

## An Evaluation of Service Quality in Pre-School Education Institutions through Servqual Method: A Sample of Türkiye

**Oğuz EMRE** (<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2173-1965>), İnönü University, Türkiye; [oguz.emre@inonu.edu.tr](mailto:oguz.emre@inonu.edu.tr)

**Zekeriya ARSLAN** (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8861-0310>), Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University, Türkiye; [zarслан46@hotmail.com](mailto:zarслан46@hotmail.com)

**Hüseyin GÜVEN** (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1816-6415>), Karabağlar Guidance and Research Center, Türkiye; [huseyin0709@msn.com](mailto:huseyin0709@msn.com)

**Ayşegül ULUTAŞ-KESKİNKILIÇ** (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6497-6534>), İnönü University, Türkiye; [aysegul.ulutas@inonu.edu.tr](mailto:aysegul.ulutas@inonu.edu.tr)

### Okul Öncesi Eğitim Kurumlarında Hizmet Kalitesinin Servqual Yöntemiyle Değerlendirilmesi: Türkiye Örneği

#### Abstract

The service quality of pre-school education institutions is a pivotal issue in meeting the expectations of education policies in Türkiye regarding solution proposals, institution adequacy and dissemination of pre-school education, and supporting children's development at a desired level. This study evaluates the service quality in pre-school education institutions through the Servqual method. The study's working group consisted of 428 parents whose children learn at pre-school education institutions in İzmir, Diyarbakır, Karaman, Kahramanmaraş, and Zonguldak provinces during the 2020-2021 academic year. The study deployed the Servqual scale as a data collection tool. The results revealed that the parents' expectations were met regarding tangibles and empathy, while their expectations were unmet regarding reliability, responsiveness and assurance.

**Keywords** : Pre-School Education, Service Quality, Servqual Method.

**JEL Classification Codes** : I20, M31, C4.

#### Öz

Türkiye'de eğitim politikalarının; çözüm önerileri, kurum yeterliliği ve okul öncesi eğitimin yaygınlaştırılması konusundaki beklentilerinin karşılanmasında ve çocukların gelişiminin istenilen düzeyde desteklenmesinde okul öncesi eğitim kurumlarının hizmet kalitesi ön plana çıkmaktadır. Bu çalışmada okul öncesi eğitim kurumlarındaki hizmet kalitesinin Servqual yöntemiyle değerlendirilmesi amaçlanmıştır. Araştırmanın çalışma grubunu İzmir, Diyarbakır, Karaman, Kahramanmaraş ve Zonguldak illerindeki okul öncesi eğitim kurumlarında 2020-2021 eğitim öğretim yılında çocukları eğitim almakta olan 428 öğrenci velisi oluşturmaktadır. Araştırmada veri toplama aracı olarak Servqual ölçeği kullanılmıştır. Çalışmanın sonucunda, fiziksel özellikler ve empati boyutlarında öğrenci velilerinin beklentilerinin karşılandığı görülmektedir; güvenilirlik, heveslilik ve güven boyutlarında beklentilerin karşılanmadığı sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler** : Okul Öncesi Eğitim, Hizmet Kalitesi, Servqual Yöntem.

## **1. Introduction**

The shaping of human life and the social contribution by creating a desired behavioural change in an individual depends on the service and quality level of education. This is mainly achieved in pre-school within the education sector as the 0-6 age range, defined as the pre-school period and known as the magic years, holds the most critical period regarding all development areas of an individual. Therefore, pre-school education will be given in this period, which occupies the most crucial place in the service sectors and will lead to problems that are difficult to compensate for at the individual and social levels when a quality service is not provided.

Because pre-school education is not compulsory in Türkiye, the increase in welfare and education level, the rise in digitalisation and technology, the frequent participation of mothers in working life, the competitive environment emerging with college and private schooling, the small age groups of children, and the lack of studies analysing service quality in this field, our study is expected to make a significant contribution to the relevant literature. Besides, this study provides a comparison opportunity by including the provinces in different regions of Türkiye.

## **2. Conceptual Framework**

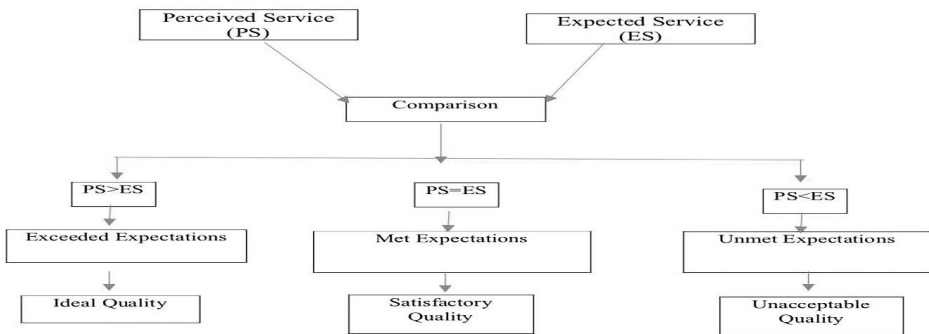
### **2.1. The Concept of Service, Quality and Service Quality**

