

Research Article

A Qualitative Study of Preschool Teachers as Parents¹

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Abstract

As shown by prior research, parents want to know if the parenting advice given to them by preschool teachers is actually followed by those teachers with their own children. This qualitative study of the views of 50 preschool teachers addresses this question directly. A semi-structured interview protocol developed by the researchers was used to collect data, which was then analyzed using the word-list technique. The preschool teachers in our study mostly expected parents to care for their children and to support their self-help skills. The participants also reported some differences between what they expected of their pupils' parents and their own parenting practices, with some further suggesting that these differences

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might be the result of teachers' greater sensitivity and/or lack of strictness and decisiveness in their parental roles.

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Introduction

Before the age of mandatory school attendance, children's personalities are developed and shaped, and they acquire some basic knowledge and skills. As such, the effects of this period on subsequent phases of children's development are critically important (Arı, 2003). An environment that offers well-planned cognitive, social and emotional experiences and stimuli while supporting children's freedom of action is not only necessary to their healthy growth and development, but underpins their future positive attitudes to learning. Creating such an environment, however, requires that a healthy family life and a high-quality early childhood education operate in tandem (Ministry of National Education [MEB], 2013).

Preschool education is important for all of children's developmental domains, and parents – to an equal degree as teachers and pupils (Morrison, 2012) – have roles to play in increasing the quality and effectiveness of this process, given that they are the most important factor in children's lives (Essa, 2006), as the first institution that cares for, socializes and educates them. In recent years, rather than asking if cooperation with parents should be established, educators have been asking how they can most effectively work with them (Berger, 2004).

Parents tend to think of their children's teachers as secondary family members. As such, they are curious about the specific activities that occur in the classroom, and how/how much teachers influence children, help them learn, and support their development of appropriate behaviors. Nor is this a 'one-way street': teachers, for their part, think of parents as auxiliary teachers, and want to know what, how, how much and how well they teach their children at home; what other conditions prevail in their homes; and what their expectations are regarding misbehaviors and discipline (Maharaj-Sharma, 2015).

A review of the relevant literature identified many studies covering the importance of parent-teacher cooperation and the positive effects that such cooperation has on children, on parental involvement in the preschool period, and on parent-teacher and teacher-child relationships. For instance, Head Start is a U.S. Federal program for disadvantaged children that aims to support all of their all developmental domains, to foster the acquisition of certain social skills by children and their families, and to help children and their parents feel valuable. The

relationship between parental-involvement routines and former Head Start children's literacy outcomes was examined by Dove, Neuharth-Pritchett, Wright and Wallinga (2015), who found that when parents performed some routines with their children at home, participated in activities organized for them at their children's schools, and often communicated with teachers, their children's literacy scores were influenced positively. Cottle and Alexander (2014) studied 18 early-childhood educators and identified parent-school cooperation as an important determinant of the quality of early childhood education. Based on interviews with nine family members of preschool children, Cardona, Jain and Canfield-Davis (2012) found that receiving information about their children from the teachers at the beginning and end of the school day improved parent-teacher relationships, specifically by encouraging parents to share their needs with teachers. O'Connor and McCartney (2006) investigated the associations between children's maternal attachments and the quality of their relationships with teachers at 54 months, in kindergarten, and in first grade, and reported that the strength of such attachment positively influenced the quality of teacher-child relationships at all three time points. Stipek and Byler (1997) emphasized that teachers could not conduct the education program based on their own beliefs; and especially when teaching basic skills, parental pressure became a pressing issue. And Murray, McFarland-Piazza and Harrison's (2015) study of more than 2,000 parents found that parental involvement with their children's schooling was highest in the preschool period.

