

Quality in Preschool Education: The Views of Teachers and Assistant Teachers

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Abstract

As the importance attached to preschool education has increased in recent years, researchers have begun to discuss the quality of educational and care services. This study aims to show the views of assistant teachers working at preschool educational institutions concerning quality, investigate their influence on quality, and reveal the effect of quality on education. The study was conducted in Eskişehir, Turkey, in the 2014–2015 academic year. It was conducted with assistant teachers in classrooms in two different schools. Six teachers and six assistant teachers took part in the study. The survey model and the phenomenological design, which is a qualitative research method and design, were employed. The Teacher Interview Form and the Assistant Teacher Interview Form developed by the researchers were used for collecting data. Data were gathered through interviews which lasted almost 40 mins (each interview) on predetermined dates. The research data were analysed via QSR-Nvivo 8. Both teachers and assistant teachers stated that the quality of preschool education can be improved not only by upgrading the physical condition of schools but also by taking into consideration all of children's developmental areas. Based on the interviews with the teachers concerning the influence of assistant teachers on the quality of education, it was concluded that assistant teachers can contribute to improving the quality. As assistant teachers work both inside and outside of classrooms, teachers have less workload and more chances to deal with students.

Keywords: Early childhood education, quality in early childhood education, assistant teacher

Okul Öncesi Eğitimde Kalite: Öğretmen ve Yardımcı Öğretmen Görüşleri

Öz

Son yıllarda okulöncesi eğitime verilen önemin atması ile birlikte, verilen eğitim ve bakım hizmetlerinin kalitesi de tartışılmaya başlanmıştır. Bu çalışmanın amaçları, okulöncesi eğitim kurumlarında çalışan yardımcı öğretmenlerin kalite hakkındaki görüşlerini ortaya koymak, onların kaliteye etkisini incelemek ve kalitenin eğitim öğretime nasıl yansıtıldığını onların gözünden ortaya koymaktır. Çalışma Eskişehir ilinde, 2014-2015 eğitim-öğretim yılında, sınıflarında yardımcı öğretmen bulunan iki farklı okulda altı öğretmen ve altı yardımcı öğretmenle gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışma, tarama modeli ile gerçekleştirilmiş olup, nitel araştırma yöntemi ve nitel araştırma desenlerinden olgubilim deseni, veri toplama aracı olarak da araştırmacılar tarafından geliştirilen “Öğretmen Görüşme Formu” ve “Yardımcı Öğretmen Görüşme Formu” kullanılmıştır. Veriler, daha önceden belirlenen tarihlerde yaklaşık 40'ar dakikalık görüşmeler yapılarak toplanmıştır. Çalışmada toplanan veriler QSR-Nvivo 8 paket programı ile çözümlenmiştir. Çalışma sonucunda, hem öğretmenler hem de

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yardımcı öğretmenler okulöncesi eğitimin kalitesinin sadece okulun fiziki şartları ile değil; çocukların tüm gelişim alanlarını dikkate alan bir eğitim ortamı ile artırılabilceğini söylemişlerdir. Yardımcı öğretmenlerin eğitimin kalitesine etkisi hususunda öğretmenlerle yapılan görüşmeler sonucunda, yardımcı öğretmenlerin kalitenin artmasında etkili olduğu sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Yardımcı öğretmenlerin hem sınıf içerisinde hem de sınıf dışında her işi yapması, öğretmenlerin iş yükünü azaltmakta ve öğretmenlerin öğrencilerle daha fazla ilgilenmesine olanak sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Erken çocukluk eğitimi, erken çocukluk eğitiminde kalite, yardımcı öğretmen*

Introduction

The first years of our children's lives, which are defined as the early childhood period, have great importance for their healthy growth and development in the future. These years, which are called as critical period, have an impact on all developmental areas of children for life. The quality of education which is provided in the early childhood period has improved over time. This period has started to attract more attention from countries, families, local administrations, and researchers in the last thirty years (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010) because mothers now participate more in the workforce; it is thought that early education contributes to an individual's future academic life; and it is now clear that it is important to identify children who are at risk in their early years.

Previous studies indicate that if due interest is shown in learning and development in the early years, children achieve greater success in primary education and beyond; that interest shown in the early years may reduce and even eliminate learning difficulties, retardation and disabilities; that children who have had a quality early childhood experience are more likely to attend school, succeed in school and contribute to society, in comparison to those who have not; and that children who have attended preschool are less likely to fail later in school than those who have not (Eser, 2010; Şahin, 2010; Tezcan, 2011). Preschool education not only forms a basis for language, mathematics and problem-solving skills but also strengthens a child's basic sense of trust, self-esteem, ability to interact with others and capacity to learn (Güneysu, 2005).

Some studies have attempted to determine quality indicators to ensure quality in early childhood education. It has been found out that quality in early childhood education is influenced by the physical environment and materials, teachers' competencies, the number of children in the classroom, the child-teacher ratio, teacher-child interactions, the curriculum which is implemented, communication, parental education and involvement and so on (Epinosa, 2002). Educators and researchers interested in the early childhood period agree that instruction provided by qualified teachers in well-organized early childhood educational environments encourages children's learning at a young age (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2001;

Zigler, Gilliam and Jones, 2006). Presently, many children spend as much time with their teachers and other caregivers in kindergarten as they do with their parents at home. Thus, it is quite important that they have quality social relationships and experiences with teachers and other caregivers during the time in which they are at school and outside the home environment (Bryant, Burchinal Lau and Sparling, 1994).

Studies conducted in recent years indicate that families prefer that their children have well-trained teachers with a bachelor's degree who can provide the children with better quality experiences than teachers with a high school diploma or its equivalent, who can provide just an ordinary early childhood education. Studies highlighting that this rising trend in the role that quality teachers play in providing home-based early childhood education show that the teacher is actually the most important factor in providing a child with a superior education (Bassok, Fitzpatrick, Loeb and Paglayan, 2013).

A well-trained teacher is better able to provide children with services that are suitable for their developmental periods, better understands the needs of children, meets their needs more professionally in a shorter period of time (Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford and Howes, 2002; Early and Winton, 2001) and has fewer difficulties in relating to family members during home-based trainings in comparison to a teacher who has a lower level of education. The provision of quality early childhood education by well-trained teachers allows children, especially those living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities, to receive higher quality school preparation and early childhood education. Quality teachers enable such disadvantaged children to have an effective and consistent cognitive, social and emotional development on par with that of their peers (Loeb, Fuller, Kagan and Carrol, 2004). The establishment of a supportive early childhood educational environment that is based on favourable conditions depends on the competencies of the teacher. To have the necessary competencies, teachers must at a minimum receive excellent education and graduation from the faculty of education of a university (Whitebook, 2003).

A well-trained team can provide excellent preschool education for children. Although the related literature contains studies focusing on teachers' competencies and educational levels as they concern a quality early childhood education (Barnet, 2003; Early et al., 2006; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007), the number of studies addressing the competencies that assistant teachers must have to take part in outstanding education teams is quite limited.

Classroom/teacher assistants, who are also called qualified instructors, classroom mothers or care-giving mothers, are defined as educational personnel who work with students and who are under the supervision of teachers in the classroom. Assistant teachers have many duties such as preparing educational activities with teachers, dealing with children in group work one to one and helping with the care of

children. It is clear that researchers and administrators do not place an emphasis on the educational background which assistant teachers need to have in fulfilling their many duties in the classroom. According to the Regulation on Preschool Education Institutions in Turkey, schools have no obligation to employ staff to help teachers in preschool institutions. Assistant teachers, who reduce teachers' workload and help them with care services, are employed in many countries. For example, in the United States, almost all schools employ an assistant teacher, and even more than one may be employed, when necessary, depending on the number of children in the classroom (Sosinsky and Gilliam, 2011).