The concept of 'service' has been a hot topic in recent years, so various studies have been conducted on this subject. Because innovation, new products and growth opportunities in every sector have paved the way for businesses in the service sector to compete with each other (Gürbüz & Ergülen, 2006). The importance of service is increasing daily; furthermore, it has been the subject of research in different fields and branches. Service is a multidimensional sector with intangible outputs, covers numerous fields, is open to development and change, has continuity and includes fierce competition. It is gruelling for businesses to thrust themselves on customers due to multiplied reasons such as the difficulty of achieving the quality standard in service, the coexistence of the balance of supply and demand along with production and consumption, and the dependence of performance evaluation on customer satisfaction (Can, 2016).

Considering the concept of 'quality', which we encounter in almost every period of history, different definitions were made by scientists. These definitions refer to the fact that quality emerges as an effort of individuals and systems to get down to a fine art by making mistakes (Gümüšoğlu et al., 2007). Kayral (2014) defined quality as difficult to obtain for the consumer, gaudy, limited, solid and qualified; moreover, it is "a concept that is identical with compliance with the standards" according to the people in the enterprises. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry conducted extensive research on service quality for many years and attempted to develop the most general model each business can apply by finding the appropriate factors. Having been born between 1985 and 1990, these studies were the most comprehensive ones in the related literature; they were developed in the USA and became

the global model. The SERVQUAL model is comprehensive and consists of 22 items that form the basis of quality and must be present in service. The general term used to measure quality in this model is 'perceived service' quality. This model is the result of comparing the expected service with the perceived service. In other words, the sole purpose of the enterprise is that the service provided is equivalent to or higher than the customer's expectation. When the exact opposite situation emerges, namely, when the service does not satisfy the customer's expectation, no quality arises (Erişkin, 2019).

**Figure: 1**  
**Service Quality Model**



*Bulgan, 2002.*

The Figure 1 above explains the Servqual scores and levels calculation. Perceived Service Quality is obtained by subtracting the expectation score from the perceived score (Çiçek & Doğan, 2009; Devedakan, 2006; Filiz, 2009). After measuring the service quality, the level of quality is calculated as follows. If the perceived score exceeds expectations, it is considered an ideal quality service. Low-quality service is unacceptable; if it is equal, it means satisfactory quality service (Yılmaz et al., 2007).

Service quality refers to being satisfied or dissatisfied with the customer's service and what he or she receives from that service. Therefore, service quality can be defined as the customers' needs and expectations of the service, the features required to be in the service, and the degree of having these features of the service (Özveren, 2010). To provide a proper service and increase the service quality, a lot of endeavours are made, and different strategies are implemented. That's why businesses realised that being superior in the service offered with the products would increase the quality status along with those they provide. They started to consider this relationship for maintaining their existence (Karahana, 2006). The leading actor in the determination of the quality is the customer. Therefore, how customers perceive quality is most important in all service sectors. In light of the definitions, the most remarkable criterion is the extent to which the enterprises meet customer expectations (Gazan, 2010).

## 2.2. Service Quality in Pre-school Education

Upon analysing the meanings of the concepts of 'Service' and 'Quality' with satisfactory quality in all institutions, organisations and businesses in different fields, the relations between those who serve and those who get service in each field differ, and the evaluations of the service quality are made according to the expectation and perceived service levels. In this vein, the schools that will shape children's lives, regarded as the assurance of the future, must develop good business and quality standards and serve students. The studies conducted on the concepts of service and quality in education (NICHHD, 2002; Yılmaz et al., 2007; Aksaraylı & Pala, 2019; Devedakan et al., 2019; Gerşil & Güven, 2018; Arslan et al., 2022) are essential in terms of increasing the quality standards in educational institutions and providing a better educational environment and atmosphere.

Defining quality and quality indicators in pre-school education is still a pivotal concern. Families, supervisors and managers have different viewpoints regarding evaluating and interpreting quality. The quality indicators generally include the number of children per teacher, the classroom size, the educational environment and materials diversity, security, cleanliness, and the cooperation level of teachers with students and their families. (Textor, 1998; Phillipsen et al., 1997). The definability, applicability and evaluability of the concept of quality in pre-school education can be considered as the basis of pre-school education since it is fundamental to make a comprehensive evaluation by taking into account the curriculum, administration, teacher's proficiency level, the controllability of the school, the physical environment and many situations to associate quality with pre-school education (Güleş, 2013).

NAEYC is one of the organisations that symbolises quality in pre-school education institutions and ensures accreditation. NAEYC has classified the quality indicators in 10 areas based on their propriety for improvement. These are "teacher-child relationship, curriculum, teacher-parent relationship, teacher competencies, management, staff, physical environment, health and safety, nutrition and food services and evaluation". NAEYC (1991) stated that institutional quality should be strictly appropriate to the child's development.

