

Determining the Competence of Primary School Teachers in Identifying the Problems Experienced by Students

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Teachers' knowledge of their students is an important part of monitoring the progress made in education. Timely identification of problems and deficiencies keeps the guidance to be given to the student up to date. However, teachers should be able to evaluate and follow their students academically and as a whole. He/she should not only be the teacher of the lesson, but also the teacher of the student. Most of the students' time is spent in schools and with their teachers. The primary school teacher is the first to have the opportunity to identify any problems experienced by the student at an early stage. This research aims to determine the role of primary school teachers in identifying the problems experienced by students. The research focuses on primary school teachers getting to know their students from all angles and prioritizing their perceptions and approaches to their students with differences. The research study group consists of 19 primary school teachers working in public institutions affiliated with the Ministry of National Education in Şanlıurfa/Siverek district center in the 2023-2024 academic year. The study group was determined using the convenience sampling method. In this study, phenomenology design, a qualitative research techniques, was used to determine teacher experiences. The data were collected using a semi-structured interview form and evaluated using descriptive analysis. According to the research findings, primary school teachers could identify problematic behaviors in students according to academic, physical, and developmental-behavioral indicators that they directly observed and that they were aware of social and psychological indicators that they could not directly observe but perceived as a problem. According to the results of the research, it is recommended that teachers should be well aware of the academic, social, psychological, physical, developmental, etc. indicators in students, have an idea about the meanings of these indicators, and gain the necessary competencies in this regard.

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Keywords: Primary school teacher, the child at risk, identification competence

INTRODUCTION

Today, there are many global problems and most of these problems are intertwined (Kitapçı, 2017). According to the World Economic Forum's 2023 Global Risks Report, global pandemics, war; energy, inflation, food and security crises, increasing debts, cost of living, social polarization due to misinformation, rapid climate change and geo-economic wars are currently predicted (World Economic Forum, 2023). With the impact of globalization, a problem in one part of the world affects all humanity in a short period. Wars, migration, climate change, poverty, pandemics, epidemics, economic crises, and natural disasters make it difficult for parents to raise children with their social, cultural, psychological, biological, and economic effects. The most important factor that protects children from risks is the family that gives them the belonging and support they need (Nalbant and Babaoğlu, 2016). In a society of fear, parents tend to take precautions with the perception of safety and unsafe in every situation related to the child (Çakı and Altundere, 2017). Family psychosocial problems such as poverty, food insecurity and housing instability affect children's health and development. The opportunities offered by the family and social environment have a strong impact on shaping children's well-being (Garg et al., 2012). The risks to which children are exposed are a problem that continues to exist from the past to the present and cannot be prevented all over the world. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), child neglect and abuse includes all forms of physical and/or emotional maltreatment, sexual abuse, neglect, and commercial or other exploitation of children under the age of 18 that cause actual or potential harm to the health, survival, development or dignity of the child in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power (WHO, 1999). The difference between child neglect and abuse is that abuse is active and neglect is passive (Özpolat, 2023). It is thought that the frequency of child neglect and abuse in our country and the world is much higher than that communicated to official institutions. Due to insufficient reporting to official institutions, neglect and abuse remain hidden and make the difficulties in the diagnostic process even more important (Başdaş and Bozdağ, 2018). Neglect and abuse harm the mental health of children, who are our future (Aktay, 2020; Bağla, et al., 2017).

According to the results of the Address Based Population Registration System (ABPRS), as of the end of 2022, the population of Turkey is 85 million 279 thousand 553 people, of which 22 million 578 thousand 378 are children. The ratio of the child population to the total population is 26.5%. (TÜİK, 2023) Ensuring and protecting the international legal rights of children, who constitute a significant proportion of Turkey's population, is of great importance. Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on November 20, 1989, States Parties to the Convention shall take all legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child against physical or mental

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assault, violence or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, abuse and ill-treatment of any kind, including rape, while in the care of his or her parents or one of them alone, or of his or her legal guardian or guardians, or of any person having care of him or her (UNICEF). This article of the convention, to which Turkey is a party, guarantees the protection of all children against all forms of neglect and abuse. Although children's rights are guaranteed to the greatest extent by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, states, societies and non-governmental organizations have important responsibilities in the protection and implementation of children's rights. Along with the protection and implementation of rights, problems that children may be exposed to should be recognized and prevented. The process of protecting children against the risks to which they may be exposed, preventing problems and protecting their rights starts with the child's closest relatives and extends to their social environment. Schools are the place where children spend most of their time after their homes; therefore, classroom teachers working in schools have important duties in identifying the problems they are exposed to, protecting them against the risks they may be exposed to and preventing problems.