A number of studies related to parental involvement in preschool education have been conducted in Turkey. For instance, Koçyiğit (2015) asked 10 preschool teachers, 10 parents and 10 preschool administrators for their views of the problems that can emerge during family involvement in preschool activities, and solutions to such problems. The participant teachers and administrators emphasized that parents participated in only a few of the family-involvement activities, with attendance negatively affected by factors including time, cost, lack of personal familiarity between teachers and parents, transportation problems, issues with school facilities (especially notice boards) and technology, and security concerns. Neslitürk, Çamlıbel Çakmak and Asar (2014) looked at 112 preschool teachers' metaphorical perceptions of parents, and found that some of the former perceived the latter as unconscious of their children's educational process, as not knowing what the best was for their children, as not cooperating enough with schools, and as protecting their children instinctively. Büyüктаşkapu (2012) compared the reading skills of 25 first graders who had attended a

preschool institution against those of 25 other children who had both attended preschool and the Family Supported Pre-Reading Program, and determined that the latter group had greater reading success. Tezel-Şahin, İnal and Özbey (2011) examined the parental-involvement activities in preschool institutions from the parents' perspectives, and found that 79.2% of the parents in their sample thought that such programs were useful for children, while 68.8% stated they were beneficial for parents. The same study also found a statistically significant relationship between parents' educational and occupational levels, on the one hand, and on the other, their rates of participation in parental-involvement programs. Nevertheless, no research that focused on teachers' relationships with or attitudes toward their own children was found. Filling this gap in the literature will require investigation of how preschool teachers put their parenting suggestions into practice within their own families.

It has been argued that, in the process of cooperation between parents and preschool teachers, parents should give due consideration to the universities from which teachers graduated, the subjects they studied, and the extent and type of their teaching experience (Sevinç, 2006; Topaç, Yaman, Ogurlu, & İlgar, 2012), and well as to the dynamics of the teacher-child relationship (Howes & Pianta, 2010). By the same token, parents want to know if the parenting advice given to them by preschool teachers is actually followed by those teachers with their own children. The current study addresses this last question directly.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, as being best suited to learning the participants' perceptions, views and experiences directly, and to determining and explaining the current state of the phenomenon being studied (Büyüköztürk, Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2009). More specifically, a phenomenological approach was selected: aimed at determining, through in-depth interviews, how preschool teachers understood their experiences related to being a teacher and being a parent. Following Seggie and Bayyurt (2015), the focus was on similarities between teachers rather than idiosyncrasies in their individual experiences.

Participants

To assess the degree to which preschool teachers who have children of their own actually follow the parenting advice they give to others, this qualitative study recruited 50 preschool teachers. The participants were selected purposefully, as this approach tends to provide researchers with rich and detailed information (Patton, 2002). All participants were volunteers who, at the time of the study, were employed in preschools and had at least one child of preschool age.

The participants included four male teachers and 46 female ones. While most (n=46) had bachelor's degrees, two had two-year degrees and two had master's degrees. The majority (n=43) had graduated in early childhood education, with the remainder having studied child development and education (n=4), preschool teaching (n=2) or primary-school teaching (n=1). About half (n=24) had between six and 10 years' teaching experience, with another 12 having taught for five years or less, and the rest, 11 years or more, though only four participants had taught for more than 15 years. Most of the participant teachers (n=27) had two children; around a third had one (n=16); and the rest had three (n=7).

Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview protocol developed by the researchers was used for data collection. The first draft of the protocol consisted of 14 questions based on our literature review (Barbour, 2015; Büyüктаşkapu, 2012; Cardona, Jain, & Canfield-Davis, 2012; Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Dove, Neuharth-Pritchett, Wright, & Wallinga, 2015; Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Koçyiğit, 2015; Mahmood, 2013; Murray, McFarland-Piazza, & Harrison, 2015; Neslitürk, Çamlıbel Çakmak, & Asar, 2014; O'Connor & McCartney, 2006; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Venninen & Purola, 2013). Then, suggestions for improvements to the draft protocol were solicited from two experts, one in early childhood education and the other in qualitative-research design. Both agreed that the demographic/background questions were appropriate. Their recommendations regarding the questions related to teachers' views were similar, but differed in emphasis. For instance, the draft protocol asked preschool teachers for examples of things they had learned about child development and education that they had not been able to put into practice with their own children. One of the experts suggested asking for

more details, while the other said that some examples should be provided. Therefore, we extended this item with a secondary question, “Could you please give some examples?”

