Parallel to that idea, Fjortoft and Sageie (2000) stated that the environment including natural elements provides many opportunities for children to develop their motor skills, such as coordination, balance and agility as well as protect children from childhood obesity (Bundy, Lockett, Tranter, Naughton, Wyver, Ragen, & Spies; 2009; Moore, 1997). Similarly, Chakravarthi, Schilling, Hestenes and McOmber (2007) asserted that even if an outdoor environment just includes grass as a natural element, it will be sufficient to promote children's physical skills.

Not only does outdoor environment nurtures children's physical development, but also helps their cognitive development to flourish. To demonstrate, Ouvry, (2003) and Rivkin (2000) highlighted that outdoor environment develops children's observation skills by letting them follow whatever is going on in the surroundings including behavior of animals, change in weather conditions, or progress of construction. Gleitman and Liberman (1995) also emphasized the crucial role of outdoor environment on children's intellectual development if they possess varied equipment stimulating creativity and imagination of young children.

In addition to the positive effects of outdoor environment on children's psychomotor and cognitive domains, outdoor environment is also beneficial as to fostering children's socio-emotional skills. Rivkin (2000) stressed that children have many opportunities to get to know different people or animals while playing outdoors. Furthermore, children also have a chance to experience all types of play with their peers and compare their behaviors with each other through those experiences (Creasey, Jarvis & Berk, 1998). Moreover, they could improve their

communication and empathy skills by means of interacting with their peers during outdoor activities (Hartle, 1994; Richardson, 2007).

By considering the value given for the outdoor environment through the centuries and also contributions to developmental areas of children, it would not be surprising to conclude that outdoors might be superior to indoors since this type of environment has more flexible and useful conditions for variety of activities for children, including both inappropriate and allowable activities in indoor settings (Parsons, 2011; Rivkin, 2000; Talbot & Frost, 1989).

### **Types of playgrounds**

After discussing the countless benefits of outdoor environments on children's learning and whole development, it should be made clear where outdoors are. Outdoor environments have been separated into three groups by the researchers considering the facilities they provide for children to play and explore (Frost & Klein, 1979). Those groups are called traditional playgrounds, contemporary playgrounds, and adventure playgrounds (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999; Parnell & Ketterson, 1980). The first and the most common type of the playgrounds, traditional playgrounds, consist of mostly stationary and large metal equipment such as slides, swings, and jungle gyms (Frost & Klein, 1979; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999). On the other hand, the second type of the playgrounds, namely contemporary playgrounds, consists of alternatively manufactured surfaces which are different form than metal ones and generally would include a sand box, wheeled vehicles, or play houses. The last type of playgrounds called adventure playgrounds comprise of natural features giving opportunities to children to explore available materials in their surroundings to use them for construction and deconstruction (Frost, 1992).

Reviewing the literature related to those three types of playgrounds, many studies have revealed that children's play choices are affected by the structures of playgrounds. For example, Frost and Strickland (1985) investigated 138 preschool children's preferences for equipment in playgrounds and established that children mostly engaged in playing with portable, complex, and manipulative play materials rather than fixed ones. In parallel to that research, Campbell and Frost (1985) studied preschool children and investigated their material choice during free play. The results indicated that children mostly spent their time with creative loose materials rather than large and stationary equipment during their free play due to the nature of the equipment. Similar to those results, but considered from different viewpoint, Berry (1993 in Walsh, 1993) conducted a research by focusing on the duration of children's preferences for static structures in 7 early childhood education centers in Australia. The results of the study showed that children were not willing to spend more time with fixed materials. In fact, they spent merely 4 minutes on the average with static equipment unless communication with the teacher was provided or additional creative play equipment was offered. In addition, Barbour's study (1999) convinced us to understand why children do not prefer traditional areas as a first choice. In essence, he found out that traditional playgrounds increase competition between children since they do not encourage collaborative play among children.

Some other studies have extended the ideas regarding why children's play preferences have demonstrated more inclination towards environment having creative and open-ended equipment rather than non-manipulative fixed materials. Researchers expressed the reason of the changing preferences of the children's playgrounds by emphasizing their decreasing level of engagement to nature. For instance, Louv (2005) stressed the idea that today, the increasing number of children are spending very little amount of time in outdoor environment so they have been detached from the nature. In a similar way, Anggard (2010) and Greenman (2005) underlined the necessity of integrating the natural world into children's education in early years due to increasing disengagement from the nature.