Children are exposed to developmental, academic, emotional, social, physical, and environmental problems. Developmental, behavioral, educational, and familial problems experienced during childhood can have both lifelong and intergenerational effects (Anda, 2009; cited in Garner et al., 2012). According to Yılmaz, since most children's lives are spent at school, prevention activities at schools will be the most effective (Yılmaz, 2009). The important contributions of teachers who are in direct communication with children in recognizing and preventing the problem should not be ignored (Doğan and Bayar, 2018). After their families, teachers are the people who know children well, sometimes even better than their families (Süzan, 2023). Children spend the most time with their teachers after their parents. Primary school teachers can prevent many problems at an early stage by observing the differences and negativities in students and reaching the source of the problem (Bayındır, 2021). Primary school teachers' observation and monitoring of students' behaviors are valuable in diagnosing, solving, and preventing the problems that students are exposed to. For this reason, the research aims to determine the competence of primary school teachers to identify the problems experienced by students. It is thought that this study will guide what kind of actions the teacher can take such as understanding, recognizing, and intervening in the process despite problems that children may experience in physical, emotional, economic, sexual, etc. issues. The scope of this research is to comprehensively address the competencies of primary school teachers in identifying the problems experienced by their students. The research includes the roles that teachers assume during this process, the ways and methods of identifying problems and the measures and actions they implement to address the problems they identify. The research aims to determine the primary school teachers' awareness of the potential risk situations that students face and what they can do when they are exposed to these situations.

METHOD

In this section, the design of the study, the participants, the data collection tools and the techniques used in the analysis of the data are given. Case study, describing and explaining events within a situation or situations, a research design in which the researcher collects detailed information about the situation (Creswell, 2021; Yin, 2011). In this study, the teachers' is the ability to understand student-induced problems.

Research Design

A Case study design, one of the qualitative research methods, was used in this study. Qualitative research is a direct data source. Researchers strive to understand the perspectives of the participants objectively address situations and events from a broad perspective by accepting all participants as equal (Tarkun, 2000).

Participants

The study group consists of 19 classroom teachers working in public institutions affiliated to the Ministry of National Education in Şanlıurfa/Siverek district center in the 2023-2024 academic years. The study group

was determined using the convenience sampling method. This sampling method is based on easier access to the individual or individuals to be researched to accelerate the study (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2021).

Data Collection Tool

The data of the study were obtained using a semi-structured interview form consisting of 5 questions developed by the researchers and revised by taking expert opinions during the development phase. The semi-structured interview form consists of two parts. The first part of the form includes information about the participants and the second part includes semi-structured interview questions consisting of open-ended questions. While developing the interview form, the literature was used and submitted to the opinion of the field expert. After the pilot application of the interview form, the final version of the interview form was submitted the study group after the necessary corrections were made. The necessary ethical permissions were obtained for this research.

Data Analysis

Content and descriptive analysis techniques were used to analyze the collected data. Yıldırım and Şimşek (2021) defined the descriptive analysis method as a systematic and clear description of the data, then explaining and interpreting these descriptions and reaching some conclusions by establishing cause and effect relationships. Content analysis involves coding categories derived directly and inductively from raw data, which methodologists call grounded theory or grounded theory approach. This orientation develops theories or theoretically related explanations about the content of the analyzed document (Berg and Lune, 2015, p. 383).

Validity and Reliability

For reliability in the research, measures such as stakeholder participation and expert opinion, data source and data tool diversification, computerization of interview forms to prevent data loss, participant confirmation, independent analysis of data, and results by more than one researcher were used. The raw data obtained in this research will be stored electronically and analyzed when needed. The personal information of the teachers who participated in the study was kept confidential and the participants were given code names (T1, T2, T3...). In this study, the data obtained through the semi-structured interview form were coded by continuous reading. Themes and sub-themes were determined by processing the codes related to each other according to the framework created on the basis of the interview questions. The coding was performed independently by two researchers (co-coders). To ensure the validity of the research, explanatory and sincere communication was established with the participants before the interview, and opinions were obtained by ensuring participant confidentiality. Some of the participants' opinions were directly quoted for verification.