The protocol was then piloted with three preschool teachers (none of whom were included in the main group of participants), and the results led to some questions being dropped. For instance, one item asked teachers about specific suggestions they had made to parents based on their undergraduate education, seminars and books, but which they could not put into practice in their own households. Because the pilot group answered this question as “I explained before” or words to that effect, this question was omitted as being redundant with others.

Based on the pilot interviews and with the approval of the same two experts, the total number of questions was reduced to 11, of which six related to the teachers’ demographic/background information and the other five to the main topic of the present research. Two examples from the latter group are, “What do you expect from parents regarding their children’s education and care?” and “In your opinion, what are the reasons that you could not put some of your suggestions into practice for your own child?”

Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected in the southern Turkish city of Mersin during the spring semester of the 2014-15 academic year. Before the study commenced, the researchers contacted teachers via secretaries or other administrators at 18 preschools, and then explained the aims of the study in face-to-face meetings with those teachers who volunteered to participate and who met the research criterion of having at least one child aged three to six. The selected participants were interviewed face to face in places of their own choosing, and all gave their permission for these sessions to be audio-recorded. Each participant was interviewed once, for between 20 and 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

In the initial stage of data analysis, all 50 interviews were transcribed and the transcripts were read by two of the researchers to gain a general sense of the data. Then, the researchers

applied the word-list technique (Bernard & Ryan, 2010): listing all of the words and phrases used by the respondents and counting the frequency with which each one was used in the data as a whole.

At the end of this process, the coders met to reconcile the codes they had created separately. Initially, they could not reach agreement regarding 2% of the codes, so referred to the literature for precedents. In the end, they were able to reach agreement about all the codes, all of which were therefore analyzed for purposes of this article. This analysis resulted in the identification of four main themes: (1) preschool teachers' expectations of their pupils' parents; (2) the teachers' own parenting practices; (3) factors leading to inconsistency between teachers' expectations of their pupils' parents and their own actual parenting practices; and (4) suggestions for enabling greater consistency between these expectations and practices.

Trustworthiness

There are several strategies for ensuring the validity of qualitative studies. Peer review is one of these strategies. In this study, the researchers shared and discussed their research methods and findings with an experienced preschool teacher and an academic researcher specializing in parental education and involvement. During this peer-review process, the researchers also aimed to evaluate their own interpretations of the data in an objective and critical way (Johnson, 1997; Krefling, 1991). They also adopted a second strategy for ensuring validity, known as low-inference descriptors. This means that, when reporting the data, the researchers avoided adding their own comments and characterizations, and instead tried to describe the teachers' views in detail so as to give the readers the opportunity to experience and interpret them for themselves (Johnson, 1997). The agreement that was established between the two coders, both of whom were members of the research team and experienced in qualitative data analysis, supported the reliability of the study (Creswell, 2007).

Findings

This section is organized according to the four main themes identified above.

Preschool Teachers' Expectations of Their Pupils' Parents

Analysis of the data showed that the participant teachers initially focused their responses on their expectations of their pupils' parents. The great majority (n=39) stated that they expected parents to care for their children, and appeared to define care as spending quality time with them, e.g., watching TV less and playing with them more, and being a part of their children's educational lives through parental-involvement activities at school and/or educational activities at home. One of them said:

"I observed that more than half the children in my classroom spend their out-of-school time sitting in front of the TV, whereas I expect parents to care for their children and especially to spend quality time at home. For instance, they can do activities at home to support classroom activities. At least, they can help their children with homework or at least observe while the child does her homework. They can play together. There are many ways to care for children if parents have the will to do it[.]" K₁₆

More than half of the preschool teachers in this study (n=28) wanted parents to support their children's self-help skills related to potty training, nutrition and hygiene. One of them (K₂₄) commented:

"Parents are not interested enough in their children's cleanliness, especially when it comes to toilet training. I expect more from parents in these areas, as well as eating habits."

