**Today’s Dilemma for Preschool Curriculum:**

**Literacy or Play?**

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Öz

Bu çalışma, özellikle okuryazarlık eğitimine ve okul öncesi çocuklar için oyun zamanı üzerine odaklanarak, okul öncesi eğitime ilişkin küresel ve Türkiye'deki bağlamları ele aldı. Okul öncesi eğitimde okuryazarlık öğretimi ve daha ileri düzeyde öğrenciler için oyuna harcanan zaman konusunda çeşitli varsayımlar olmuştur. Okuma yazma öğretmek veya en azından okuryazarlık faaliyetleri yapmaya başlamak için en uygun zaman ebeveynler kadar eğitimciler arasında da endişe kaynağı olmuştur. Bununla birlikte, okuryazarlık faaliyetlerinin, okul öncesi dönemde çocukların bir bütün olarak gelişimi için çok önemli olan oyuna vakit ayırmalarını engellememesi gerektiği iddia edilebilir. Okuryazarlığa hazır olma, ortak bir politikaya veya herhangi bir ebeveyn kararına bağlı olmak değildir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Okuryazarlık, Okuryazarlık Becerileri, Bilişsel Yetenekler, Okul Öncesi

Abstract

The current study discussed global and Turkish contexts regarding preschool education by focusing specifically on literacy education and play time for preschoolers. There have been varying assumptions with respect to teaching literacy during preschool education and time spent on play for further academic level of learners. When it is the best time to teach literacy or at least starting doing literacy activities has been a concern among educators as well as parents. However, it can be contended that literacy activities should not deter preschoolers from spending time on play, which is crucial for children development as a whole. Readiness for literacy is not to be up to a common policy or any parental decision.

*Keywords*: Literacy, Literacy Skills, Cognitive Abilities, Preschooler

INTRODUCTION

Preschool education covers the years of education prior to elementary school. It is a system that is composed of lists of planned activities and it is beyond parents in a way that each child becomes engaged in more activities than they normally do at home (Çetinkaya, 2006). Preschooling is the most important and basic aspect of education as preschoolers are ready to be moulded during those ages. It helps learners to adapt to various environments. As a consequence, it is widely agreed that preschool education is necessary around the world as it prioritizes education of children, who are vital elements of life.

The ages between 0-6 are the best years for individuals to notice their children. Preschooling has positive effects on parents and learners. Various studies mention that investment on preschool education proves useful (Yekta, 2005; Büyükekiz, 2008; Siva, 2008; Erbay, 2008; Dursun, 2009; Cinkılıç, 2009). As stated in Neuman&Hatipoglu (2015), there is growing evidence worldwide on the benefits pre-primary education for children’s school readiness and performance in the early grades. Moreover, parents and educators together collaborate to develop learners’ potential and work on them (Demir, 2010). Preschool children are egocentric (Erikson) based on their ages, but preschool education enables children to learn that they are an individual, and they learn to tackle with issues and problems happening around them. Likewise, children learn the basics of socialization that is crucial for their future life as well as learning how to behave in differing situations and contexts thanks to preschools.

The Significance of the Study

Preschooling, a form of education that is so necessary, has some fallacies based on the practices, principles, learners and educators all round the world. The curriculum of the preschool needs to place emphasis on basic principles that are to do with selecting appropriate materials and their suitability for them as well as how important the daily activities at the preschool along with previous children experiences. An effective preschool program has to take all shareholders into consideration and provide learning that is enjoyable and challenging enough. It is vital to note that learners reach significant results by making use of play and other forms of learning that are appealing to them (Israel Ministry of Education, 2010). This paper will basically mention the two most important issues of preschoolers in the world by touching upon some practices carried out globally as well as mostly reflecting Turkey’s attempts and practices carried out so far. Namely, the issues of literacy and time spent for play during preschool education will be the main concern covering some countries and Turkey. It is thought that this study may be important because there are insufficient number of studies on literacy and playtime in preschool; therefore, it will shed a light upon future researches. In addition, this paper can raise awareness of the teachers, prospective teachers and parents for the issues of literacy and play in preschool.

Methodology

This paper is literature review study which involves gathering and integrating information about issues on literacy and play-time in preschooling. “A literature review distills the existing literature in a subject field; the objective of the literature review is to summarize the state of the art in that subject field” (Rowley, 2004, p. 32). It is a systematic method of researching, synthesizing and evaluating the already published data in order to identify a good quality of references on a topic (Fink, 2005; Rau, 2004). This work has solely been carried out on written sources and electronic resources. In addition, the opinions of the families and the experts in the media are taken into consideration. The focus of the study is up-to-date and controversial, so t is useful to discuss it with field research so that it can be taken into account in the regulation of preschool programs.