Aforementioned studies in the literature call close attention to benefits of outdoor experiences for children's development as well as to the importance of playgrounds characteristics on children's play choices. Nevertheless, ultimate importance of outdoor

activities and outdoor environment to all aspects of children's development and learning are not efficiently highlighted in the literature on early childhood education. In essence, while literature on early childhood education is quite rich with regard to importance of indoor environment and indoor activities providing variety of sources for early childhood educators to investigate any issues related to indoor activities, most of those sources provide only brief information about outdoor environment and activities (Henniger, 1993).

The importance of outdoor activities was neglected even by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) which is the world's largest early childhood education association. Indeed, although the NAEYC highlighted the key role of indoor play with regard to developmentally appropriate programs supporting children's whole development, outdoor experiences are almost totally ignored with only few pages in the program (Bredekamp, 1987) allocated for them. In addition to that scientific evidence, in practice, most preschool teachers devoted themselves to preparation of indoor activities during their professional life and ignored the value of spending a period of time outdoors within their daily schedules (Chakravarthi, 2009).

Examining the literature, reasons of dearth of sources and ignored value of outdoor environment as well as activities convince us that there are barriers to children's outdoor experiences. One of the reasons of that particular deprivation of children from outdoor experiences was related to parents and their concerns about safety of their children in outdoors (Pyle, 2002) as well as their limited time for going outside with their children (Wilson, 1996). Clements (2004) studied eight hundred and thirty mothers to investigate their own early experiences in outdoor environment as well as the outdoor experiences of their children at present. When comparing the status of outdoor experiences of children with their mothers', it is clear that due to parental safety concerns, children have fewer opportunities to experience outdoors today than their mothers did as they young. Similarly, White (2004) conducted a study with mothers of children between three and twelve years old and aimed to investigate the reason why they restrict their children's outdoor experiences. The researcher found out that mothers retain their children from outdoor facilities due to crime and safety concerns. In parallel to this research, an increasing number of studies (Herrington & Studtmann, 1998; Moore & Wong, 1997; Pyle, 2002) established that children's time spent in outdoor environment, particularly in their neighborhoods, is restricted by the fear of strangers unless the children are under the supervision of adults. In addition to parental safety concerns, another barrier to children's outdoor experiences is related to teachers' safety concerns. Considering this concern, Chakravarthi (2009) and Bundy et al., (2009) stated that teachers 'safety concerns override their teaching concerns during outdoor play time.

Restrictions to children's outdoor activities are not only related to adults' safety concern but also arise from the focus of the programs of the early childhood education centers. It is vital to make outdoor activities an indispensable part of daily routine in early childhood programs rather than perceiving those activities as a break time or a chance to communicate with others for teachers (Frost, 1994). Furthermore, Pate, McIver, Dowda, Brown, and Addy (2008) supported that idea and indicated that planning outdoor activities for children depends on the implemented program in an early childhood education center. Basically, if the center gives importance to sedentary activities for children that are mostly appropriate for indoor environment, the time children spend in outdoor settings will automatically decrease.

In addition to safety concern and the focus of early childhood education programs, one more inevitable factor affecting the time children can spend outdoors is related to the weather. According to Chakravarthi et al., (2007), the amount of time teachers spend with children in outdoor settings varies depending on the weather. She indicated that teachers do not prepare outdoor activities as regular activity since they consider the weather conditions while planning the outdoor activities; in fact, only if the weather is nice, they prefer to implement those activities. Maynard and Waters (2007) also conducted a study with preschool teachers from four different schools. The researchers found out that teachers do not perceive outdoor activities as a part of their daily schedule. In fact, teachers' reports showed that if they allow children to

experience outdoors on a rainy day, they know that parents will react negatively to those experiences since they do not want to see their children's clothes wet and dirty. Therefore, weather conditions and possible parental reactions may prevent teachers to implement outdoor activities throughout their daily schedule. There is similar perceptions in Turkish context that outdoor activities are perceived as the reason to go out to the school garden in good weathers instead of perceived as activities practiced out-of-doors by the teachers (Alat, Akgümüş, & Cavali, 2012). This perception among teachers should be changed and teachers should be informed about all weather conditions offer different kinds of opportunities to experience with children in case children wear appropriately and be safe. Moreover, outdoor activities should be a part of the curriculum instead of playing outdoors freely only in good weathers.