Upon examining the related literature on quality in pre-school education, a limited number of national studies were conducted, while the number of international studies is relatively high. The studies in the international literature were mainly carried out on 'Educational Environments' (La Paro et al., 2012; Denny et al., 2012; Hooks et al., 2006; Cassidy et al., 2005; Warash et al. 2006; Fenech et al., 2010; Hofer, 2010; Jeon et al., 2014), 'School Management' (Lower & Cassidy, 2008; Foster-Nelson, 2012; Arend, 2010; Mathers et al., 2007) and 'Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)' (Lahti et al., 2015; Yazejian & Iruka, 2015; Connors & Morris, 2015; Hestenes et al., 2015). Most of these studies were conducted by considering different states in the USA. In addition to the detailed studies conducted for ECERS-R, which will strengthen the evaluation processes of institutions and ensure their quality improvement, some studies sought alternative measurement tools. While QRIS deals with the educational environments of schools and

offers detailed inspection and development opportunities, specific research efforts on managers seem to be scarce. However, the issue of evaluating and improving quality in early childhood education is a research topic that is frequently examined.

The studies carried out in Türkiye (Solak, 2007; Kalkan & Akman, 2009; Göl-Güven, 2009; Güçlühan-Özgül, 2011; Sumeli, 2015; Köse, 2015; Yaman, 2016; Kurt, 2015) were primarily based on the physical environment quality and characteristics of the institutions. In addition to the studies examining managers' leadership types, communication skills, etc., some approaches combined teachers' and administrators' views in a single study. The number of studies examining audit processes is negligible. Thus, there is a need for scientific studies that address quality holistically, cover all stakeholders and focus on development. This study evaluates the parents' expectations and perceptions in five dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy) through the SERVQUAL method for measuring service quality in pre-school institutions. Another study aims to compare the service quality of different provinces within the context of SERVQUAL Scale dimensions.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

This study employed a descriptive survey design, one of the quantitative research methods, to describe an existing situation as it is. Descriptive surveys are studies that aim to describe the characteristics of a large population and take a picture of the current situation (Büyüköztürk et al., 2014). In this model, inferences can be made about the individuals' tendencies, attitudes and behaviours (Creswell, 2014).

#### **3.2. Population and Sample**

The study used the disproportionate cluster sampling method, one of the cluster sampling methods. The excessive cluster sampling method determined five regions among the regions of Türkiye, one city among the provinces in each region, and four pre-school education institutions in each city. Questionnaires were distributed to 520 parents in five provinces (İzmir, Diyarbakır, Karaman, Kahramanmaraş, Zonguldak), and 446 responses were taken. Eighteen of the questionnaires were excluded from the study due to unfilled parts. Thus, analysis processes were carried out with 428 questionnaires. Of all the surveys, 80 were from İzmir, 101 from Diyarbakır, 82 from Karaman, 80 from Kahramanmaraş and 85 from Zonguldak.

Analysing the demographic information regarding the participants in Table 1, most were predominantly female, indicating that women assumed great responsibility in pre-school education institutions. Besides, 80% of the parents are 31 years and older. Considering the parents in terms of the number of children they have, those with a total number of 1 and 2 children constitute 77% of the study. This paves the way that families tend to have fewer children today than in the past. When the parents were examined regarding their educational status, more than half were identified as having at least a

bachelor's degree. This indicates that those who send their children to pre-school education institutions are generally more educated. Having investigated the income status of the parents, their income was usually equal to their expenses; moreover, most of them reside in the city centre (Table 1).

**Table: 1**  
**Demographic Characteristics Regarding the Participants**

Variables	Groups	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	135	31,5
	Female	293	68,8
Age	21-25	14	3,3
	26-30	72	16,8
	31-35	181	42,3
	36 and over	161	37,6
The Number of Children	1	119	27,8
	2	211	49,3
	3	68	15,9
	4 and over	30	7,0
Educational Status	Illiterate	2	0,5
	Primary School Graduate	40	9,3
	Secondary Education Graduate	127	29,7
	Bachelor's degree	222	51,9
	Postgraduate Program Graduate	37	8,6
Income Status	Income Less Than Expense	66	15,4
	Income Equal to Expense	283	66,1
	Income More Than Expense	79	18,5
Residence	District	121	28,3
	Province	307	71,7
	TOTAL	428	100

### 3.3. Data Collection Tools

This study deployed the Personal Information Form and the Servqual Service Quality Scale developed by the researcher to measure the expectation levels from pre-school education institutions.

*Personal Information Form:* This form includes items related to the parent's gender, age, educational status, number of children, income level and residence.

*Servqual Service Quality Scale:* It measures the contentedness and satisfaction of the service recipients. Servqual provides an understanding of how consumers evaluate the quality of the service they receive, what dimensions they consider, whether these evaluation dimensions vary across consumers, and finally, what factors affect consumers' expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1990).