1. Changing the Nature of Preschool Education

Preschooling has been a popular term for many years. To delve into the background of preschooling, it first started in the USA for disadvantaged children (Kamerman, 2006). It was found out that these children have improved with respect to their rate of learning and experiences compared to their peers. Preschool education in Turkey can be traced back to 19th century during the reign of Ottoman Empire. It has been compulsory for 48-66 months olds in Turkey in 2007-2008 academic years. In 2012-2013 academic years, preschool education did not become a part of compulsory education in Turkey (Ministry of National Education [MONE], 2014). It was rendered optional instead. Recently, there have been attempts to increase preschools with the help of the Ministry of National Education, The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), universities and non-governmental organizations. However, these policies have to focus on more disadvantaged kids and accessibility of preschool education (Erturk, 2013).

Today, in many countries, one can witness the fact that there is a difference between educational systems and how they are applied and implemented. Preschool education itself encompasses a lot of issues as well as other aspects of education.

There are differences in terms of access to the preschool among countries. Internationally, a place for all children by the time they reach a certain age has been guaranteed by some European countries. To exemplify, Sweden is a leading country that makes preschool education accessible for almost all of its citizens (age 1) as well as Denmark and Finland considering the ages of 3-6 and age 3 in Germany (Kamerman, 2001, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2001). Spain and Ireland follow them with respect to 5 years-olds. In Poland, for 5- 6 year olds the preschool has been compulsory between 2004 and 2011. Unfortunately, Turkey falls behind many countries in the EU with respect to accessibility of preschool education as in the case of many Arab and African countries as stated by Çetinkaya (2010). While the participation is among EU countries about 95 percent in Turkey this rate is 16 percent (Atay-Turhan, Koc, Isiksal, & Isiksal, 2009). Furthermore, the number of preschool institutions is very low in Turkey when compared with OECD and European countries. Apart from that, the number of schools for preschoolers falls behind the number of learners. Especially in the countryside, there are few preschool institutions. Turkey cannot provide equal opportunities for preschool education (Çetinkaya, 2006). However, educated people tend to send their children to preschool more as suggested by Pehlivan (2006). Kuday (2007) illustrates today all children irrespective of their social and financial situation are in need of schooling.

When it comes to the financial issues on preschooling, American and Japanese preschool education is free; hence, there is much participation. In the Nordic countries, the programs may be publicly funded and delivered whereas in Netherlands and Germany it is publicly funded and privately delivered. In less developed countries such as Brazil as well as most of Africa preschooling includes a combination of free-access or private deliver. The access to preschooling is very limited in most of the countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2006). Preschool education is predominantly provided by public free schools, but the number of private preschools is increasing in Turkey. In any case, the percentage of preschoolers are fewer than 50 percent of children aged 3–4 in most low- and middle-income countries around the world (UNICEF, 2014).Despite the fact that the enrolment in early childhood education increased from 27 percent in 1990 to 54 percent in 2012 (UNESCO, 2014) only 17 percent of children, which is a small percentage, could access pre-primary education in low-income countries in 2012 (UNESCO, 2012). UNICEF (2012) highlights that due to the cost of private preschooling; it becomes difficult for poorer households to reach pre-primary education. Many countries allocate less than 10 percent of their education budget on preschooling. Not surprisingly, this share is lower in poorer and low-income regions (UNESCO, 2012).

World-wide, the countries tend to focus on different areas and abilities in preschooling. When developed countries are taken into account, they focus on cognitive, emotional and physical abilities as well as art and technical knowledge unlike other countries. In Germany, play and drama are prioritized like Italy which focuses on transferring cultural knowledge to preschoolers as stated by Çetinkaya (2006). With respect to China’s kindergarten curriculum it can be asserted that learners are seen as a whole, and they pay attention to play time and learners are involved in active learning. One can also mention teacher-led parts in preschool education in some regions, too (Sutterby, 2012). English-speaking countries focus more on literacy and numeracy (OECD, 2006) unlike the Korean National Kindergarten Curriculum, which is to focus on the whole child, creativity, children's individuality, play-oriented activity and integrated learning (Kwon, 2013).Main foundations of preschool education have already been mentioned in many countries. Turkey and Japan, for instance, focus on the same principle that preschool education has to take learners in account. Age, learner-centeredness and teaching through games during preschool education are a few of them. It is also stated that characteristics of preschool education in Turkey are: child based, play based, flexible, eclectic, and well balanced activities (MONE, 2013). However, Turkey additionally mentions the main aim of preschool education, which is making young learners ready for elementary school (Sakai, 2006). In the study, Turkish parents assume that they send their children to preschool institutions as they believe preschool education helps better cognitive abilities unlike Japanese mothers who say preschool education makes learners ready for elementary school education as accepted by Turkish education authorities. Japanese mothers and Turkish mothers also regard preschool education extremely important for prospective educational practices and career because they report that institutions give more than they can do to their children.