In a study on assistant teachers conducted by the department of finance of a region in Virginia, United States, teachers and school administrators stated that they could not imagine classrooms without assistant teachers, and that it would be very difficult to manage classrooms if it were not for them. Another important and remarkable finding of the study was that no early childhood education classroom can be considered secure and functional without an assistant teacher. As children in the early childhood period should never be left alone, it can be said that assistant teachers stand as a guarantee of their security (Arlington Public Schools, 2005).

The Aim of the Study

This study aims to determine quality in preschool education, the influence of assistant teachers on quality and the impact of quality on education from the perspective of teachers and assistant teachers (classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants) who work at independent kindergartens affiliated with the Eskişehir Provincial Directorate of National Education.

To this end, an attempt is made to answer the following questions:

1. How is quality defined by teachers and assistant teachers working at official independent kindergartens that are one type of preschool education institutions?
2. What constitutes quality?
3. Who are assistant teachers (classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants)?
4. What do preschool teachers expect from assistant teachers (classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants)?
5. Do assistant teachers (classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants) have any influence on quality? If so, why?
6. What effect does the availability of an assistant teacher (classroom mother/elder sister/assistant) in the classroom have on educational services?

Method

The survey model was employed in this study, which aims to determine the views of teachers and assistant teachers (classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants) who work at independent kindergartens affiliated with the Ministry of National Education

concerning quality in preschool education and the influence of assistant teachers on quality, as well as their stereotypical judgments. The phenomenological design, which is a qualitative research method and design, was used to achieve the general purpose of the study.

The kindergartens from which the participants were selected were from the Uluönder Educational Zone and the Ertuğrul Gazi Educational Zone, and were chosen through criterion sampling in accordance with the qualitative research paradigm. The researchers conducted interviews with 12 people, consisting of six kindergarten teachers who worked at two schools (three from each kindergarten) in different educational zones, and six assistant teachers who worked with these teachers (three from each kindergarten). The criterion was to be working with an assistant teacher in the classroom in the 2014–2015 academic year.

Data Collection Tools

The The Teacher Interview Form and the Assistant Teacher Interview Form, which were developed by the researchers, were used for collecting data. The researchers tested whether or not the interview questions were clear and comprehensible by conducting an interview with a pre-service teacher. Based on the feedback of experts and discussions with them, the wording of two incomprehensible questions in both interview forms was revised. In addition, two questions were added to the Teacher Interview Form, and three questions were added to the Assistant Teacher Interview Form in accordance with the aim of the study.

The researchers were available at the schools at which the interviews would be conducted on the dates of the appointments scheduled by the teachers and the assistant teachers. Then they conducted the interviews. The interviews were conducted between 14 and 16 May 2014 at the times determined beforehand. Each interview took almost 40 mins.

Analysis of Data

The inductive data analysis technique was employed to analyse the research data. Inductive analysis can be defined as a method of dividing the data obtained from participants via interviews into categories through coding to understand the symbolic world of the group and forming themes and sub-themes by revealing the relations between these categories (Patton, 2002, p. 112). Linking together the emerging themes, making sense of them and making prospective predictions about them are included in the comments to be made by the researchers (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2011, p. 224).

In the present study, the researchers coded using QSR-Nvivo 8. All views likely to provide an answer to the research question were combined under the same code. Sub-themes and themes were created through coding. After the themes and the sub-

themes had been formed, they were all reviewed again, and those considered to be associated with one another were combined. Before researchers finalized the themes and the sub-themes, they read the excerpts included in the themes, sub-themes and codes, thereby checking the conformity of each interview excerpt with the relevant code, sub-theme and theme.

Findings

This section presents the findings obtained from the semi-structured interviews with the participating teachers and assistant teachers from the two official independent kindergartens, and the interpretations of such findings.

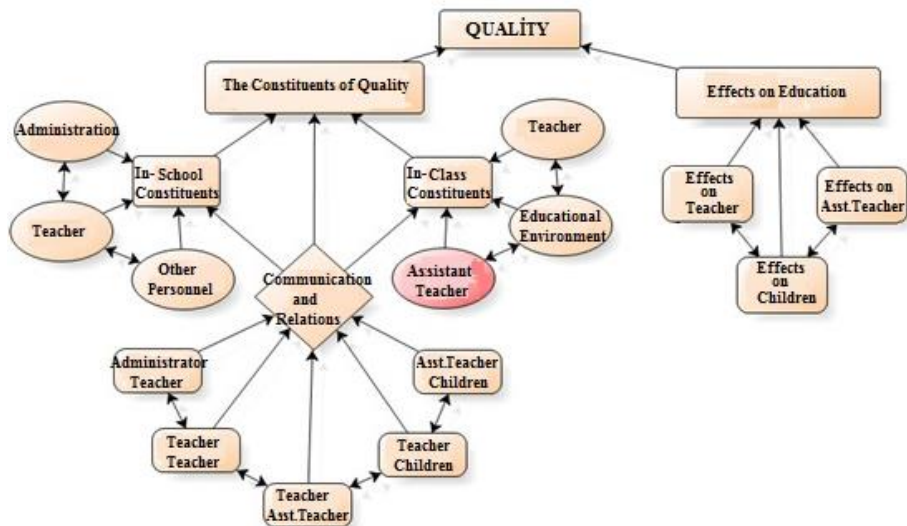


Figure 1. Themes and sub-themes obtained from interviews

Figure 1 presents the findings obtained from the interviews with the preschool teachers and assistant teachers in themes and sub-themes. This section first provides the findings concerning the definition of quality. Then, the findings are given under two main titles, which are also the two main themes: constituents of quality and effects on education.

Findings concerning the definition of quality

In this section, an attempt is made to answer the question ‘how do kindergarten teachers and assistant teachers define quality?’ Thus, the findings obtained from the semi-structured interviews are interpreted. First, the views of the teachers and the assistant teachers are provided. Then a comparison is made between their views.

The results of analysis of the interviews with the teachers show that the sub-themes concerning the definition of quality are making progress in all fields;

developing a positive attitude towards learning; ensuring closeness to life and nature; fulfilling parents' expectations; being child-centred; and providing education according to children's needs, interests and developmental characteristics. Most of the teachers who were asked what quality meant to them answered the question by considering the needs and the developmental characteristics of children and associated quality with the instruction that is provided.

Teacher Ayşe believes that the preschool education period is the most important educational stage; also, people have started to appreciate its value just recently and that many factors should coexist to ensure quality in preschool educational institutions. She expressed her views as follows:

As is known, preschool is the most important educational stage. I think it has been understood more recently. In my opinion, there are many factors that constitute quality. I think physical conditions, teachers and parents are important factors that have an influence on quality. Anything that enables children to receive good education can be called a part of quality. As I have said, the goodness of a school's infrastructure, the completeness of materials, teachers' having enough equipment and making the best use of materials, and warm and child-centred relationships between parents and teachers contribute towards quality. Indeed, doing whatever is needed to achieve the desired education constitutes quality.