***The essential characteristics of outdoor environment in an early childhood education settings***

Since among all obstacles to outdoor activities, adult's safety concerns overwhelmingly surpass others in the literature, there exist some standards, as cornerstones providing licensing requirements at a minimum level, implemented by most states in the USA to maintain the quality of early care and education in terms of safety issues (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998). Those standards might be listed as the consumer product safety commission handbook on public playground safety (Consumer Product Safety Commission, 1997), Environment Rating Scale (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998), tiered quality strategies, and the criteria of Developmentally Appropriate Practice's for children's outdoor environment (NAEYC, 1997). As an example, developmentally appropriate practices defined by NAEYC (1997), outdoor environment should offer children an opportunity to move freely and loudly, to promote their physical development, and to explore natural environment. Moreover, outdoor environment should protect children from variety of hazards and should provide variety of activities in fresh air supporting different developmental areas of children (NAEYC, 1997). Like NAEYC (1997) standards, all of standards mentioned above commonly and preponderantly concentrated on protection of children from physical harm. Since all those endeavors of determining standards did not go beyond just the safety issues to reduce children's injuries in outdoor environment, the necessity of designing qualified outdoor environments for young children come into prominence (McGinnis, 2003).

Focusing just safety issues surfaced the necessity of designing qualified outdoor environments. As a pioneer, Frost (1992) introduced a new word 'playscape' to describe different play environments. He strictly emphasized the value of natural elements in terms of the quality of the outdoor environment since he believed that natural elements are open-ended, so they offer children more variety of learning experiences than other types of materials. However, he was also aware of the limitation of those materials to just some particular group of materials, such as sand, balls, or tricycles (Frost, 1992). In the same manner, White and Stoecklin (1998) described ideal outdoor environment by emphasizing the importance of unstructured experiences with the elements of the nature rather than structured experiences. Then, many other researchers also gave high priority to natural elements in outdoors for young children. For instance, Henniger (1994) and Wardle (1994) indicated that the most important part of children's outdoor environment is loose articles which include changeable and creative construction materials such as sand, water, rope, bricks, or lumber. Many researchers (Debord, Hestenes, Moore, Cosco & McGinnis, 2002; Pfouts & Schultz, 2003; Widler, 2001) also pointed out that loose materials are extremely beneficial to children's outdoor environment since they are very affordable, available and effective learning materials for children's development and learning. In contrast to those ideas, Sutterby and Thronton (2005) accepted stationary equipment, such as swings, slides, and balance platforms as indispensable and the most crucial parts of outdoor environment for children since those equipment help children to reveal their intrinsic willingness to move.

Different from just indicating the required materials in outdoor environment for children, Shell (1994) stressed that the most important task is to create opportunities for young children rather than just selecting manufactured and close-ended structures from the catalogues

to prepare qualified outdoor environment for children. In a similar way, many researchers underlined the necessity of appropriate and different level of risk as well as different degrees of challenge for children through their outdoor experiences in outdoor environment (Gleave, 2008; Little, 2010; Sandseter, 2009; Sutterby & Frost, 2002). Furthermore, Wardle (1994) highlighted the necessity of developmentally appropriate experiences, without any safety concerns as well as focusing on the goals and objectives of outdoor activities in the curriculum. Different from others, Frost, Wortham, and Reifel (2008) stated that a quality outdoor environment should enrich children's experiences and provide them with an opportunity to play at their own pace and within a social group.

A comprehensive review of the literature brought to light four essential characteristics of children's outdoor environment and activities. These points were summarized by Wellhousen's (2002) and Henniger's (1994) as follows: the outdoor environments should (1) provide many opportunities for children to take risks to the extent which is acceptable under safe and well-supervised conditions; (2) offer challenging situations for children consistent with their developmental level and interests; (3) have variety of materials and space for children to use in all kinds of play; and (4) include manipulative materials and provide choices for children to move some parts of the materials.

To sum up, considering all above aspects of quality are provided, it would be easy to maximize children's learning in outdoor environments.