SERVQUAL has been welcomed and frequently preferred in many sectors, especially the service sector. When the service providers in the education sector know how to evaluate the service recipients, they can see how their expectations influence this evaluation (Eroğlu, 1990). If the service meets the expectations, it refers to high quality, and if the service cannot meet the expectations, it means there is a gap between the expectation and the service quality. This gap indicates dissatisfaction in service areas (Öztürk, 2013).

Within the scope of the Servqual Service Quality Scale, the researchers ensured that half of the items were positive and the rest were negative. The participants' positive and negative statements are evaluated on a seven-Likert-type scale. Number seven on the scale corresponds to the expression "strongly agree" and number one to the expression 'strongly disagree'. The number of items in the scale was determined as fifty-four according to Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The data were re-evaluated and updated, and the SERVQUAL scale got its final version as twenty-two items and five dimensions. The tool is often used in marketing, business and economics. Since the scale could be used in every field, minor corrections were made to the statements in our study. The scale was numbered in terms of the dimensions. These dimensions are as follows:

The dimension of tangibles includes four items (1,2,3,4). The content of these items refers to the fact that pre-school education institutions are modern equipped, buildings and classrooms please the eye, personnel are clean and neat, and the tools and equipment are excellent.

The reliability dimension covers five items (5,6,7,8,9). The content of these items points out that personnel in pre-school education institutions fulfil their promises within a time frame, they are close and sincere to solving the problem when the student experiences a problem, they present their services accurately and dependably, they deliver the service at times promised, and they are sensitive to recording information regarding pre-school education institutions without any error.

The dimension of responsiveness involves four items (10,11,12,13). The content of these substances indicates that teachers in pre-school education institutions develop students' learning and problem-solving skills, lead society in innovation, development and adaptation to the age, are willing to help students and allocate sufficient time to respond to student's requests.

The dimension of assurance has four items (14,15,16,17). The content of these items is expressed as the reliability of the employees in pre-school education institutions, the feeling of safety by the students, the confidence that the complaints and problems of the students will be resolved, and the employees' knowledge of responding to the student's questions.

The empathy dimension holds five items (18,19,20,21,22). The content of these substances points out that teachers in pre-school education institutions provide individualised attention, operate convenient working hours for all students, deal with each student personally, understand students' special requests and have the best interests of the students in mind (Dyke, et al., 1997).

### **3.4. Data Analysis and Calculation of Quality Scores**

The obtained data were analysed through the use of the SPSS 23.0 program. Descriptive statistics (N, %, X, SD) were used during data analysis. The Cronbach Alpha

coefficient was calculated to ensure the reliability of the scales. If the Cronbach Alpha value is above 0.90, it is considered 'highly reliable', between 0.90 and 0.80 as 'highly reliable', and between 0.79 and 0.70 as 'reliable' (Cohen et al., 2007). The Cronbach's alpha value of the scales was found to be 0.959, which was highly reliable.

The score was determined: SERVQUAL Score = Perception Score - Expectation Score. Therefore, the calculated SERVQUAL Score can be between -6 and +6. The positive value of the result may indicate that parents exceed all expectations from pre-school education institutions. Based upon this result, it may be wise to mention that the parents have positive perceptions towards the service quality of pre-school education institutions. In the opposite case, it can be interpreted that the expectations are not met. Therefore, the quality perceptions of the parents regarding the services of pre-school education institutions will be negative. If the result is zero, it is likely that the parents' expectations are at least met, namely, the service quality of the pre-school education institutions is 'satisfactory'. The size of negative and positive scores is also paramount in interpreting values. When the result is close to +6, the parents' expectations are met at a 'high level', and when it approaches -6, their expectations are not met at a 'high level'.

### 3.5. Calculation of SERVQUAL Score Based upon Dimensions

The differences between the 'perception' (P) and 'expectation' items (E) of the scale are calculated for each parent, and the sum of the differences is divided by the number of items constituting the relevant service quality dimension. Thus, a 'quality score' is calculated for each participant on a dimension basis. Subsequently, the calculated scores for each participant are summed and divided by the number of participants to calculate the total SERVQUAL score for the service quality dimensions. The averages are the SERVQUAL score based on dimension.

SQ1 = SERVQUAL score for the 'Tangibles' dimension

SQ2 = SERVQUAL score for the 'Reliability' dimension

SQ3 = SERVQUAL score for the 'Responsiveness' dimension

SQ4 = SERVQUAL score for the 'Assurance2 dimension

SQ5 = SERVQUAL score for the 'Empathy (Sensitivity)' dimension.