Teacher Yasemin thinks that quality is directly proportional to the education provided; also, children's needs such as acting, expressing their opinions, discovering and being creative should be met and finally the quality of the instruction provided is more important than the quality of the physical environment. She delivered her views as follows:

Quality in preschool education is directly proportional to the suitability of the educational environment provided for children based on their needs, interests and characteristics based on their ages. In addition, the offering of such an educational environment to children by educators is quite important. Preschool education has poor quality regardless of the quality of the physical conditions available if it is provided in an environment in which children cannot act freely, cannot express their opinions, do not know nature, have limited opportunities to discover and become socialized, do not have a chance to improve their creativity and cannot become independent.

The results of analysis of the interviews with the assistant teachers show that the sub-themes concerning the definition of quality are how good the physical environment is, opportunity to learn by having fun, a good education and suitability for children's developmental level. The assistant teachers who were asked what quality meant to them associated it with the physical condition of the environment and with learning by having fun.

Assistant teacher Sibel believes that quality education is directly proportional to the physical conditions (i.e. features of the educational environment) and the richness of learning materials. As she stated,

In my opinion, the physical environment and learning materials are in direct proportion to a quality preschool education. The more effectively teachers and assistant teachers use the available rich environment, the higher is the quality education provided. By this means, children receive good quality education.

Assistant teacher Ayşa thinks that education should be suitable for children's developmental level; also, children can learn only through experiencing enjoyable instruction and finally quality education has a long-term effect on children. She expressed her views as follows:

In my opinion, children can learn only when they have fun. If we talk about quality, then it means that we want children to learn. Quality education can be achieved only if we can provide the education suitable for children's developmental levels by making them enjoy themselves. Here we have a big responsibility.

Some participants, however, considered quality preschool education to be based on all the developmental areas of children, whether or not they have a positive attitude towards learning and whether or not parents' expectations are fulfilled. Teacher Senem delivered her views on this matter, stating that 'quality in preschool education means enabling children to grow in all developmental areas, endearing school and teachers to them and enabling them to have a positive attitude towards learning'. In contrast, assistant teacher Ceren believes that trying to fulfil parents' expectations is necessary for quality instruction. She stated her views on this subject as follows: 'because parents want their children to receive quality education, fulfilling parents' expectations can be part of quality too'.

When the findings obtained from the interviews are considered together, it is clear that both the teachers and the assistant teachers placed great emphasis on the idea that quality education can be achieved if all of children's developmental areas are considered; that preschool education is critical because it forms the basis of children's future educational lives; that quality education can occur only in an environment in which children act, think and speak freely, have a chance to know and discover nature, are encouraged to become socialized, are capable of displaying and improving their creativity and, most importantly, feel themselves to be independent; in addition, only having good physical conditions does not assure a quality education.

Findings Concerning the Constituents of Quality

In this section, an attempt is made to answer the question 'what do kindergarten and assistant teachers think are the constituents of quality?' The results of analysis of the interviews with the teachers and the assistant teachers show that the sub-themes concerning the constituents of quality are, in general, in-school constituents and in-class constituents. While in-school constituents include administration, teacher, other personnel and communication and relationships, in-class constituents include teacher, educational environment, assistant teacher and communication and

relationships. All of the teachers who were asked about the constituents of quality answered the question by considering the school as a whole and then expressed their views about in-class constituents. In presenting the findings in this section, first, in-school constituents are given, then in-class constituents are given and finally, these constituents are interpreted along with the sub-themes of communication and relationships.

Teacher Hatice thinks that quality preschool education requires an excellent school administration in the first place and that the attitudes of the administration have an impact on the attitudes and the behaviours of other people who work at the school, on the educational approaches adopted and on the classroom. She expressed her views as follows:

If you want to know about quality at a school, you should look at the administration in the first place. The most important constituent of quality is the administration, which is followed by teachers and other personnel. This is because, it is administrators who must know all personnel (i.e. teachers and assistant teachers); who must eliminate all problems related to the physical environment, if any; who affect the way we have relationships with other personnel and other teachers and who even have an indirect influence on the efficiency of classroom practices and activities. Heads of schools lead others. If you have an empathetic administrator who is open to improvement, you become happy and do your work intimately and productively. Otherwise, you do not even want to go to work.

Teacher Derya, who is from another school, but has similar views, expressed her opinion: 'I think the administration comes first. The quality of administrators is the primary factor. It is followed by the quality of teachers, school personnel (i.e. assistant teachers), servants who work as a cleaner, as a cook and school equipment respectively'.

Teacher Yasemin stated her views about administrators and teachers, who are the constituents of quality, as follows:

Experienced administrators who have received training in educational administration... Teachers who have graduated from a 4-year preschool teaching department, improve themselves and are open to new educational approaches... Educational environments set up in accordance with children's characteristics (i.e. physical, social and emotional characteristics)... Assistant personnel who have graduated from the child development branch of a vocational high school at least and have been trained to provide children with appropriate assistance in any matter... The most important ones are administrators and teachers. This is because the former lead their institutions and are responsible for everything, and the latter are responsible for the instruction provided in the classroom and are supposed to provide a quality education. All in all, teachers who directly interact with children are responsible for the quality of education.

Some teachers believe that the school is a whole and that even the personnel who are responsible for cleaning and other work are important for providing a good quality learning environment. Teacher Mehtap expressed her views on this subject, saying,

Indeed, the school is a whole. Quality is closely associated with how this whole works in a coordinated and orderly fashion. The more orderly and intimate relationships are between all members of the school from school administrators to cleaning personnel, the higher quality education is provided. Everything is a chain here. That is, everybody affects one another.

The teachers put forward some in-class constituents of quality besides in-school constituents. Teacher Ayşe, who regards the school as a whole in general, delivered her views on teachers, who are one of the in-class constituents, as follows: ‘When we consider the classroom, it is firstly teachers who are responsible for quality. We can achieve the intended education only if we use time, space and materials effectively and productively. We are supposed to be skilful in this matter. Thus, teachers are very important for quality’. Teacher Senem, her colleague, also spoke on this subject: ‘Teachers are the people who try to use whatever they have for quality and are educated enough for that. If a teacher has developed him/herself, he/she can meet the needs of children qualitatively based on specified qualities by working productively’.

Teacher Hatice believes that quality is closely associated with teachers, but that the educational environment and materials are also important in providing quality instruction. She stated her views as follows:

It is firstly teachers who are important for quality education in the classroom. I think the materials to be used and the classroom environment are also influential. The classroom should be full of rich stimuli for children’s development. It may be disorderly in itself, but it should be orderly for the children. The children should be able to obtain whatever they want and should be free in this respect. Think! You should have quality paint so that you have a quality painting. In other words, the environment and what it contains are important.

Some teachers think that the availability of an assistant teacher, in addition to the teacher and the educational environment, is important for quality. Teacher Derya said on this subject, ‘having an assistant enables me to deal with the children more, increases the amount of time I allocate for them individually and allows me to meet some of their needs in a timely fashion. Indeed, quality means the effective use of time and practices. Thus, I can say that assistant teachers have an influence on quality’. Teacher Mehtap spoke on this subject as follows:

There are many in-class factors that influence quality. The most important one is, as I have said before, teachers, and they are followed by assistant teachers. As you know, our classrooms are crowded. We sometimes come up short. That unavoidably affects both our productivity and quality. Thus, I feel lucky that I work with an

assistant teacher. I can say that her existence enhances quality. I receive support from her when I do not have enough time to deal with every student. She gives me any support I need. She enables me to allocate more time for the children and allows me to conduct activities completely. By this means, I can provide quality education in accordance with students' needs.