### ***Examining the National Early Childhood Education Curriculum (2013) in Turkey in terms of outdoor activities***

Before examining the Turkish Ministry of National Education, Early Childhood Education Curriculum (MONE, 2006) in terms of outdoor activities, it would be better to draw a picture of current but contradictory status of outdoor environment and outdoor activities in Turkey.

Investigating outdoor environment as well as outdoor activities is not so widespread among the researchers from the field of early childhood education in Turkey. In fact, there are limited studies (Alat, Akgümüş & Cavali, 2012; Artar, Demir & Çok, 1998; Bağlı, 1996; Olgan & Kahriman-Öztürk, 2011; Sevimli-Çelik, Kirazcı & İnce, 2011) investigating the characteristics of children's playgrounds, behaviors of children within outdoor environment, and the significant contribution of outdoor activities on children's development and learning. For instance, Olgan and Kahriman-Öztürk (2011) conducted a research to examine the current condition of playgrounds in terms of playground environment and their equipment in 34 public and private preschools in Ankara. The results of their study addressed that there was no difference between public and private preschools with regard to their playground environment and materials; in fact both types of preschools had traditional playgrounds disrupting children's play experiences with just similar materials such as swings and climbing bars rather than focusing on the features of playgrounds or playground equipment. From different perspective, Bağlı (1996) investigated the level of social interaction among 71 preschool children while playing different equipment and materials in playgrounds. Her result revealed that children's behaviors in playgrounds were mostly affected by the arrangement of the playgrounds. Moreover, Sevimli-Çelik, Kirazcı, and İnce (2011) indicated the insufficiency of outdoor environment for children to practice movement activities in 8 preschools in Ankara. Lastly, Alat, Akgümüş, and Cavali (2012) investigated 25 preschool teachers' beliefs and practices about outdoor play. According to the results, although the early childhood educators have positive thoughts and attitudes regarding the importance of outdoor activities on children's development and learning, they indicated that some factors, such as insufficient physical conditions, lack of safety at school gardens, crowded classes, inappropriate weather conditions, and lack of parental permission prevent them to practice such activities outdoors.

In contrast to the studies in early childhood education field, investigating children's playgrounds concentrated on their different aspects is insistently popular among the researchers from the field of landscape architectures. For the most part, research has focused on the issues (1) the qualities of children's playgrounds in terms of safety of playgrounds' arrangement and

the equipment they have (Açık, Gülbayrak & Turaci-Çelik, 2004; Akkulah, 2008; Cihangiroğlu, 1994; Özgüç, 1998; Üskün, Kişioğlu, Altay, Çıkmışlar & Kocakaya, 2008; Yılmaz & Bulut, 2007), and (2) the quantity of children's playgrounds (Tekkaya, 2001; Yılmaz & Bulut, 2003). Although they are many in number, most of the studies in the field of landscape architecture are limited with just investigating the physical characteristics, particularly emphasizing the safety concern, of the outdoor environments as far away from considering educational goals and objectives for young children.

As a result, it could be addressed that there is a clear-cut neglect to explore children's outdoor environments and the impacts of outdoor activities on their development and learning in the context of early childhood education. Therefore, it would be make more sense to examine the national early childhood education curriculum in Turkey in terms of children's outdoor activities to confirm the above picture.

Examining National Early Childhood Curriculum we could see that there are some goals to support children's physical developments for three different age groups (36-48 months, 48-60 months, and 60-72 months children). For each goal, there are some indicators that children are expected to gain through the outdoor activities. In particular, there are some explanations in the curriculum as a guideline for teachers to consider while preparing different activities for children. Goals which are directly related to nurture children's physical development are 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and the 4<sup>th</sup> goals in the MONE curriculum (pp.32-33). For instance, one of the goals is "to be able to do displacement" and some objectives to be well-supported in outdoor for this goal are "to walk/run according to the directions", "to jump from the specific height", and "to roll through a specific distance" (p.32). As an explanation for this goal and indicators, the MONE curriculum is flexible and enables teachers to create their own activities while considering age appropriateness. However, it includes only the standards for the height/depth of an obstacle that teachers should consider while preparing activities for children. Thus, teachers have to be knowledgeable and conscious about preparing a safe environment to prevent possible injuries of their children.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> goal to nurture children's physical development is "to be able to perform specific movements that require balance" and as example indicators for this goal, the MONE curriculum includes "ability to move different weights from one place to another", "ability to do different kinds of balance movements individually or in paired" (p.32). As an explanation for this objective, the curriculum gives advices to teachers in terms of the appropriateness of width, height, and length of balance board for creating a safe environment for children.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> goal to support children's physical development is "object control". The curriculum includes several indicators of this goal such as "controlling objects individually or collaboratively", "rolling a small ball on the ground" and "holding, moving, pulling, and pushing of objects" (p.32). The explanation for this objective is mainly related to controlling the small objects such as balloon, sea ball, scarf, and ribbon as well as to be able to start and to keep going on, and to control the movement.