FINDINGS

The demographic information of the teachers who participated in the study is given below. To ensure the credibility of the research process and results participant verification, appropriate and adequate participation in data collection processes and sampling information were explained.

Table 1 - Information of the participants

Participant s	Gender	Age	Year of work-experience	Graduation status	Class level of education
T1	Male	40	16	Bachelor's Degree	1
T2	Male	30	6	Bachelor's Degree	3
T3	Male	30	7	Bachelor's Degree	1
T4	Female	25	2	Bachelor's Degree	3
T5	Male	26	3	Master's Degree	2
T6	Female	26	1	Bachelor's Degree	1
T7	Male	45	18	Bachelor's Degree	2
T8	Male	43	19	Bachelor's Degree	3
T9	Female	30	8	Bachelor's Degree	3
T10	Female	43	14	Bachelor's Degree	4
T11	Female	42	20	Bachelor's Degree	4
T12	Female	38	14	Bachelor's Degree	4
T13	Female	45	22	Bachelor's Degree	3
T14	Female	37	6	Bachelor's Degree	1
T15	Female	28	11	Bachelor's Degree	3
T16	Male	25	2	Bachelor's Degree	2
T17	Female	26	2	Master's Degree	3
T18	Male	27	4	Bachelor's Degree	1
T19	Female	30	6	Bachelor's Degree	2

8 male and 11 female teachers participated in the study. Seven of the teachers were over the age of 30 and 12 were under the age of 30. Five of the teachers teach 1st grade, 4 of them teach 2nd grade, 7 of them teach 3rd grade, and 3 of them teach 4th grade. Two of the teachers have master's degrees and 17 have bachelor's degrees.

Below are the findings that aim to determine classroom teachers' awareness of potential risk situations faced by students and what they can do when they are exposed to these situations.

Most of the teachers stated that they identified frequent illnesses, growth, and developmental delays that they observed in students as developmental problems. Some direct quotations are given below.

T11 - Generally, the health status of the student draws the attention of the teacher. Because classroom teachers frequently observe their students during the day, these indicators can be easily detected. Teachers are the people who can follow the developmental status of the student best after the family.

T2- Issues such as height-weight ratio appropriate for the developmental period, having a negative situation in their appearance, cleanliness of their clothes, and hand and nail care attract my attention. If there is a height-weight ratio that is not appropriate for their development, I wonder if they have a problem with nutrition at home. Likewise, by observing the cleanliness of hands, clothes, and faces, I try to understand whether there is negligence on the part of the

caregiver. Teachers see absenteeism, lack of interest in class, indiscipline and not doing homework as the most important academic problems that students face. Some direct quotations are given below.

T7- *The fact that the student does not come to the lesson in a state of readiness, does not fulfill the given homework, responsibilities, etc., and has low interest in the lesson are behaviors that attract attention to academic problems. Because it may decrease course success, it is the behavior draws attention primarily.*

T18- *Indifference to the lesson, complaining about a friend, talking without permission, and dealing with other things in the lesson are more noticeable. The teachers stated that they could identify violent sadness and violent tendencies the most among the emotional problems to which their students were exposed. Teachers stated that among the emotional problems that their to which their students were exposed they were most able to identify violent sadness and violent tendencies. Some direct quotations about this are given below.*

T10- *I notice when a student is prone to violence or when he/she is withdrawn because there is definitely an emotional problem under those behaviors.*

T18- *We understand that children generally have problems with crying crises, complaints of abdominal pain, and the desire to go home. For example, if a student says they have a stomach ache, I can often tell whether they are lying or not. I talk to their parents and usually something comes out.*

For example, one of my students did not want to come to school and came to school crying. When I asked her why, she said, "My mom leaves me at school and goes on a trip and then I go home alone.

The most common physical problems that teachers can directly identify are falls and injuries. Some direct quotations about this are given below.