The results of analysis of the interviews with the assistant teachers show that the sub-themes concerning the constituents of quality are mostly about in-class constituents. The themes formed based on the views of the assistant teachers are teacher, educational environment, assistant teacher and communication and relationships. Most of the assistant teachers who were asked about the constituents of quality focused on in-class constituents.

Assistant teacher Fatma thinks that teachers, who provide instruction and carry the entire responsibility for it, are important for achieving quality education. She delivered her views on this subject: 'Indeed, teachers are the cornerstone of education. Teachers must be well-qualified so that quality education is achieved. It is teachers who decide on the activities to be conducted with children'. Likewise, assistant teacher Zeynep, who works at the other kindergarten, believes that teachers play a key role in providing children with a quality education. She offered her views on this subject: 'I think teachers are the keys to providing quality education. Whatever happens at the school or whatever kind of order exists at the school, a teacher can do whatever she/he deems suitable when she/he closes the classroom door. The only leader is the teacher in the classroom. Thus, she/he is responsible for the quality of education'.

Similarly, assistant teacher Sıla, who works at the same kindergarten, thinks that the educational environment and assistant teachers, in addition to teachers, who are one of the in-class constituents, have an influence on the quality of education. She stated her views as follows:

The educational environment should be established in a way that meets the needs of children so that quality education is provided. The educational environment and materials are very important for a quality education. It is teachers who are responsible for establishing the educational environment. Teachers have an indisputable importance for the quality of education, but we should not be ignored. We try to support them in any matter. Indeed, everybody works to ensure quality here.

The results of analysis of the interviews with the teachers and the assistant teachers show that the constituents of quality fall into two categories in general: in-school and in-class. These two sub-themes mainly consist of in-school and in-class communication and relations. The findings obtained from the interviews conducted with the teachers and the assistant teachers are presented comparatively here.

The teachers regard administrators as the most important constituents of in-school quality and think that it is actually administrators who shape all the activities

and practices conducted at the school. Teacher Senem, who believes that the communication and interpersonal relations at a school contribute to student performance and productivity, expressed her views as follows: ‘If we consider the school as a whole, we can see that everybody has relationships or communicates with one another in some way. If you have warm relationships that allow you to know one another, you become happy and can work productively. Otherwise, it is difficult to show the desired performance if you have problems or ambiguities in your mind’.

Teacher Mehtap, who works at another institution, believes that communication and interpersonal relations underlie everything and also have an effect on the classroom and children. She expressed her views as follows:

As I have said before, everything follows, one from the other, like links in a chain in educational institutions. It is true for communication and interpersonal relations, too. For example, an administrator communicates with a teacher. A teacher communicates with the other teachers. Teachers communicate with assistant teachers and the children. Assistant teachers communicate with the children. If you have quality relationships with your colleagues and principal, productive educational conditions come about. If you have good relations, you feel comfortable and peaceful. That has an effect on everybody, even the children. This is why I have said that there should be a ground for healthy communication as well as warm, realistic and non-artificial relationships so that productive and quality education is provided. In this way, you can achieve a so-called synergy of quality by ensuring togetherness and team spirit. Otherwise, just the opposite may occur. Then, children are affected negatively.

Some assistant teachers associated in-class communication and relations with a chain. Assistant teacher Sila thinks that a class is like a family and that whatever takes place there has an impact on children. She stated her views as follows:

A class is like a family. The head of this family is the teacher. We are the classroom mothers, and we have children. As is known, the mother and the father should know each other well in starting a family. They should have effective communication and a good relationship. This is true for a class, too. If you want to work peacefully and educate children productively, you should have quality communication and relationships. Your relationships directly affect the children. They see you, feel you and experience you. You are already watched and taken as a model.

When the findings obtained from the interviews are considered together, it is clear that both the teachers and the assistant teachers, in regard to the constituents of quality, laid a great emphasis on preschool education institutions as a whole, from the administration to the assistant teachers and from the cleaning personnel to the educational environment. Moreover, the participants highlighted that interpersonal relations based on healthy communication are among the fundamental constituents of quality. The healthier and more continuous the communication, the stronger and

warmer relations are. Quality relationships promote the formation of in-house togetherness and team spirit. Such a peaceful work environment provided by team spirit influences the class and enables children to receive a quality and productive education. However, if the environment lacks these elements, it can have a negative impact on relationships and the classroom environment, as stated by the participants.

Findings Concerning Assistant Teachers

Findings concerning classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants are presented in more detail in comparison to other findings for the sake of the research purposes. In this section, an attempt is made to answer the question “who do kindergarten teachers and assistant teachers think that classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants are?” The results of analysis of the interviews with the teachers and the assistant teachers show that the sub-themes concerning the definition of classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants are cleanliness and order, supporting in activities, self-care, supporting children, and not teachers. Most of the teachers who were asked what classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants meant to them touched on self-care skills and cleanliness and order.

Teacher Ayşe thinks that classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants help teachers especially with cleanliness and order and take their place when they are not in the classroom. Teacher Ayşe spoke as follows:

To me, they are the people who help teachers when requested and deal with children one to one when required. That is, they provide assistance especially in cleaning and care works. They can take our place when we are outside the classroom. For example, when we have a meeting, we compulsorily leave the classes to them. Of course I am talking about the existing classes. As I have said, they can even head the class like a teacher. They help us and take charge in the smooth continuance of the educational process.

Teacher Derya, who works at another institution, but has similar views, said, “They are the personnel from whom I receive support especially in self-care skills. In other words, they help children during activities or when they need to use the toilet and make an effort to prevent any accident.” Teacher Hatice, on the other hand, believes that classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants are not teachers. She expressed her views as follows:

We may sometimes have affairs to deal with outside the classroom. For example, administration may call us, or we may have a meeting with parents. In such cases, they head children and support us based on our instructions. They are not teachers. They are just responsible for assisting teachers and providing any support requested.

There are similarities between the teachers’ and the assistant teachers’ definitions of classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants. Assistant teacher Ceren defined her job as follows: “We are the people who help children with anything. We can help in self-care or activities...” Assistant teacher Zeynep, her colleague, on the other hand,

remarked, “I’m officially here to help children with self-care skills. In this respect, I’m the person who helps the teacher.”

In this section, an attempt is made to answer the question, “What kind of characteristics do you want classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants to have?” The results of analysis of the interviews with the teachers and the assistant teachers show that the sub-themes concerning the characteristics to be held by classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants are having received required education (knowing developmental characteristics and needs), knowing how to cooperate, capable of communicating well, fair, patient, understanding, smiling, and capable of generating practical solutions.

Teacher Senem delivered her views about the characteristics to be held by assistants as follows: “They directly interact with children. For that reason, they must communicate with children and the teacher well, speak Turkish well, be capable of cooperating with the teacher and generating practical solutions in face of problems, and be fair to children.” Teacher Yasemin, her colleague from a different school, thinks that assistants with whom she works together in the classroom must be meticulous and clean. She also complains that their opinions are not asked during the recruitment of assistants and claims that assistants must be employed based on certain criteria. She stated her views as follows:

As I have said before, when required, these people deal with children one to one and closely. This being the case, it is firstly very important that they love children. In addition, they must be meticulous about hygiene and cleanliness. I know that parents request assistant teachers from school administration for their children, especially for small children upon the recommendation of teachers. Because children are young in age, hygiene is very important for us. If possible, individuals knowledgeable about children’s developmental characteristics should be employed. Our opinions are not asked on this subject. If it is administrators who decide on assistant teachers, they should take into account these criteria. This is because; we unfortunately hear from some schools that some incompetent assistant teachers are employed without requiring any criteria just because they are the acquaintances of some influential people.