The 4<sup>th</sup> goal to promote children's physical development is "to be able to do small motor activities" (p.33). The indicators of this goal include gathering objects, pouring the objects from one pot to another, and gathering objects to create new shapes (p.33). Nevertheless, although the 4<sup>th</sup> goal and the objectives are appropriate to support children's motor skills outdoors, and the indicators under that goal refer to support children's physical development, the MONE curriculum does not provide any specific guidance as to how to practice them outdoors.

In addition to the goals and objectives related to physical development of children, there are other goals and objectives for different domains in which children gain though outdoor activities. For instance, in socio-emotional domain, the objectives of "to be able to take responsibilities" (p.29) and "protecting aesthetical values" (p.30) could be supported in outdoor environment. Children could be responsible to take care of an animal or a plant as well as to protect beautiful things in their environment. They should also learn to assure sustainable life by using resources (e.g., soil, water, energy, and food) effectively (p.29). Moreover, children

should be given different kinds of opportunities to express their ideas regarding to protect beautiful things and to arrange both natural and man-made environment around them (p.30).

In addition, outdoor environment might be invaluable to nurture some objectives in cognitive domain. To illustrate, “to be able to observe the various features of the objects or entities” (p.20) might be the objective that children could gain through the sensory experiences in outdoor environment. Children’s self-care skills such as “to be able to apply cleaning routines” (p. 41) could even be fostered in outdoor environment. In fact, children could be aware of cleaning their hands or arms after messy outdoor activities.

After reviewing the goals and indicators in terms of outdoor activities, the next part that is examined in the MONE curriculum is of the principles of the early childhood education. In this part, the curriculum indicates that the facilities of the school and the environment should be considered as much as children’s interests while preparing educational activities for children. However, it specifically refers neither indoor and outdoor environment nor outdoor play.

The next part I reviewed in MONE curriculum is “The Importance of Early Childhood Period”. The curriculum highlights the importance of enriched and stimulating environment for children’s learning and development. However, the MONE curriculum is insufficient as to highlight the importance and richness of outdoor which provides opportunity to implement different kinds of activities. In fact, outdoor environment provides wide range of opportunities for children to develop their observation, exploration, or discovery skills through the help of sensory experiences (White, 2008). Moreover, those kinds of environments stimulate children’s curiosity and give many chances for them to ask as well as respond the questions within the environment result in strengthening the communication skills of children (White & Stoecklin, 1998).

The heading of “The Importance of Teachers” also investigated in terms of teacher’s preparations of outdoor teaching as well as their arrangements of outdoor environment for teaching. The curriculum emphasizes the significance of process rather than product during play, investigation and unstructured activities (p.13). In addition, the significance of the arrangement of the environment for children’s learning is emphasized in this part of the MONE curriculum. The curriculum also supports the idea that teachers should let children to discover their immediate environment in accordance with the goals and indicators of the curriculum.

The heading of “The Essential Characteristics of the Curriculum” is another part that is analyzed considering outdoor activities and outdoor learning in the MONE curriculum. This part includes different sub-titles that can be associated with outdoor learning. In essence, the MONE curriculum indicates that early childhood program is so flexible that it can be adapted to changing characteristics of the physical environment. It lets teachers to enrich children’s learning processes by arranging the environment and the materials however they would like to do. Nevertheless, the MONE curriculum does not include optimal characteristics of outdoor environment and outdoor play materials as a guide for teachers.