The calculation of SERVQUAL scores for service quality dimensions is depicted below:

$$SQ1 = [(P1 - E1) + (P2 - E2) + (P3 - E3) + (P4 - E4)] / 4$$

$$SQ2 = [(P5 - E5) + (P6 - E6) + (P7 - E7) + (P8 - E8) + (P9 - E9)] / 5$$

$$SQ3 = [(P10 - E10) + (P11 - E11) + (P12 - E12) + (P13 - E13)] / 4$$

$$SQ4 = [(P14 - E14) + (P15 - E15) + (P16 - E16) + (P17 - E17)] / 4$$



$$SQ5 = [(P18 - E18) + (P19 - E19) + (P20 - E20) + (P21 - E21) + (P22 - E22)] / 5$$

'Equally weighted SERVQUAL Score' is calculated by adding the previously calculated quality dimensions' scores and dividing by five. This calculation is as follows:

$$SQE = [(SQ1) + (SQ2) + (SQ3) + (SQ4) + (SQ5)] / 5$$

The formula below is used while calculating the 'Weighted SERVQUAL Score'.

$$SQA = [(SQ1*k1) + (SQ2*k2) + (SQ3*k3) + (SQ4*k4) + (SQ5*k5)] / 5$$

(k = weight coefficient of the service quality dimension reached by dividing the score allocated by parents to each dimension to 100).

#### 4. Results

In the second part of the scale, the respondents were asked to allocate '100' points among the five service quality dimensions under the strength of the service received from the pre-school education institution. The result is significant in determining which feature is most important and which is least important for each of the parents. Table 2 displays the results of this distribution.

**Table: 2**  
**The Distribution of the Parents' Scores for the Service Quality Dimensions That Are Considered Important**

	Dimension	N	Mean	SD
İzmir	Tangibles	80	16,6750	6,87644
	Reliability	80	20,3125	7,76815
	Responsiveness	80	18,6500	6,98842
	Assurance	80	22,8125	7,54076
	Empathy	80	21,5500	9,42915
Karaman	Tangibles	82	14,2683	6,71841
	Reliability	82	17,8537	8,11206
	Responsiveness	82	20,8659	5,90200
	Assurance	82	26,1585	9,85383
	Empathy	82	20,3659	7,88734
Kahramanmaraş	Tangibles	80	13,5500	6,57363
	Reliability	80	18,3500	11,24762
	Responsiveness	80	17,2375	6,94143
	Assurance	80	28,7500	12,31188
	Empathy	80	22,4875	9,73444
Diyarbakır	Tangibles	101	16,8812	6,77685
	Reliability	101	19,7525	6,79618
	Responsiveness	101	19,2376	4,92980
	Assurance	101	23,0693	7,03457
	Empathy	101	20,9901	5,38608
Zonguldak	Tangibles	85	14,8824	7,19526
	Reliability	85	19,4118	6,65528
	Responsiveness	85	19,2941	5,93381
	Assurance	85	25,5294	8,72952
	Empathy	85	21,1176	7,69108
Total	Tangibles	428	15,3107	6,89086
	Reliability	428	19,1752	8,20605
	Responsiveness	428	19,1005	6,18730
	Assurance	428	25,1869	9,39443
	Empathy	428	21,2570	8,00259

Table 2 depicts that the parents attributed the highest score to the item in the 'Assurance' dimension, 'The knowledge, respect, ability to arouse confidence in students, helpfulness and comfort of teachers and all other employees working in pre-school education institutions', while the lowest score belonged to the item of the 'Tangibles' dimension 'The general appearance of pre-school education institutions, training halls, equipment and areas where communication services such as internet halls are provided'. This refers to the fact that parents attached the most importance to the characteristics of the "Assurance" dimension, whereas they scored at least the "Tangibles" dimension. The third part of the scale consists of statements that measure the parents' expectations from the pre-school education institution at an ideal level, and the fourth part constitutes statements that determine the parents' perceived service quality related to the pre-school education institution.

The scores obtained from the expressions in the third part signify 'Expectation', and those in the fourth part constitute the 'Perception' scores. These statements were distributed across the dimensions of 'Tangibles', 'Reliability', 'Responsiveness', 'Assurance' and 'Empathy'. Table 3 presents the values obtained for these dimensions.