The assistant teachers have similar views as the teachers in regard to the characteristics to be held. Assistant teacher Fatma remarked on this subject, “If you do this job, you are expected to have a strong love for children. In addition, you must be patient. It isn’t easy to deal with so many children. On the other hand, you must always be smiling no matter what happens. This is because; you are in close relations with children and may affect them negatively otherwise.” The assistant teacher Ayça, her colleague, spoke as follows: “We are expected to be knowledgeable and experienced in this field. That is, we must have a good knowledge of the developmental characteristics and needs of children. If you have it, you have an understanding attitude towards children. In this way, you fulfill one of the expectations from you.”

In this section, an attempt is made to answer the question, “Are assistant teachers needed in preschool education? If so, why?” The results of analysis of the interviews with the teachers and the assistant teachers show that the sub-themes concerning why assistant teachers are needed are overcrowded classrooms, teachers’ coming short, quality education, preventing possible accidents, complete achievement of self-care skills, and parents’ request.

Teacher Derya explained the reasons for needing assistant teachers as follows: “We come short in the overcrowded classrooms. In addition, individual time allocated for children must be used in the best way. We can achieve it only when assistant teachers help us. In this way, the quality of the education provided increases more”. A similar view was expressed by assistant teacher Sibel as follows: “Our classrooms are really overcrowded. It is almost impossible for teachers to deal with all children. We save time for them and enable them to give due attention to children”. Teacher Mehtap working at a different institution stated the reasons why she needs an assistant teacher in her classroom as follows:

In today’s conditions, there are 25 to 30 students per teacher. We know that our school is one of the best schools in our neighborhood. We are in great demand. We are in a neighborhood where working families live for the most part. So, parents need to send their children to kindergartens. There are people who want to leave their children in the morning when they are going to work and pick up them when they are returning home in the evening. One can say that our classrooms are crowded. For that reason, it is difficult for teachers to deal with all children at satisfactory levels. They sometimes come short. We try to deal with children one to one, but we come short especially in self-care skills. While a teacher is conducting an activity, she may describe another activity to her assistant for her to provide necessary conditions. That both saves time and increases the quality of attention given to children. For all these reasons, assistant teachers are needed. They are important for children. They reduce the workload of teachers, too.

In this section, an attempt is made to answer the question, “How do classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants provide support?” The results of analysis of the interviews with the teachers and the assistant teachers show that the sub-themes concerning the support provided by classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants are cleanliness and order, continuous education, helping with self-care works (skill development), helping with group activities, and watching and following children.

Teacher Ayşe expressed her views on the support provided by assistant teachers by giving examples as follows:

In the simplest term, I have an assistant who watches me and my communication with children during activities in the classroom and in this way understands how to treat them. When any child needs to use the toilet, she deals with him/her no matter what she is doing then. She helps me a lot especially in preparation of materials for art activities. The Internet access is available in the classroom. When I arrive in the classroom in the morning, we can turn on the computer and look through sample

activities. We can exchange ideas and decide on the activities to be conducted. I can say that she helps by putting forward ideas.

Assistant teacher Ceren talked about the support she provides to the teacher as follows: "I help the teacher prepare activities for group works. When the teacher has any affair in the administration or any other affair, I can teach students as she instructs me so that education is not interrupted. When we go to the schoolyard or go on a trip, I help her by watching and following children." Assistant teacher Sila, her colleague, told, "I help the teacher especially with the self-care skills of children. I change children's clothes when they sweat. I follow their sleeping and clothing."

In this section, an attempt is made to answer the question, "Are classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants influential on more quality and productive education? If so, how do they influence it?" The results of analysis of the interviews with the teachers and the assistant teachers show that the sub-themes concerning the influence of classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants on more quality and productive education are less waste of time, more efficient use of energy (not getting tired), more productive and enjoyable activities, and physical and emotional protection of children.

Having stated what quality meant to her, teacher Derya expressed her view that more quality education is achieved in the classroom thanks to assistant teachers as follows:

Yes, I think they're influential. To me, quality means more productive and permanent education. If the time spent yields benefits for children, it means that you provide quality education. That is, quality exists only where children can accomplish the targets set at a satisfactory level. If there is an assistant teacher in the classroom, the teacher can use her energy in a more balanced way. She allocates more individual time for children. In other words, you can perform productive activities, which is needed for a quality education. Thus, assistant teachers have a big influence on quality education. Art activities can be given as an example. During these activities, the assistant teacher helps you and deals with some students herself. She can answer the questions of children. If she is communicating with children as she has learned from you, it means that she does what the teacher comes short of. Right? That enhances quality, too.

Assistant teacher Ayça has parallel views to the teachers. She told, "When we participate in activities, children enjoy more. In addition, we can answer their questions immediately. In the meantime, the teacher deals with other works, if any. In this way, waste of time is prevented."

When the findings obtained from the interviews are considered together, it is clear that the teachers and the assistant teachers have similar views about classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants. In this respect, the teachers laid a great emphasis on that assistant teachers must be meticulous, clean, and tidy for children's health; they must support activities based on the instructions of teachers; they are needed

because of the overcrowdedness of the classrooms; and certain criteria must be taken into consideration in employing assistant teachers. Moreover, all participants think that assistant teachers who speak Turkish well, are patient, understanding, tolerant, meticulous, cooperative, and fair, and can generate practical solutions to the problems experienced add quality value to education.

Findings Concerning Effects on Education

In this section, an attempt is made to answer the question, “What do kindergarten teachers and assistant teachers think are the effects of works/acts of classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants on the educational process?” The results of analysis of the interviews with the teachers and the assistant teachers show that the sub-themes concerning the effects of the works/acts of classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants on the educational process are classroom order (cleanliness), reduced workload, fast and effective solution of problems, continuous education (rate of transmission between activities), more attention, more enjoyable education, more productive and quality educational process, more observable and controllable educational environment, and development self-car skills.

Teacher Ayşe thinks that there is no educational process independent of assistant teachers; they directly interact with children; and children adopt them as much as they do the teacher. She expressed her views as follows:

There is no educational process independent of assistant teachers. As I have said before, when appropriate, they can deal with children as much as we do. You can sometimes witness children calling them ‘teacher’. They adopt them so much. If you have an assistant who has a warm and sincere personality, she endears herself to you and children. Then you can see her positive effects. It may sound simple, but when she goes to toilet together with her children, she enables toilet training to continue as intended. Indeed, it can be said that assistant teachers make up the deficiencies of any educational process undergone by children. When teachers come short, they go into action. It is assistant teachers who have the primary responsibility for classroom order and cleanliness. If you get on well with an assistant teacher, she adopts your behaviors and educational method. So, you become a team. Your workload decreases, so your productivity increases. You become more productive in the educational process because you allocate more individual time and attention for children.