1. New Content for Preschool Curriculum: Literacy

The idea of preschool education has evolved and changed over years. The number of working women, the status of working women have changed as well (UNESCO,2006).Therefore, as stated in UNESCO (2007) preschooling has been an essential service for employed parents apart from contribution to cognitive stimulation, socialization, child development, and early education. Other members of families including fathers have changed their perspectives and raised their awareness on the importance of preschool education. Apart from this, children living in cities do not have enough opportunities to play at home, so there was a need to play more. Preschooling institutions were opened; however, they were also regarded as a first step to make a child get ready for elementary schools, which causes some problems. One of the problems related to this is the emergent literacy among preschoolers and family and society expectation on how to make learners ready for prospective educational steps and literacy.

When it comes to literacy, it is assumed that learning to read and write are essential skills to improve as they also contribute to our intellectual and thinking ability in general. Pehlivan (2006) states that being able to understand, articulating ideas and comments as well as reflecting on what people read are dependent on literacy skills. Parents tend to relate perfect literacy skills with prospective academic success.

Likewise, Öztürk (1995) and Kırca (2007) contend that success in educational life depends on literacy skills as well as arithmetic. Reading readiness has been a subject of various studies before to illustrate that there is a link between literacy experiences and later academic achievement as preschool education is planned, structured and close to real education. Similarly, Kırca (2007) assumes that early school education contributes to cognitive, affective, physical and emotional well-being of learners as well as increasing the level of readiness. Also, Kirik (2011) states that preschoolers are more successful in elementary school with respect to physical activities. They can hold pencils as required and they are good at basic drawing skills. Additionally, preschoolers do not experience serious problems during elementary school education and become higher achievers (Atci, 2012). Also, in Cambodia and China, children who participated any form of pre-school had better school readiness than children who had no experience in preschool (UNESCO,2015). When compared to a control group in Mozambique, children at a rural preschool showed better cognitive abilities and motor skills and they tend to enroll in primary school by were 24 percent (Martinez et al., 2012 as cited in Nueman& Hatipoglu, 2015). In parallel to this, Morris (2015) contends that it is vital to provide effective literacy practices and approaches within Early Childhood Education Intervention Programs to encourage literacy learning and development of young children in disadvantaged communities.

Ceylan (2017) maintains that preschool education can be compulsory as preschoolers are said to have better scores in terms of cognitive and linguistic abilities in the future. Kose (2013) asserts that preschool education influences elementary school education. The first grade is meaningful as it tells about the effects of preschool education. Better preschool access or quality can assist reducing achievement gaps in elementary school. Preschool education contributes to readiness and it is a must from birth to high school. (Karoly, 2009).Furthermore, data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicate that 15-year-old students who participated in at least one year of pre-primary education outperformed the students who did not (OECD, 2014).

In Turkey, there have been some discussions regarding the new system announced in 2012-2013, which is about teaching literacy skills earlier. That has received a lot of criticisms (Erturk, 2013). Unlike general perceptions, in Turkey, some scholars consider that parents are reluctant to send their children to preschool education as they perceive that there are practices of working on literacy which may deter them from sending their children to preschool institutions. There may not have any time left for fun and play. It can be asserted that preschool education should not aim to teach literacy to children, it should rather facilitate readiness (Çetinkaya, 2010; Tasci, 2016, MONE 2014). Parents have to adopt positive attitudes towards children when faced with difficulties. This may prove the fact that starting primary school and working on literacy at the age of 6 or before may be considered inappropriate as opposed to common practices in Turkey. Siva (2008) similarly supports that the aim of preschool education is not to teach literacy skills. The issue of readiness for literacy has to be taken into account as preschooled children may get bored in elementary schools, and they may not like schools.

Preschooling is a step towards literacy skills rather than a starting point where the rest of the instruction of literacy takes place in the first grade. Students need activities that are to develop their motor skills and they need to cater to their needs on the way to learn more about learning to read and write. Schweinhart and Weikart (1997) underline that the early education should not prioritize academic preparation for school, instead help children develop decision-making problem-solving skills as well as getting well with others (UNESCO, 2015).