**Table: 3**  
**Servqual Scores for Dimensions by Province and in General**

	Dimension	Perception			Expectation		Servqual Score
		N	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Perception-Expectation
İzmir	Tangibles	80	6,1219	,89212	5,8062	1,13557	0,3157
	Reliability	80	6,2375	,80636	6,1775	,88131	0,06
	Responsiveness	80	6,3031	,92066	6,3062	,83750	-0,0031
	Assurance	80	6,2906	,87280	6,2188	,81265	0,0718
	Empathy	80	6,0835	,93677	5,9190	,96902	0,1645
Karaman	Dimension	N	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Perception-Expectation
	Tangibles	82	5,7957	,87324	5,8049	1,39887	-0,0092
	Reliability	82	6,1195	,82842	6,2073	,76558	-0,0878
	Responsiveness	82	6,1037	,74634	6,2348	,70311	-0,1311
	Assurance	82	6,1860	,82851	6,2219	,87239	-0,0359
Kahramanmaraş	Dimension	N	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Perception-Expectation
	Tangibles	80	5,8469	1,20027	5,6125	1,33709	0,2344
	Reliability	80	6,1150	1,40767	6,1475	1,14328	-0,0325
	Responsiveness	80	6,1500	1,25133	6,3125	,86739	-0,1625
	Assurance	80	6,2750	1,15397	6,3594	1,00304	-0,0844
Diyarbakır	Dimension	N	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Perception-Expectation
	Tangibles	101	5,3438	1,18159	5,4059	1,29125	-0,0621
	Reliability	101	5,3625	1,22963	5,6297	1,32163	-0,2672
	Responsiveness	101	5,4781	1,16189	5,6634	1,33343	-0,1853
	Assurance	101	5,6375	1,07614	5,6807	1,32009	-0,0432
Zonguldak	Dimension	N	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Perception-Expectation
	Tangibles	85	5,6882	1,35010	5,8872	1,23613	-0,199
	Reliability	85	6,0871	1,18581	6,2619	1,01837	-0,1748
	Responsiveness	85	6,1548	1,17061	6,3012	1,10691	-0,1464
	Assurance	85	6,2618	1,09918	6,3735	,98647	-0,1117
Total	Dimension	N	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd	Perception-Expectation
	Tangibles	428	5,7465	1,15169	5,6727	1,21833	0,0738
	Reliability	428	5,9827	1,17690	6,0902	1,23811	-0,1075
	Responsiveness	428	6,0369	1,12325	6,1367	1,04551	-0,0998
	Assurance	428	6,1203	1,07225	6,1464	1,06533	-0,0261
	Empathy	428	5,8075	1,28819	5,7775	1,23847	0,03

As is observed in Table 3, the results of İzmir revealed that the expectation averages of the other dimensions, except for the 'responsiveness' dimension, were below the perception averages, meaning that the service quality of the pre-school education institutions was above the expected level in terms of the parents' views, except the 'responsiveness' dimension. The dimension of 'Tangibles' had the highest score, with 0.3157. In other words, this dimension met the parents' expectations at the highest level. On the contrary, the dimension of 'Responsiveness' had the lowest score, with -0.0031. Namely, the parents' expectations were met in the dimension of 'Responsiveness' at the lowest level.

When evaluated in terms of Karaman province, the expectation averages in all dimensions were determined to be above the perception averages. This result suggests that the service quality of the pre-school education institutions was below the expected level in all dimensions. The dimension of 'Tangibles' had the highest score, with -0.0092. Hence, the parents' expectations were met mainly by the dimension of 'Tangibles', while 'Responsiveness' had the lowest score with -0,1311. In other words, the parents' expectations were met in the dimension of 'Responsiveness' to the lowest level (Table 3).

As for the evaluation in terms of Kahramanmaraş province, the expectation averages in all dimensions were above the perception averages, except for the 'Tangibles' and 'Empathy' dimensions. The highest score belonged to the dimension of 'Tangibles' with 0.2344. Therefore, the dimension that met the parents' expectations the most was the 'Tangibles' dimension. The lowest score was determined to be -0.1625 in the 'Responsiveness' dimension. The dimension that met the parents' expectations at the lowest level was 'Responsiveness' (Table 3).

Upon analysing the findings regarding Diyarbakır province, the expectation averages in all dimensions were noted to be above the perception averages. From this point of view, the service quality of the pre-school education institutions was below the expected level for all dimensions. The 'Empathy' dimension had the highest score, with -0,0306. Therefore, this dimension met the parents' expectations at most. The dimension of 'Reliability' had the lowest score, with -0.2672. The dimension that met the expectations of the parents at the minor level was identified to be 'Reliability' (Table 3).

Considering the results in terms of Zonguldak province, the expectation averages in all dimensions were above the perception averages. This demonstrates that the service quality of the pre-school education institutions was below the expected level. The 'Empathy' dimension had the highest score with -0.0299. Thus, the parents' expectations were mostly met by the dimension of 'Empathy', while that of 'Tangibles' had the lowest score with -0,199. In other words, the parents' expectations were met at the most minor level in the dimension of 'Tangibles' (Table 3).

When evaluated based on all provinces, the expectation averages of each dimension were above the perception averages in all dimensions, except for the 'Tangibles' and 'Empathy' dimensions. The service quality of the pre-school education institutions was

below the expected level in the dimensions of 'Reliability', 'Responsiveness' and 'Assurance'. The highest score was 0.0738 in the dimension of 'Tangibles'. Therefore, the dimension that met the expectations of the parents the most was determined to be 'Tangibles'. The lowest score, on the other hand, belonged to the dimension of 'Reliability' with 0.1075. Namely, the parents' expectations were met at the most minor level in the dimension of 'Reliability' (Table 3).