Teacher Senem delivered her views similar to those of her colleague as follows: “When you have an assistant, you can deal with other affairs without any worry about the class. When any problem is experienced, you can solve it with your assistant more rapidly. By this means, you can continue the process without disrupting education and causing children to be affected by such problem physically or emotionally.” The assistant teachers have similar views to the teachers. Assistant teacher Fatma spoke as follows: “We help with anything in the classroom. It may be

about children or the teacher. We participate in activities together with children. That makes them happy. They learn to be sharing and enjoy more.” Ceren, her colleague, added as follows:

We take part in activities to help teachers and increase the attention of children. In addition, we maintain order in transition from one activity to another and deal with cleaning works. In this way, transition occurs faster and without any interruption. I observe children with the teacher in the classroom. Then we exchange ideas about them. Thus, we can follow their development together. That makes the class more controlled. Since we are informed of anything about children, we miss few things about children. For example, as soon as children arrive in the classroom, I check their daily family notebooks (notes). In this way, we help with communication with parents and contribute to a more controlled educational process.

When the findings obtained from the interviews are considered together, it is clear that the teachers and the assistant teachers have similar views about the effects of the works/acts of classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants on education. In this respect, the teachers laid a great emphasis on that their assistants have an effect on the educational process by maintaining the classroom order and cleanliness, reducing teachers’ workload as there are two adults in the classroom, allowing coping with possible problems more rapidly and solving these problems without causing children to be affected physically and emotionally, helping to make up the deficiencies of the educational process, increasing the amount of time and attention allocated for children and thus allowing a productive process, and especially contributing to the development of self-care skills. The assistant teachers, on the other hand, stressed that children are engaged in more enjoyable activities thanks to them; they enable a more controlled educational environment to be formed; they take part in activities; and they prevent any interruption in education in transition from one activity to another.

In this section, an attempt is made to answer the question, “What can teachers and classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants do to increase the quality of educational services?” The results of analysis of the interviews with the teachers and the assistant teachers show that the sub-themes concerning the actions to be taken by teachers are having a good command of the field, being a good commander, being flexible, preparing a proper educational environment, being open to new approaches, being patient, warmhearted, smiling, and fair, keeping calmness, and trying to conserve the existing favorable characteristics.

Teacher Ayşe expressed her views about the actions to be taken by teachers to improve the quality of educational services as follows: “Being a teacher, maybe I can review and read more sources to enhance quality. I can examine developing community and world standards, consider what other activities and practices I can conduct, and how I can employ different techniques, and try to apply all of them in my classroom.” Teacher Derya, her colleague, spoke as follows: “First of all, a

teacher must be very patient, warmhearted, and fair towards children. She must have warm relations with other personnel and administrators of the school and conduct activities and practices open to improvement in her classroom.” Assistant teacher Sila, on the other hand, told, “Teachers should have good relations with their assistants, create team spirit, try to contribute to our development, and should keep in mind that we will always stand by them.”

The sub-themes concerning the actions to be taken by classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants are improving oneself, knowing how to communicate well, being a guide (not doing everything for children), being a good observer, being clean, meticulous, careful, patient, tolerant, and warmhearted, and conserving such favorable characteristics.

Teacher Yasemin expressed her views about the actions to be taken by classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants as follows: “First of all, they should help children with activities, but they shouldn’t do everything for them. They should know that children just need guidance. They should guide them. They should observe children doing activities and share their observations with teachers.” Teacher Mehtap, her colleague, said:

Classroom assistants should read papers and sources about preschool and review documents about behavior patterns and child development in order to improve themselves. They should get on well with teachers who lead the classes and communicate with them continuously. In this way, they may have a good command of what will be done as well as where and when it will be done. By this means, they contribute to more productive education.

The views of assistant teacher Fatma about the actions to be taken by classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants to enhance quality are as follows: “As our primary responsibilities are for order, we must be meticulous and careful in this matter. As you know, we are in one to one relation with children. For that reason, we must be warmhearted, patient, and understanding. Then we can strengthen our relations with teachers.” Ayça, her colleague, told on this subject, “Being assistant teachers, we must do our best. We must both improve ourselves and have a patient, tolerant, understanding, and careful attitude. Only then can we become beneficial to the educational process. Moreover, we must try to conserve our existing characteristics as they are on the first day. We must prevent them from diminishing day by day and improve ourselves.”

When the findings obtained from the interviews are considered together, it is clear that the teachers and the assistant teachers have similar views about the actions to be taken by teachers and assistant teachers to enhance quality. In this respect, the participants stated that to improve quality, teachers must have a good command of the field, be open to new approaches, be warmhearted, patient, smiling, and fair to children, and create a good educational environment that meets needs. According to

the participants, to enhance quality, classroom mothers/elder sisters/assistants must improve themselves as much as possible by cooperating with teachers, have good communication skills to establish and maintain nice dialogues with children, guide children rather than doing activities for them, observe children carefully together with teachers, share the information they have about children with teachers, be clean, meticulous, patient, and understanding, and always follow the instructions of teachers so as not to forget their positions.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study has been conducted to investigate the influence of assistant teachers on the quality of preschool education institutions. Here the research results are presented as results concerning the definition of quality, results concerning the constituents of quality, and results concerning effects on education.

The findings obtained from the interviews about the definition of quality, which is one of the sub-problems of the study, show that all developmental areas of children should be taken into consideration for a quality education. Both the teachers and the assistant teachers think that a quality preschool education can be achieved only in an environment where there are not only good physical conditions, but a great importance is attached to preschool education for children's all future educational lives; children can act, think, and speak freely; they are provided with an opportunity to know and discover the nature; they can become socialized; they have a chance to display and improve their creativity; and, most importantly, they can feel themselves independent.

Since the importance attached to preschool education institutions has increased in recent years, perspective on the education provided by such institutions has started to change. Early childhood care and education institutions try to feature quality in providing services to children. A quality institution is not limited to only physical conditions. Physical conditions are just one of the constituents of quality. The previous studies have not limited quality to only physical conditions and materials, either. Quality in education is influenced by teachers' competencies, the number of children in the classroom, the number of children per teacher, teacher-child interactions, the curriculum implemented, communication, and parental education and involvement besides physical environment and materials (Epinosa, 2002).

When the findings concerning the constituents of quality are considered, it is seen that the constituents of quality fall into two sub-themes based on the answers given by the teachers and the assistant teachers: in-school constituents and in-class constituents. In-school constituents are administration, teacher, other personnel, and communication and relations. In-class constituents, on the other hand, are teacher, educational environment, assistant teacher, and communication and relations. In regard to the constituents of quality, both the teachers and the assistant teachers

highlighted that preschool education institutions should be considered as a whole from administration to assistant teacher and from cleaning personnel to educational environment. In addition, the participants emphasized that relations based on healthy communication are among the fundamental constituents of quality. The healthier and more continuous communication is, the stronger and warmer relations are. Quality relations promote the formation of in-house togetherness and team spirit. Such peaceful work environment provided by team spirit affects the class and makes children receive quality and productive education. Otherwise, it negatively affects relations and the classroom environment, as stated by the participants.

Quality in preschool education institutions depends on the relationship between many interdependent elements. The quality of teacher or the quality of curriculum is not enough to make a school quality, just like the quality of physical environment or the quality of materials is not enough for it. All constituents of quality should interact with one another and function harmoniously so that quality is achieved and maintained. In the related literature, the constituents of quality fall into two categories in general: a) structural quality b) process quality (Epinosa, 2002; Zigler, Gilliam and Jones, 2006). While structural quality includes the number of students in the classroom, the number of students per teacher, and the education and training of teachers and administrators, process quality involves interactions, activities, materials, health, and safety (Epinosa, 2002). The teachers and the assistant teachers mentioned most of the constituents of quality indicated in the literature. However, the number of students in the classroom and the number of students per teacher, which are two important points, were ignored. Nevertheless, the findings concerning the views of the teachers and the assistant teachers about the importance of communication with children are consistent with the literature. Shonkoff and Philips (2000) report that children learn best when they are encouraged by their teachers and peers.