The MONE curriculum indicates that the program should support children’s whole development. It also includes the idea that educational plans should be prepared in a balance by including the goals and indicators from all developmental domains, both active/passive and indoor/outdoor activities. Nevertheless, the curriculum gives almost no information about the notion of the crucial role of children’s connection with nature for their development. Therefore, teachers might suffer from lack of understanding of the value of natural outdoor environment for children’s development and learning and may not be aware of how to prepare outdoor activities by using the materials in their immediate environment.

This part also emphasizes that the MONE is a play-based curriculum. In fact, it highlights that children not only learn but also discover their environment through play (p.15). One of the important points here is that the educational programs should be prepared by considering the importance of play to reach educational goals and indicators. However, there is no example or information for teachers about how they should practice play activities with young children. I believe that this part might be enriched as far as importance of play for children’s development and learning is concerned. There might be two subtitles as “play

indoors” and “play outdoors” devised under the general heading. As an example, teachers might be informed that children’s need to move could be met during outdoor activities since they could master their gross motor skills through using gross muscles in outdoors. Moreover, the MONE curriculum could be further improved if there are concrete well-planned examples of both structured/semi-structured outdoor activities and unstructured outdoor experiences for teachers to practice with children.

In addition to aforementioned parts, the importance of developing children’s creativity is emphasized through goals and indicators rather than included in separate part the MONE curriculum (p.16). The curriculum addresses that teachers should be creative to reach the goals and indicators in an effective way. However, there is no emphasis regarding the relationship between outdoor activities and creativity in the MONE curriculum. Since outdoor environment is one of the best environments to nurture children’s creativity (Fjortoft, 2001, 2004) it would be better to include the significant role of outdoor play to support children’s creativity and the ways how teachers can flourish children’s creativity outdoors.

Lastly, the MONE curriculum supports the idea that educational programs should be planned considering children’s daily living experiences since such experiences helps to enrich learning process. The curriculum also supports the idea that it is a good and economic way to use the opportunities of the immediate surrounding as source for children’s learning. At this point, teachers have a key role to recognize children’s daily experiences well and the opportunities in their immediate environment while they preparing educational plans.

In addition to the MONE curriculum book, there are two more books prepared in accordance with the main curriculum book for parents (OBADER) and teachers to support children’s learning. The OBADER has almost no outdoor activity suggestions for parents to practice with their children. In essence, some sessions that can be model for parents within orientation programs at the beginning of the semester only gives general information about outdoor play. This book also includes the benefits of toys including natural materials (i.e., sand, clay, and mud) which children can play outdoors. It states that these natural materials provide children to have experiences outdoors, to know their immediate environment, and to support their imagination (p.54). Lastly, this book gives general information about the importance of field trips for children’s learning. However, I think there are countless acquisitions of children during field trips that the OBADER would focus on. For instance, it should give some examples of trips to historical buildings, museums, or factories. It would be better to inform parents in terms of the benefits and contributions of visits to different out-of-doors environments where children could be offered various opportunities to ask questions if they are curious about something within a particular area (Helm & Katz, 2001).

When the book including different kinds of integrated activities for teachers to practice in their educational settings is analyzed, there are six different structured or semi-structured outdoor activities (11<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, and 31<sup>th</sup> activities, p.32-72) examples. In essence, these activities are integrated activities associated with science, art, music, play, language, science, and mathematics domains.

To sum up, after examining the whole curriculum and aforementioned two supportive books, now it is better easy to understand the connection between the scarce of the studies about outdoor environment and outdoor activities and the value given for them in the literature; since, in general, the MONE curriculum and the books for parents and teachers provide insufficient information about children’s outdoor activities and the characteristics of qualified outdoor environment. In essence, the information provided in all aspects of outdoor environment and outdoor activities in these books is too general. Most importantly, the importance of natural elements outdoors is not highlighted as creative and necessary to enhance children’s whole development. However, although teachers are free to select developmentally appropriate practices for their specific age group of children based on the goals and objectives in the MONE curriculum, all outdoor practices in early childhood settings are based on their initiative due to lack of determined minimal standards for outdoor environment to be implemented as guidelines

for teachers. As a result, there are too many responsibilities on the teachers' shoulders as long as the teacher is willing to enable children to get maximum benefits through outdoor experiences. Therefore, teachers should be more conscious and informed about the benefits of outdoor activities and the qualified outdoor environment for children and they should actively involve children's play outdoors unlike the common perspective which is only supervising or guiding children's behaviors (Ihmeideh & Al-Qaryouti, 2016; McClintic and Petty (2015). Similarly, parents have also responsibilities to support children's development and learning outdoors by extending limited information about the importance of outdoor activities in the OBADER book and recognizing how to practice such information with their young children.