Emergent literacy activities may cause children to spend their time with plays. According to Piaget children need reach the right stage so that they can comprehend the concept of reading and writing (Lancaster, 2003). Children learn by doing, singing, touching and hands-on activities. What people aim to teach to learners should be provided to learners through games. What is taught during preschool education must be in accordance with the developmental stages of preschoolers (Kirik, 2011). However, what affects school readiness is a beyond what learners receive during preschool education. How parents regard education and their attitudes towards it and opportunities they provide for their children are also important as well. Not only time spent at a preschool and reading at a preschool age but also attending cultural activities, visiting art events and reflecting on them are also crucial for readiness as well (Tozar, 2011).

Nowadays, children at preschools spend far more time being taught and tested rather than play and develop skills. There is a growing epidemic for parents and teachers to provide increasingly learning experiences for children. As a result, the likelihood for free play especially outdoors is becoming less of a priority. Even though literature highlight that children learn best through play, many preschools are becoming obsessed with academic success. As Bassok, Latham and Rorem (2016) assume currently, kindergarten teachers have higher academic expectations for children both prior to kindergarten entry and during the kindergarten year. They spend much time on to advanced literacy and math content; on the contrary, they spend less time on art, music and science.

Less Playtime in Preschools

Play is a process that includes a range of voluntary, intrinsically motivated activities which are engaged in for the purpose of enjoyment (Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2008). Apart from academic efforts and literacy work, play forms the basis of children’s lives. Play is the leading source of development in the ages between 2 and 6 according to Vygotsky. In a way, play is children’s language, a tool for communication and a way for children to relax. It is essential for healthy development. Even when they are babies, play is a way of expressing feelings and communication. They are also the years when children play the most (Frost et al. 2008). In other words, play has a vital role in children’s lives since it is a way of expressing feelings and abilities. Physical abilities lead to improved cognitive abilities. A child can learn to interact with others. Play adds on to personal experiences and imitation, which is extremely crucial for children (Siva, 2008). Similarly, Perihan (2011) says that games help to have a better listening and speaking abilities. Problem-solving is achieved through play. Play is as important as personal care and love as well as encouraging taking responsibilities.

Play has a great role in both social and emotional development of the children. It teaches children how to think, plan, be patient, obey the rules, mend mistakes and enables to practice skills. Moreover, thanks to play children imagine, create, make sense of their world, give and take of relationships with friends. Playing outdoor and indoor, for instance, may reduce their stress. However, today as academic skills are often seen as the priority, social-emotional skills may be neglected by most parents and educators. Research has indicated that social-emotional skills are of utmost importance for kids to be successful not only in academic settings but also in social ones. For instance, having higher social emotional skills in preschool is bounded to important outcomes at the age of 25 (Jones& Greenberg& Crowley, 2015). Therefore, play should be integral to academic environment more, rather than reduce the allocated time for it in order to make room for more academics. Preschoolers can master skills they will need for academic subjects later on. As Wright also suggests (2016), plays help literacy develop; hence, plays in the form of drama need to be added to any curriculum. It is of great importance for educators to practice play and literacy in play areas. In brief, play in preschools can contribute to the development of oral language and literacy skills. More play in the curriculum may help children to adjust school setting and enhance readiness for the literacy.

Likewise, play is beneficial for thinking skills and language development. Learners make sense of their world and build their knowledge based on plays. Learners may have exploratory play, directed and scaffolded play and sensory play. It contributes to thinking skills, reasoning, perspective taking, problem solving, lateral thinking, divergent thinking, oral language, mathematical understandings and experiences, literacy, self-regulation and self-expression, intrinsic motivation, skill acquisition and practice, self-initiation and decision-making, responsibility, questioning, reflecting and resilience (Walker, 2011).

As for the further advantages of play, it contributes to second language learning as suggested by Uslu (2017) who assumes that singing, drama and dance activities in groups and pairs contribute to language learning. Those activities are designed to increase creativity and critical thinking beforehand. Playing with puppets and puzzles prove important results for language learning in the research. One can also contend that playing games encourages learning more and creativity due to the fact that games are like simulations of real life, and children behaves in a way they want. Apart from individual skills, games are used to transfer traditions and cultural values to offspring. Games have a long-lasting on learners as suggested by Emir (2011). According to Ceylan (2017), preschoolers do not have literacy anxiety as long as they are involved in games, and they learn through games as opposed to the common idea common in Turkey.