Since the research purpose is to reveal the influence of assistant teachers on quality, the first attempt about the findings concerning teacher assistants is to determine the nature of assistant teachers. Common points in the answers of the teachers and the assistant teachers are as follows: assistant teachers are not real teachers, and they are the people who are responsible for cleanliness and order, assist in activities, and help with the self-care services of children. According to the participants, the characteristics to be held by assistant teachers are having received required education (knowing developmental characteristics and needs), knowing how to cooperate, being capable of communicating well, being fair, patient, understanding, and smiling, and being capable of generating practical solutions. Common points in the answers of the teachers and the assistant teachers regarding the reasons for needing assistant teachers in the classroom are as follows: overcrowded classrooms, teachers' coming short, quality education, preventing possible accidents, complete achievement of self-care skills, and parents' request. It has been concluded that assistant teachers are influential on enhanced quality.

Assistant teachers are not only the assistants of teachers. They mostly spend more time with children and deal with them one to one. For that reason, people who have strong communication skills, love children, are knowledgeable about child development, and can work with people harmoniously should be employed as assistant teachers. If assistant teachers work in coordination with teachers, a good learning environment comes out. That, in turn, allows cultivating successful children. Shim, Hestenes, and Cassidy (2004) carried out a study on this subject and found out that quality in the classrooms where teachers and assistant teachers work coordinately is higher than quality in the classrooms where two teachers who have a hierarchical relationship teach and than quality in the classrooms with a single teacher.

It is quite important that assistant teachers have the required educational level. Having received education in this field should be a requirement for the employment of assistant teachers who are in one-to-one interaction with children. The previous studies report that children learn most when they are taught by well-trained teachers (Bowman, Donovan, and Burns, 2001; NICHD, 2005).

As more importance is placed on preschool education today, the number of children receiving such education is increasing day by day. As new schools or classrooms are not opened despite the increasing number of children, the existing classrooms become more and more crowded. The number of children in the classroom and the number of children per teacher are two of the important factors influential on quality. Assistant teachers are important not only for helping teachers in the crowded classrooms but also for reducing the number of students per teacher. It is quite difficult to care and provide secure education to all children in the crowded classrooms. All teachers participating in a study stated that classrooms would not be secure, and no effective education would be provided if it was not for assistant teachers (Arlington Public Schools, 2005). In the same study, teachers remarked that they need assistant teachers for the security of children in the classrooms most. A major duty falls to assistant teachers because it is they who must ensure the security of children in the classroom when the teacher goes outside. Reportedly, a teacher said that she prefers to work with more children together with an assistant teacher rather than work with few children by herself.

According to the participants, the effects of the availability of assistant teachers on education are ensuring the classroom order and cleanliness, allowing easy transition between activities, reducing the workload of teachers, enabling problems to be solved more easily, and creating a more quality and controllable educational environment. The answers of the teachers and the assistant teachers show that assistant teachers do almost any work both inside and outside the classroom. They not only lighten teachers' burden but also contribute to the quality of education.

The findings obtained through the question, "What can teachers and assistant teachers do to increase the quality of education?" are as follows: having a good

command of the field, being open to new approaches, being warmhearted, patient, smiling, and fair to children, and creating a good educational environment that meets needs. The assistant teachers expressed the following views on this subject: improving oneself as much as possible by cooperating with teachers, having good communication skills to establish and maintain nice dialogues with children, guiding children rather than doing activities for them, observing children carefully together with teachers, sharing the information one has about children with teachers, being clean, meticulous, patient, and understanding, and always following the instructions of teachers so as not to forget one's position. The teachers think that assistant teachers (not trained in the field of preschool education) should deal with the care and the needs of children without intervening in educational activities much and comply with the hierarchy between teachers and them. Likewise, the assistant teachers emphasized that they should interact with children and teachers, but they should always keep their positions in mind. A previous study supports this view of the teachers. According to Sosinky and Gilliam (2011), teachers think that assistant teachers are not very useful in educational activities, but they are quite useful in arranging classrooms and monitoring children.

Implications

The answers of the teachers and the assistant teachers indicate that in Turkey, it is schools and parents who decide on keeping assistant teachers (classroom mothers/elder sisters) available at kindergartens which provide the large part of early childhood education in Turkey. Social security and salary costs of these people are covered by parents. That has a negative influence on the quality of education provided by schools that are located in a neighborhood with a low socio-economic level. Thus, the Ministry of National Education should make it obligatory to employ assistant personnel (i.e. teachers, elder sisters, mothers) in the classrooms of kindergartens that play an important role in the provision of early childhood education services. In this way, the Ministry should apply the principle of equality in education. In addition, this step of the Ministry may create a new job, which, in turn, means social security and continuous salary for especially the graduates of departments of child development of girls' vocational schools.

The field-related knowledge and experience of these people who are in direct communication and relation with children may be tested. In addition, exams and interviews may be carried out to select the personnel fulfilling specific standards (criteria) determined by ÖSYM (Turkish Measurement, Selection, and Placement Center) and the Ministry of National Education so that quality education is provided at schools.

Assistant teachers' standards and programs existing in other countries may be examined. Furthermore, those assistant teachers who are placed in this job may be subjected to exams in certain fields (e.g. first aid, healthy communication) biyearly

based on the practices in other countries. In this way, the intended standards may be reached more rapidly.

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Genişletilmiş Özet

Kaliteli bir erken çocukluk eğitimi, kurumda bulunan kaliteli eğitim almış bir ekiple gerçekleştirilebilmektedir. Alan yazın incelendiğinde kaliteli bir erken çocukluk eğitiminde öğretmenin yeterliliklerinden ve eğitim durumlarından bahsedilen çalışmalar olmasına rağmen (Barnet, 2003; Early & arkadaşları, 2006; LoCasale-Crouch & arkadaşları, 2007); kaliteli eğitim ekibi içerisinde yer alan yardımcı öğretmenlerin sahip olması gereken yeterliliklerden bahsedilen çalışmalar nadirdir.

Yardımcı öğretmenler, usta öğreticiler, sınıf annesi veya bakıcı anne gibi birçok adı bulunan sınıf/öğretmen yardımcılarının tanımı şu şekildedir: Sınıf içerisinde öğretmenlerin kontrolü altında öğrencilerle çalışan eğitim personelidir (Bellm, Burton, Whitebook, Broatch, & Young, 2002). Yardımcı öğretmenler, sınıf içerisinde öğretmenlerle birlikte eğitim etkinliklerini düzenleme, çocuklarla grup çalışmalarında birebir ilgilenme ve çocukların bakım ihtiyaçlarına yardımcı olmaya kadar birçok görev yürütmektedirler. Okulda ve sınıf içerisinde pek çok görev yapan

yardımcı öğretmenlerin sahip olması gereken eğitim konusunda araştırmacıların ve yöneticilerin konuya dâhil olmadığı gözlenmektedir. Türkiye'deki Okul Öncesi Eğitim Kurumları Yönetmeliği'ne göre, hiçbir kurumda öğretmenlere yardımcı olacak bir personel çalıştırma zorunluluğu yoktur. Öğretmenlerin yükünü azaltmak ve bakım hizmetlerine yardımcı olmak için çalıştırılan yardımcı öğretmenler birçok ülkede çalıştırılmaktadır. Örneğin Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde okulların hemen hepsinde bir tane yardımcı öğretmen çalışırken, sınıftaki çocuk sayısına bağlı olarak birden fazla da yardımcı öğretmen istihdam edildiği göze çarpmaktadır (Sosinsky & Gilliam, 2011). Bu çalışmanın, aslında okul öncesi eğitim sisteminde çocuklar için diğer öğeler kadar önemli bir yere sahip olduğu bilinen ancak resmîyette ve araştırmalarda pek değinilmeyen yardımcı öğretmenlerin fark edilmelerini sağlayacağı ve bu konuya ilişkin alanda yapılabilecek diğer çalışmalara yol gösterebileceği düşünülmektedir.