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### Uzun Öz

Dış mekânların ve dış mekân aktivitelerinin çocukların gelişim ve öğrenmesine katkısı, okul öncesi eğitimin öncülerinden Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel ve Dewey zamanından günümüze kadar birçok araştırmacı tarafından vurgulanmıştır. Bahsedilen filozofların konunun önemi ile ilgili fikirleri geçmişte eğitim mekânlarına aktarılamamasına rağmen, günümüzde okul öncesi eğitimde dış mekânların ve dış mekân aktivitelerinin çocukların gelişim ve öğrenmesine katkısı bilimsel olarak birçok araştırmacı tarafından araştırılmıştır. Bu araştırmacıların birçoğu çocukların gelişimine uygun olarak hazırlanan dış mekânların ve bu mekânlardaki deneyimlerinin çocukların motor, bilişsel, sosyal/duygusal ve duyuşsal gelişimine katkı sağladığını ortaya koymuştur.

Çocukların gelişim ve öğrenmesine çok sayıda katkısı olan ‘dış mekânlar’ bazı araştırmacılar tarafından çeşitli özellikleri bakımından birbirinden ayrılarak üç grupta toplanmıştır. Bu gruplar, geleneksel/klasik oyun alanları, modern/çağdaş oyun alanları ve macera oyun alanları şeklinde oluşturulmuştur. Geleneksel/klasik oyun alanları genellikle sallanmak, kaymak ve tırmanmak gibi fiziksel aktivitelere olanak sağlayan, sabit ve geniş metal malzemelerden oluşan oyun alanlarıdır. Modern/çağdaş oyun alanları ise, metal malzemelere alternatif olarak, kum havuzu, tekerlekli araçlar, ya da oyun evleri gibi alan ya da oyuncakları barındıran oyun alanlarıdır. Son olarak, macera oyun alanları, doğal yapısı ve doğaya özgü malzemeleri barındırması bakımından çocuklara araştırma yapmak, inşa etmek veya yeniden inşa etmek gibi olanaklar sağlayan oyun alanlarıdır.

Yapılan araştırmalar, farklı yapıdaki oyun alanlarının çocukların oyun tercihlerinde farklılık yarattığını ortaya çıkarmıştır. Örneğin, birçok araştırmacı çocukların sabit malzemelerden çok hareket ettirebilecekleri, yaratıcı ve açık uçlu malzemeler içeren oyun alanlarını tercih ettiklerini göstermektedir. Sabit malzemelere sahip olan oyun alanlarının çocuklar tarafından tercih edilmeme sebeplerinden bazıları, çocuklar arasında rekabete sebep olması ve çocuklara birlikte/işbirlikçi oyun oynama fırsatı sunmaması olarak belirtilmiştir. Bazı araştırmacılar ise çocukların bu tercihlerinin nedenini günümüzde çocuklarla birlikte doğada geçirilen zamanın çok kısıtlı olması ve çocukların doğadan kopuk olarak yetişmeleri ile açıklamıştır.