**Table: 4**  
**Parents' Expectations, Perceptions and Servqual Scores Related to Expressions**

	EXPRESSION NO	Perception			Expectation		Servqual Score
		N	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	PERCEPTION-EXPECTATION
Tangibles	1	428	5,3738	1,52281	5,1238	1,68367	0,25
	2	428	5,5421	1,46963	5,5607	1,54815	-0,0186
	3	428	6,2477	1,17323	6,2447	1,20978	0,003
	4	428	5,8224	1,32928	5,7541	1,41187	0,0683
Reliability	5	428	6,0864	1,28930	6,1706	1,27721	-0,0842
	6	428	6,0093	1,38912	6,1893	1,29643	-0,18
	7	428	5,8575	1,39278	5,8738	1,34738	-0,0163
	8	428	5,8972	1,36490	5,9533	1,31917	-0,0561
	9	428	6,0631	1,23881	6,1355	1,18750	-0,0724
Responsiveness	10	428	6,0561	1,25324	6,2150	1,18364	-0,1589
	11	428	6,0398	1,24878	6,2126	1,17512	-0,1728
	12	428	6,1168	1,31124	6,2593	1,20130	-0,1425
	13	428	5,9322	1,34027	5,8621	1,39325	0,0701
Assurance	14	428	6,1636	1,16602	6,2523	1,12534	-0,0887
	15	428	6,1846	1,17986	6,2757	1,14055	-0,0911
	16	428	5,9299	1,35146	5,9318	1,38133	-0,0019
	17	428	6,2033	1,16679	6,1449	1,24421	0,0584
Empathy	18	428	5,7658	1,48907	5,9743	1,32594	-0,2085
	19	428	5,8879	1,46834	5,7518	1,65703	0,1361
	20	428	5,7775	1,59066	5,8248	1,51175	-0,0473
	21	428	5,7196	1,53824	5,7477	1,50000	-0,0281
	22	428	5,8949	1,43253	5,5995	1,67453	0,2954

Table 4 shows the SERVQUAL scores for each item on the scale. In the statements with positive Servqual scores, the parents' perceptions towards that statement were higher than their expectations, and in the negative scores, their perceptions were below the expectations. In this regard, Table 4 depicts that the 22nd item (Teachers in perfect pre-school education institutions value students' success above all) had the highest Servqual score with 0.2954. Therefore, this was the statement that mostly met the parents' expectations. The lowest score belonged to the 18th item (Perfect pre-school education institutions care for each student individually) with -0.2085. This was the second item that met the parents' expectations at the lowest level.

## 5. Discussion, Result and Recommendations

This study examined the expected and perceived service quality of pre-school education institutions from the lens of the parents whose children received pre-school education.

Upon analysing the scores given by the parents to the service quality dimensions at the level of all provinces and in general terms, the parents attributed the highest score to the item in the "Assurance" dimension "The knowledge, respect, ability to arouse confidence in

students, helpfulness and comfort of teachers and all other employees working in pre-school education institutions". Likewise, LoCasale-Crouch et al. (2007) highlighted the significance of teacher qualifications and educational status in quality early childhood education. Arnas (2002) stated that it is important for parents to trust administrators and teachers in school selection. The study by Kalkan (2008) demonstrated that interaction is vital to quality. This result is in conjunction with the study by Feyman (2006).

The scores related to the service quality dimensions based on all provinces and, in general terms, suggested that the lowest score belonged to the item of the "Tangibles" dimension "The general appearance of pre-school education institutions, training halls, equipment and areas where communication services such as internet halls are provided". In this context, no supporting studies were found in the related literature, yet numerous studies emphasise that physical environment and facilities are essential in pre-school education (Arnas, 2002; MoNE, 2012; Güleş, 2013; Cohen et al., 2010; Goelman et al., 2006; Kalkan & Akman, 2009; Özgan, 2009; Erbay & Ömeroğlu, 2009; Kubanç, 2014).

When the Servqual scores of the dimensions related to the research findings were evaluated based on all provinces, the expectation averages of each dimension were found above the perception averages in all dimensions, except for the "Tangibles" and "Empathy" dimensions. Therefore, it is most likely to state that the service quality of the pre-school education institutions was below the expected level. While the "Tangibles" dimension had the highest score, the lowest was identified in the "Reliability" dimension. Considering the results of the studies that align with this study, the last tasks of the pre-school education institutions were determined as tangibles, love, assurance, tolerance and empathy (Arnas, 2002). In the same study, the first thing parents paid attention to when sending their children to school was the cleanliness and order of the school. Contrary to the results of this study, the literature includes many studies suggesting that tangibles are at the forefront. Kandır and Çaltık (2006) examined the physical facilities and conditions of public and private kindergartens and kindergartens. They determined that the physical conditions and tools in pre-school education institutions were not sufficient according to the international existing standards required for providing pre-school education in a qualified way. Güleş (2013) and Özkubat (2013) also found similar results. In their study, Erbay and Ömeroğlu (2009) pinpointed that the quality level of the school significantly differed across the type of school, the number of floors, the garden and open playground, and the number of children in the classroom. Kalkan (2008) aimed to examine the quality of all public and private pre-school education institutions in Türkiye in terms of physical environment conditions and to compare their quality, and he stated that the ECERS-R scale score averages in all pre-school education institutions were measured below the "satisfactory" level. In Özgan's (2009) study, Türkiye's problems in pre-school education from past to present were determined as physical conditions, school-family cooperation, low schooling rates. Şirin (2019) concluded that the quality of pre-school education is one of the three scientifically-aided practices that increase children's intelligence levels. The researcher mentioned scientific studies in which a child's intelligence was increased by more than 7 points on average, especially when the pre-school education institutions are a comprehensive place that centre all the child's

developmental areas. Güçhan-Özgül (2011) stressed that the educational environments in pre-school education institutions are measured at "below acceptable" and "satisfactory" levels. Along with all these studies, the pre-school curriculum of the Ministry of National Education (2013) indicated that environmental stimuli need to be regulated at a level that will increase the child's cognitive, language, social and emotional development and that will support their independence so that the child grows up healthily and develops positive attitudes towards learning.