Another teacher said:

"My prior expectations of parents as related to childcare include clean clothes, smoothly combed hair, and short and clean nails. Also, children should be given some self-help skills such as how to wash their faces and hands, brush their teeth, go to the toilet, and dress and undress themselves." K₃

Another expectation, emphasized by 11 preschool teachers, was that parents should support their children's social-emotional development. K₃₉ stated that parents should give their children certain responsibilities to children, give them freedom in some areas, support their

self-confidence, and respect their skills and abilities. Other teacher expectations of parents were that they should be active in their children's educational process and cooperate with the school (n=10), and that they should improve their knowledge about child development and education (n=3).

Teachers' Own Parenting Practices

Just over half the participants (n=26) stated that there were some conflicts between what they expected from their pupils' parents and their own parenting practices. For instance, some of the teachers said that they were not good at supporting their own children's self-help skills (n=6), establishing rules and making children obey them (n=6), or spending enough time with their children (n=3). One of them (K₄₉) described herself as "unsuccessful" when it came to providing her child with good eating habits. Another commented:

"I know in theory that I shouldn't feed my child... However, I feed him as quickly as possible so that I can have more time for myself, even though I know this means I am not giving him the opportunity to acquire this skill for himself." K₂₇

K₂₅ emphasized that she was not good at establishing and keeping rules, adding that she found it especially difficult to punish her child, and that when she did so, she felt guilty. In terms of allowing time for their children, some participants focused on their jobs: saying that since they were with children throughout the day, they could not stand hearing children's voices during their time off, and then felt remorse that, because of this aversion, they could not spend quality time with their own children. One commented:

"Since I am with children during the day... I am disabling my motherhood. For instance, I cannot make time to talk with my own children about the activities they did in school or to repeat what they learned. Also, since I am in school on weekdays, I cannot go to my children's parental-involvement activities. I even do their homework for them, simply to get my own work out of the way more quickly." K₂₉

Eight of the participants declined to make any comments on the differences between their recommendations as teachers and their practices as parents, while less than a third (n=16) reported that, as parents, they could practice everything that they preached as teachers. One of this latter group said:

“I promote my child’s self-help skills as much as I can. She feeds herself, tidies her room and puts her own clothes on. We talk about the activities she does at school and complete worksheets together, if there are any.” K₇

Factors Leading to Inconsistency Between Teachers’ Expectations of Pupils’ Parents and Teachers’ Actual Parenting Practices

Factors that the participants mentioned as causing inconsistency between their expectations of parents and their own actual parenting practices included teachers’ sensitivity and emotionality as parents (n=21); lack of time and tiredness (n=12); not being strict or decisive enough in some circumstances (n=7); other adults (e.g., grandparents) being left in charge of their children (n=4); and inconsistencies between the parenting styles of the teachers and their spouses/partners (n=3). As related to teachers’ sensitivity and emotionality, K₂ mentioned the Turkish proverb *the tailor does not sew his own coat (terzi kendi söküğünü dikemez)*, in support of her view that being a mother and being a teacher were not same. She then added that she was not able to put her knowledge of discipline into practice. Another teacher said:

“Teaching young children is my job. In my professional capacity, I expect the parents to do things ideally. However, I am a mom at home and can engage in some behaviors that I would never suggest to other parents.” K₃₆

In terms of lack of time and tiredness, the teachers stressed workloads, housework and other children at home. One of them (K₂₃) commented:

“I am a spouse, a mother, a housewife, a cook and a cleaner. Therefore, I cannot do anything completely, let alone find time to implement the ideal practices that I explain to the parents.”

Another said:

“When I come home after work, normally my children expect attention from me. I am sometimes so tired that I shake them off. I sometimes have so much work at home that I offer them TV time as a reward... Thus, they do whatever I say as soon as possible and I can start my work.” K₄₇

With regard to other adults being left in charge of their children, the participants stressed that children were spoiled by their grandparents. K₁₃ said that she tried to be consistent with her child, but when she was not at home, grandparents always expanded the rules: for instance, bedtime might change, or a toy that she had not wanted to buy would be in the house when she came back. In parallel to this, some teachers talked about inconsistencies in parents' behaviors. K₉ said:

“I tell parents that consistency is the most important factor when using rewards or punishments. However, I cannot use either with my own children because of inconsistencies between me and my husband. For instance, my children know that if their father is at home, punishment will not work, since he will stop it. Also, I sometimes say that the children will get a reward for a specific behavior, but they still don't perform it because they know that their father will give them the same reward regardless of how they behave.”