Yukarıda bahsedildiği gibi çocukların dış mekândaki yaşantılarının onların gelişim ve öğrenmesine katkılarının belirgin olmasına karşın, dış mekânların fiziksel özelliklerine ve dış mekân aktivitelerine okul öncesi eğitimde yeteri kadar önem verilmemektedir. Okul öncesi eğitim alanında yazın taraması yapıldığında, çocuklara iç mekânlarda sağlanan imkânların ve aktivitelerin öneminin, dış mekânlarda sağlanana göre daha fazla araştırıldığı görülmektedir. Dış mekânlarla ilgili yapılan çalışmaların daha sınırlı olması, dış mekânların ve dış mekân aktivitelerinin yeteri kadar önemsenmemesi, çocukların dış mekân deneyimlerini engelleyen faktörlerin varlığını pekiştirici niteliktedir. Özellikle, ebeveynlerin güvenlik konusundaki kaygıları ve çocukları ile birlikte dış mekânlarda geçirdikleri zamanın kısıtlı olması, çocukların bu tarz deneyimleri kazanmasını engelleyen faktörlerin başında gelmektedir. Ebeveynlerin, çocuklarının güvenliği konusundaki kaygılarına ek olarak, öğretmenlerin de bu konudaki endişeleri yazında vurgulanmaktadır. Hatta öğretmenlerin, dış mekânlarda çocukların güvenliği konusundaki endişeleri, eğitim ve öğretim konusundaki endişelerinin önüne geçmektedir. Anne-baba ve öğretmenlerin güvenlik ile ilgili kaygılarına ek olarak, okul öncesi eğitim kurumlarının benimsedikleri eğitim yaklaşımları da çocukların dış mekân deneyimlerini kısıtlayan etkenler arasında yer almaktadır. Örneğin, bir okul öncesi kurumunun daha çok iç mekânlarda yapılan hareketsiz deneyimlere ağırlık veren bir yaklaşımı benimsemesi, eğitim sürecinde çocukların dış mekânlarda geçireceği zamanı otomatik olarak düşürecektir. Bununla birlikte, hava koşulları da çocukların dış mekân deneyimlerini etkileyen faktörlerden sayılmaktadır. Okul öncesi eğitim kurumlarında, öğretmenler günlük planlarındaki etkinliklerini, hava koşullarını dikkate alarak hazırlamaktadır. Öğretmenler, çocukların dış mekân deneyimleri kazanmasına sadece güzel havalarda olanak sağlamaktadırlar. Bu da, eğitim kurumlarındaki dış mekân aktivitelerinin, çocukların günlük rutinleri arasına girmesini engelleyen faktörlerden biri olmuştur.

Türkiye’de okul öncesi eğitimde dış mekânların ve dış mekân aktivitelerinin günümüzdeki durumu incelendiğinde, araştırma sonuçları genel olarak okul öncesi eğitim kurumlarının dış mekânlarında benzer materyallerin (salıncak, tırmanma çubukları vb.) yer aldığı, geleneksel oyun alanlarından ibaret olduğunu ve bu alanların çocukların fiziksel gelişimini dahi yeterli şekilde desteklemediğini göstermektedir.

Türkiye’de çocukların oyun alanlarını incelemek, okul öncesi eğitim alanındaki uzmanlardan çok, peyzaj mimarlığı alanındaki araştırmacılar arasında yaygınlaşmıştır. Bu araştırmalar sayıca fazla olmasına rağmen, araştırmacıların yoğunlaştığı konular çocukların oyun alanlarının fiziksel özellikler açısından incelenmesi ile sınırlı kalmıştır. Bu incelemelerde, daha çok oyun alanlarının güvenliği, materyal seçimi ve materyallerin oyun alanı içerisindeki yerleşimi gibi konulara ağırlık verilmiştir. Sonuç olarak bu durum, Türkiye’de oyun alanlarının

çocukların gelişim ve öğrenmesi üzerindeki etkilerinin araştırılmasının eksikliğini göstermektedir.

Türk milli eğitim bakanlığı okul öncesi eğitim müfredatı, dış mekânlar ve dış mekân aktiviteleri açısından incelendiğinde, bu alanlarda olması gereken özelliklerin ve yapılabilecek etkinliklerin çocukların gelişimi ve eğitimindeki öneminin, çok sınırlı bir şekilde ele alındığını ortaya koymaktadır. Müfredatta çocukların oyun alanlarında yaratıcı materyallere yer verilmesi gerekliliği, bazı yaratıcı materyal örnekleri ile birlikte yer alırken, dış mekân ve dış mekân aktiviteleri ile ilgili çok genel ifadeler yer almaktadır. Özellikle, oyun alanlarının doğal bir ortam olması ve doğal materyaller içermesinin çocukların yaratıcılığı ve öğrenmesi üzerine olumlu etkisinin ihmal edildiği göze çarpmaktadır. Bu genel ifade ve ihmal de, okul öncesi eğitim kurumlarında çalışan öğretmenlere dış mekânların çocukların gelişimi ve eğitimi konusunda etkili olarak nasıl kullanılabileceğine dair maksimum sorumluluk yüklenmesine yol açmıştır.