Considering the evaluations based on provinces, the expectation averages of the other dimensions, except for the "Responsiveness" dimension, were below the perception averages for İzmir. This refers to the fact that the service quality of pre-school education institutions in İzmir is above the expected level, except for the dimension of responsiveness. The expectation averages in all dimensions were above the perception averages for Karaman, Kahramanmaraş, Zonguldak and Diyarbakır. Therefore, the service quality of pre-school education institutions in four provinces was below the expected level. Similarly, Nartgün and Kaya (2016) found that the safety and tangibles of the school, the closeness of the school to home, full-time education and the quality services besides the school's social facilities were among the parents' most significant expectations. In addition, they determined that these expectations are important criteria for parents when choosing a school. Based upon the results of this study, it can be said that the facilities of the pre-school education institutions in İzmir are generally at a level that will meet the parents' expectations, while in the other four provinces with low service quality levels, the general facilities of pre-school education institutions are not at a satisfactory level.

The results of the parent's expectations, perception and Servqual scores regarding the expressions demonstrated that the 22nd item (Teachers in perfect pre-school education institutions value students' success above all) had the highest Servqual score. Therefore, this was the statement that mostly met the parents' expectations. The teachers' qualifications explain that the parents determined the service quality score as the highest for this item. Şen and Erişen (2002), who interpreted teachers' definitions differently, described qualified and effective teachers as "entrepreneurial, patient, sensitive, good-natured, cheerful and friendly to their students." Quality education in pre-school education institutions is defined as the increase in the quality levels of teachers along with the relationship based on trust, favour the physical, emotional, social and intellectual development of children, the warm and supportive relationship established in a healthy and stimulating environment. Together with the students' success, the quality of education was emphasised to increase (Bredenkamp & Cople, 1997; Kalkan, 2008; UNESCO, 2001; Akyüz, 2003). Likewise, Philips (1987) focused on which aspects of quality affected child development in his study on the Dimensions and Effects of Quality in Pre-school Education and thus presented four specific quality indicators. These were; "Experiences of the Manager, Teacher-Student Ratio, and Length of Time the Teachers Stay at Work, and Verbal Interaction Between Teacher-Student". In addition to these studies, the child's attitude and success were determined to increase with family support (Çelenk, 2002; Demirel, 2002; Keçeli-Kaysılı, 2008).

The lowest score belonged to the 18th item (Perfect pre-school education institutions care for each student individually). This was the second item that least met the expectations of the parents. This may arise due to the excess number of students per teacher and the limitations in physical facilities. The studies with similar results analysed the quality indicators in two primary areas: structural and process dimensions. The structural dimension of quality includes items such as the number of children cared for by each teacher, the teacher's educational status, the teacher's experience, wages, and indoor space per child. The process dimension of quality refers to the teacher-child relationship, stimulating and rich educational environment and activities (Wishard et al., 2003; Rao et al., 2003). Contrary to the study's results, in Şahan's (2016) study conducted with the education faculty students, it was suggested that teachers know how to love and value children. In a similar vein, Büyüksahin and Şahin (2017) noted the correlation of patience and love, which are among teacher characteristics, with creating a quality symbol.

Based on the study's results, various recommendations were provided for researchers and practitioners. For practitioners, a sub-quality standard should be determined across Türkiye by examining the international quality standards regarding the service quality in pre-school education, and while determining these standards, needs should be resolved to increase the quality standards of education through asking the views of the pre-school teachers, who are the stakeholders of pre-school education, the expectations of the parents from the pre-school education institutions should be taken into consideration, and the expectations of the institution administrators from the teachers and employees should be identified. Improving the physical conditions of pre-school education institutions, using the existing curriculum effectively, creating an educational environment intertwined with open air, nature and life rather than indoor activities, healthy interaction and communication between the teacher and the child, fewer children per teacher within the framework of scientific criteria and providing one assistant teacher for each of the pre-school teachers will increase the quality standard of education. Pre-school education institutions, which have become widespread in our country, need a dynamic structure to achieve specific quality standards and adapt to developments and changes. This study was conducted in five provinces across Türkiye. Researchers willing to work in this field can achieve more comprehensive results by increasing the number of provinces. Besides, a similar study may be carried out in Türkiye and foreign countries to make cross-cultural comparisons about the service quality in pre-school education.

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