Suggestions for Enabling Greater Consistency Between Expectations and Practices

One frequently heard suggestion for reducing the above-mentioned inconsistency was that teachers as parents should be more decisive and less sensitive (n=23). For example, K₃₃ stated that if could remind herself that what she had learned academically was useful for her own child, and bore in mind possible negative consequences of not following such practices, she could be less sensitive as a parent. Another teacher said:

“We should not assume that our own children should never be made to cry. Being decisive is important. If we establish a rule [in the classroom], we should accept it as a home rule and obey it together decisively.” K₁

Another suggestion was that mothers and fathers should work toward a more consistent joint parenting style (n=14). K₁₁ stated that spouses should share parenting responsibilities, make decisions about the child together, and be consistent; while K₂₇ claimed that when she established rules as a mother, the child's father should respect such rules and should not ignore them. Another teacher said:

“My husband and I should find a common approach. He needs to change some of his ideas, especially as related to education. However, the views of experienced and qualified experts don't stop him from knowing whatever he knows. Therefore, our practices are very far from ideal.” K₂₂

A few participants suggested that teachers who were parents should establish good relationships with their children (n=5), know and accept them (n=4), and spend more time or more quality time with them (n=3).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study's findings about how and how much preschool teachers expect parents to care for their children echo the aims of preschool program in Turkey that emphasizes parental involvement (MEB, 2013). Specifically, preschool teachers want parents to help build continuity between their children's education and their home life, as this will reinforce what they learn and thereby tend to increase their future success. Another key expectation of the teachers in our sample was that parents should support their children's self-help skills. This expectation may result from the idea that preschool institutions, though places of education, are also care facilities (Howes & Pianta, 2010). In spite of this expectation, however, children who have underdeveloped self-help skills can cause problems for the educational process (Boz & Yıldırım, 2014; Cooper, 1969; Şahin, Sak, & Tuncer, 2013). It is possible that our participants' focus on this issue reflects their privileging of the strictly educational aspect of their dual role as educator/carers.

Another noteworthy finding of the present study is that only around one-third of the teachers felt they could put their advice into practice as parents, while half the participants reported differences between their advice to others and their personal practices. This finding parallels those of several prior studies regarding slippages between teachers' beliefs and practices (Erdiller & McMullen, 2003; Hegde & Cassidy; 2009; Jambunathan, 2005; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006; Rentzou & Sakellariou, 2011).

According to half of the teachers in our sample, the reason for such inconsistency was that teachers as parents were less decisive and more sensitive. This may be related to a greater

prevalence, among people who choose to become preschool teachers, of a permissive parenting attitude: i.e., strong love and acceptance of children, mixed with a relative lack of rules and guidelines (Sümer, Gündoğdu Aktürk, & Helvacı, 2010).

Arguably, if preschool teachers were better able to put their parenting advice into practice, the parents of their pupils might be more willing to participate actively in the education process. Therefore, it may be beneficial for preschool teachers to be more aware of the inconsistencies identified in the present study, and to evaluate their own behaviors based on the participants' suggestions.

Though a number of studies relating to parents' expectations of preschool teachers have been conducted (Foot, Howe, Cheyne, Terras, & Rattray, 2000; Gülender, 1993; Seyfullahoğulları, 2012; Şahin, Sak, & Şahin, 2013; Şimşek & İvrendi, 2014; Tuğrul & Tokuç, 2007), there has been very little research on preschool teachers' expectations of their pupils' parents: a topic that remains ripe for investigation. In future studies, a variety of research designs should be implemented to more precisely determine the levels at which preschool teachers put their parenting recommendations into practice in their own households. The results would facilitate the design of a program based on teachers' recommendations, as well as testing of its effects. Lastly, it would be worthwhile to compare preschool teachers' *beliefs* about how well they put their parenting suggestions into practice against their actual practices.

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