T5- *The physical problems that children are exposed to in many areas such as falls, injuries, and disabilities are a situation that every teacher should pay attention to because unfortunately there are cases of violence in families. They definitely talk to their family about this, and if necessary, they talk to the guidance service. I see if there is a situation that we need to convey to the necessary authorities. Unfortunately, families can physically abuse children by characterizing them as beings.*

T4- *My students usually express this when they have a physical problem. They support each other in cases of falls and injuries. Even when they experience a small pain or ache, they tell me and their friends in class because they expect attention.*

RESULT and DISCUSSION

Teachers are the first to recognize when a child is at risk. Teachers monitor the development of each child and closely follow their academic, social, physical and spiritual development. By monitoring the attitudes and behaviors of the family to ensure the child's healthy life and academic continuity, they recognize possible risks and dangers and take the necessary measures. In this study, the reactive indicators necessary for primary school teachers to recognize risks without any victimization of the student were examined. As a result of these examinations, it was seen that the most teachers consider all kinds of advantages and disadvantages that will affect students' their academic life. Similarly, in a study conducted by Erol and Savaş (2022), preschool teachers defined the child at risk as a child whose development is negatively affected, whose needs are not met and who grows up in an unsafe environment. Teachers can recognize their students' academic, social, physical, psychological and developmental reactions. For example, physical injuries of children are seen as a situation that should not be ignored and should be immediately intervened in. Similarly, in the research conducted by Bayındır (2021), most pre-service teachers stated that they can identify children at risk from the negative behaviors they exhibit. (Nalbant and Babaoğlu, 2016) found that the families of at-risk students were inadequate in supervising their children at school, that students did not share the problems they experienced with their families, and that these students had problems with their friends, teachers and school administration at school. Similarly, another variable that is perceived observationally is children's developmental and health-related indicators. The fact that students differ developmentally from their peers, are constantly ill, lack hygiene and self-care skills draws the attention of the teacher and pushes them to take necessary measures. In a study conducted by Erol and Savaş (2022), preschool teachers stated that they had the most problems with children who are at risk in classroom

management and that these children had intense unwanted behaviors and lacked self-care skills. In addition students' social and psychological behavior problems are not reflected concretely in the classroom environment. However, the teacher tries to perceive the reactions that will evoke these indicators. For example, the majority of teachers see and evaluate students who do not participate in games, swear, have poor friendships, cannot control their reactions, and cannot communicate adequately in this category. Nalbant (2010) emphasizes that schools are suitable environments for regular observation of children by teachers and other adults, and for identifying and preventing risky behaviors. Teachers perceive academic problems in students as a decline in achievement. Dealing with students' mental health problems is not among the duties of teachers, but having knowledge and awareness about this situation can help identify students who need special interventions (Gren-Landell et al., 2015). Counseling teachers can make it easier for them to recognize students' mental health problems and help create a positive school climate in the classroom. (Lynn et al., 2003).

Teachers who produce solutions especially for children at risk need to be conscious and educated about this issue, have high attention and awareness, and be equipped in communication. The resolution of problems and conflicts is possible through effective communication. It is recommended that teachers should be provided with the necessary information about students and their families, demographic characteristics that may cause child victimization should be identified, teachers should be empowered with guidance counselors to increase their effectiveness, teachers should be clearly informed about what they can do in risky situations, an inventory of children's behaviors that may be risky should be made, teachers should be interested not only in students' academic lives but also in all kinds of vital characteristics that will affect their learning, inclusive education justifications should be established within the program and teacher intervention programs for risky situations should be updated according to these indicators.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed by the author(s) with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Ethics Approval

Formal ethical approval was granted by the Eskisehir Osmangazi University Social Sciences and Humanities Human Research Ethics Committee.

Funding

No specific grant was given to this research by funding organizations in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Research and Publication Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the research team's university ethics committee of the Eskisehir Osmangazi University (Approval Number/ID: 10/01/2024/2024-01. Hereby, we as the authors consciously assure that for the manuscript the following is fulfilled:

- This material is the authors' own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere.
- The paper reflects the authors' own research and analysis in a truthful and complete manner.
- The results are appropriately placed in the context of prior and existing research.
- All sources used are properly disclosed.

Contribution Rates of Authors to the Article

These authors contributed equally to this work.

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