As suggested by the literature review, there are countless benefits of play at preschool. Schools may offer a lot of ways for plays. For instance, preschools around the world mostly offer home corner, imaginative play, art and story-telling. In Nordic countries, the places for play are of great importance (Sandseter, 2010). In these countries kids are encouraged for playing freely and exploring (Amus, 2013). It is also not very surprising to find nature kindergartens in which children play outside almost every day. These types of schools are also famous in Germany and Sweden (Amus, 2013). Yet, in Turkish context, play areas are said to be the places that are incapable of fostering outdoor play and learning (Ozturk 2009; Olgan& Kahriman-Ozturk, 2011) and they are much more used in spring (Ozturk, 2009). It is also crystal clear from national curricula that although there is too much detailed description of indoor learning settings, almost no details are available for outdoor environment (MONE, 2013).

Even though there is abundance of research that there exists connections between play and literacy skills, there are some anti-play forces. That is, the term play may be misunderstood and misinterpreted in some contexts. One can regard play as a free time activity, which is carried out as a non-academic activity. Zigler & Bishop–Josef (2004) mentions that administers, policy makers and teachers regard play as a waste of instructional time which has no benefits for cognitive outcomes. According to Erturk (2013), free time activities are regarded as preparation activities for literacy skills in Turkey. That is, play time activities are not the basic ones. Activities witnessed in the study were all about writing letters rather than play. Many educators considered these activities as homework or a lesson in the study rather than plays. Additionally, Norwegian preschool educators in Vatne and Gjem’s study (2017) implied that teacher educators attach importance to children’s language learning unlike play. As a result, the deprivation of play time is a common issue world-wide.

Discussion and Implications

Globally, preschool education must be common spread for all children equally. In addition, education must be compulsory at preschool age as well as developed countries do. Preschool is seen a step of education that teaches how to survive for prospective years.

In preschooling, literacy skills and readiness for literacy are open to more discussions. People may adopt varying amount of discussions on the topic, however, preschoolers need more games and physical activities. In preschool institutions, there must be a room for science, play, reading and nature to improve motor skills of children. Indoor and outdoor spaces are also necessary for play. One needs to focus on outdoor facilities of preschool institutions as well as other facilities. Construction of buildings may prevent preschoolers from spending much time outdoors; however, a safe garden of optimal length is a requirement for children.

Playground design has to be in accordance with the needs of preschoolers. That is, protection from wind and other weather conditions are of great importance. Safety is another issue that needs to be focused on. Considering preschool education in Turkey, state school preschools share the same playground with elementary schools, but that could pose problems for preschoolers. A garden has to have a sand box and a water box. If not, action games may be played with construction toys or some exploratory activities may be played. In addition, if a garden is far away from meeting the needs of learners, that may cause issues as well. In other words, a garden that is far away from toilets or cafeterias may be a risk for learners as well. Outdoor games in Turkey are not enough, and preschool teachers are not knowledgeable about them as well. It is asserted that the length of playgrounds as well as safety measures and risks make teachers avoid playing outside (Çetinkaya, 2010).

Physical activities are to be regarded important as they also contribute to well-being of children. Every child needs to move freely since when children are offered interesting and creative physical activities, it is possible to discover different interests and talents of children. In Sakai (2006), Turkish mothers do not favor outdoor activities in all seasons as Japan mothers do. Turkish mothers have more overprotective attitude towards their children.

Literacy requires further work, and there should be a lot of stakeholders on the issue. Preschool education needs to serve as a step to assist elementary school and preschool educators to collaborate and decide what the best step is for a child. Sharing experiences would be so valuable to determine the future of learners (Tozcu, 2011).

Parental contribution and engagement is highly crucial for learner development and academic achievement. Teachers should reach out to families to educate parents about the importance of early educational activities at home. The number of preschooling facilities as well as education levels of parents influences preschool education. Educated ones prefer sending their children to preschool but may face limited number of preschools unlike uneducated parents who refrain from sending their children to preschools due to personal, financial and social reasons. If children are equipped with enough number of literacy materials, they tend to read and write than their counterparts. Children of the same age raised in different socio economic standards may not the same in terms of success. Each child is also unique regarding cognitive abilities. There are also neurological factors that have to be taken into account with respect to hemispheres in learner brains when talking about working on literacy and starting school (Siva, 2008).

Teacher education is one of the most important things in preschooling. Most teacher are said to have lower qualifications and they require training in comparison to other level teachers. (Neuman, et. Al, 2005). It is clear that, both pre-service and in-service training needs should be addressed by governments.

Children have an enormous capacity for learning and the eagerness should be kept alive. A meticulous work on preschool curriculum to make it developmentally appropriate will help build basis for this. (UNESCO, 2015).

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