Araştırmanın amacı, Eskişehir Milli Eğitim Müdürlüğü'ne bağlı bağımsız anaokullarında görev yapmakta olan öğretmen ve yardımcı öğretmenlerin (sınıf annesi/ablası/yardımcılarının) bakış açısından okulöncesi eğitimde kaliteyi ve yardımcı öğretmenlerin kaliteye etkisini belirleyip, kalitenin eğitim öğretime yansımalarını onların görüşleriyle ortaya koymaktır.

Bağımsız anaokullarında görev yapmakta olan öğretmen ve yardımcı öğretmenlerin okulöncesi eğitimde kalite ve yardımcı öğretmenlerin kaliteye etkisi hakkındaki düşüncelerini ve sahip oldukları kalıpsal yargıları belirleyebilmek amacıyla yapılan bu araştırma, tarama modeli ile gerçekleştirilmiş ve genel amaca ulaşmak için nitel araştırma yöntemi ve nitel araştırma desenlerinden de olgubilim (fenomonoloji) deseni kullanılmıştır.

Araştırma verilerinin elde edildiği eğitim bölgelerinden katılımcıların bulunduğu anaokulları nitel araştırma paradigmasına uygun olarak, ölçüt örnekleme yoluyla seçilmiştir. Bu kapsamda araştırmacılar, araştırma kapsamında belirlenen ölçütü-2014-2015 eğitim-öğretim yılında sınıflarında yardımcı öğretmenle birlikte görev yapma- temel olarak farklı eğitim bölgelerinde bulunan 2 okulda görevli 3'er anaokulu öğretmeni ve bu öğretmenlerle birlikte çalışan 3'er yardımcıyla, toplamda 12 kişiyle görüşmeler gerçekleştirmiştir, görüşmeler yaklaşık 40 dakika sürmüştür.

Araştırma verilerinin çözümlenmesinde tümevarım veri analizi tekniğinden yararlanılmıştır. Araştırmacılar tüm kodlama işlemini QSR-Nvivo 8 paket programı ile gerçekleştirmişlerdir. Kodlamalar yapılırken araştırma sorusuna yanıt vereceği düşünülen tüm görüşler aynı kod altında birleştirilmiştir. Yapılan kodlamalardan alt temalar ve temalar oluşturulmuştur. Temalar ve alt temalar oluşturulduktan sonra tüm temalar ve alt temalar tekrar gözden geçirilmiş ve birbirleriyle ilişkili olduğu düşünülen temalar ve alt temalar birleştirilmiştir. Temalar ve alt temalara son hali verilmeden önce temaların, alt temaların ve kodların içinde bulunan alıntılar okunmuş ve alıntının kod, alt tema ve temaya uygunluğu kontrol edilmiştir.

Araştırmadan elde edilen bulgulardan yola çıkarak; öncelikle öğretmen ve yardımcı öğretmenlerin eğitimde kaliteyi; sadece fiziksel anlamda iyi imkânlarla sahip olmakla değil; çocukların özgürce hareket ettikleri, özgürce düşünebildikleri, açıklamalar yapabildikleri, doğayı tanıyıp keşfetmeye olanak veren, sosyalleşme imkânlarının bulunduğu, yaratıcılıklarını gösterip geliştirebilecekleri ve en önemlisi kendilerini bağımsız hissedebildikleri bir ortamla ilişkilendirdikleri görülmüştür.

Kaliteyi oluşturan iç öğelerin “yönetim, öğretmen, diğer personel, iletişim ve ilişkiler” sınıf içi öğelerin ise; “öğretmen, eğitim ortamı, yardımcı öğretmen, iletişim ve ilişkiler” olduğu belirtilmiştir. Hem öğretmenlerin hem de yardımcı öğretmenlerin kaliteyi oluşturan öğeler için önemle üzerinde durdukları noktanın, okulöncesi eğitim kurumlarının bir bütün olarak yöneticisinden yardımcısına, temizlik personelinin eğitim ortamına kadar her şeyin bir bütün olarak algılanması gerektiği düşüncesi olduğu sonucuna varılmıştır.

Kendilerinden yardımcı öğretmeni tanımlamaları istenen katılımcılar, yardımcı öğretmenlerin gerçek öğretmen olmadığı; temizlik ve düzenden sorumlu, etkinliklere destek veren ve çocukların öz bakımlarına hizmetlerine destek sağlayan kişiler olduğu ve bu kişilerin sınıfın düzeni ve temizliğinin sağlanmasında, etkinlikler arası geçişin kolaylaştırılmasında, iş yükünün azaltılmasında, sorunların daha kolay çözülmesi ve daha kontrol edilebilir bir eğitim ortamı oluşturulmasında etkin rol aldıkları böylece eğitimin kalitesini arttığı noktalarında hemfikirler.

Araştırmadan elde edilen sonuçlardan hareketle; ülkemizde erken çocukluk eğitimi hizmetlerinin büyük bir kısmının gerçekleştirildiği anaokulları bünyesinde yardımcı öğretmen (sınıf annesi/ablası) bulundurulması okul yönetiminin ve velilerin isteğine bırakılmıştır ayrıca bulundurulan personelin sosyal güvence ve maaş giderleri veliler tarafından karşılanmaktadır. Bu durum sosyo-ekonomik düzeyi düşük bir çevre bulunan okullardaki eğitim niteliğini olumsuz etkilemektedir. Erken çocukluk eğitimi hizmetlerinin gerçekleştirilmesinde önemli bir yere sahip anaokullarındaki sınıflarda yardımcı personel (öğretmen, abla, anne) bulundurulması MEB tarafından zorunlu hale getirilip böyle bir meslek kolunun oluşturulması sağlanmalı ve eğitimde eşitlik ilkesinin yürütülmesi göz önüne alınmalıdır. Böyle bir iş kolunun oluşturulması özellikle kız meslek liselerinin çocuk gelişimi bölümünden mezun olan adaylar için sosyal güvence ve devamlı bir maaş anlamında cazip hale getirilebilir.

Çocuklarla doğrudan iletişim ve ilişki halinde olan bu kişilerin alanla ilgili bilgi ve deneyimlerinin sınına bilmesi ardından okullarda istenen nitelikte eğitimlerin sağlanabilmesi için ÖSYM ve MEB işbirliği ile belirlenen standartlara (kriterlere) uygun personelin seçilmesi belli sınav ve mülakatlarla gerçekleştirilebilir. Ayrıca farklı ülkelerdeki yardımcı öğretmen standartlar ve programlar incelenerek her iki yılda bir düzenli olarak bu kişiler bazı alanlardan (ilk yardım, sağlıklı iletişim, vb.) sınavlara tabi tutulabilir.