

What Do Parents Expect From Pre-School Teachers In Turkey?

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Abstract

Parental involvement and school partnership are very important in preschool education. Children demonstrate better performance in school. Therefore, it is a critical component to include parents in the research to better understand how to improve pre-school teacher education programs. The aim of this study is to determine the parental expectations about what the basic qualifications of pre-school teachers should include. Data were collected through structured interviews from 500 parents from different age groups and occupations, all of whom had a child or children at the pre-school age. After many careful and analytical readings of the collected data, several categories emerged. The most important qualities of a well-qualified pre-school teacher could be grouped into three categories: “professional”, “personal” and “teacher behaviors and practices.” More specifically, it was found that parents expected preschool teachers to be experts in their field, to be open to communication with kids and parents effectively, to pay attention to their professional development, to be proficient in using Turkish language, to be respectful to children rights, and to be an ethical person as well as a professional. In terms of personal characteristics, preschool teachers were expected to be social, caring, assertive, responsible, persistent, and self-confident.

Key word: Preschool teachers’ training, Pre-school teacher, Parents’ expectations.

Introduction

In the last decade, the Republic of Turkey has made a great effort to make remarkable changes in the Basic Education Program with the support of \$ 600 million US dollars – a loan from World Bank (Loan No. 4355-TU). One of the targets of the Basic Education Program is the construction and furnishing 300 new pre-school classrooms at existing basic education schools, educational material and training to develop pre-school education as an integral part of basic education, as well as training and educational materials to support informal education for mothers of young children. Pre-school education is not compulsory education in Turkey. In the effort to extend pre-school education all over the country, pre-school teachers’ education is being given necessary importance. High-quality pre-school education produces substantial long-term educational, social, and economic benefits. However, research findings report that large benefits are gained only when teachers are professionally prepared and adequately compensated (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Oden, Schweinhart, & Weikart, 2000; Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott-Shim, 2000; Whitebook, Sakai, Gerber, & Howes, 2001; Barnett, 2003). In Turkey, Total Quality Management has been applied in Turkish educational system. Güneysu (2005) cautions the professionals and policy makers to focus on the interaction between educators (teachers) and parents and children on the way of improving the quality of pre-school education, in addition to organizational infrastructure and the quality of activities in these schools.

This circumstance makes it necessary for parents to be active participants, simply because parents are among the stakeholders in their children’s education. Parental involvement and school partnership are common, yet according to some researchers, we are far beyond understanding how to improve it (Batey, 1996; Edwards, 2004). When parents are enabled to play key roles in quality school settings, children demonstrate heightened achievement scores, perform better in school, stay in school longer, and attend better school (Wright & Stegelin, 2003). Therefore, it is a critical component to include parents in the research to better understand how to improve pre-school education programs (Powel, 1991). During the recent years, Project Head Start was initiated to provide equal opportunities for children, asking for parental support. Thus, parents had become decision maker, volunteers, observers in the classroom and teacher at home (Wright & Stegelin, 2003). In addition, Reggio Emilia is an another program that require parental and societal participation. In this program, adults are expected to cooparte with childrem for the projects. The success of projects are based on the collaboration among children, adults, parents, teachers and other community members. (Fillipini & Vecchi, 2000; Giudici et al., 2004).

In Turkey, the program for pre-school education is based on the philosophy of developmentally appropriate practices. According to Bredekamp (1987), teachers can use child development knowledge to identify the range of appropriate behaviors, activities, and materials for a specific age group. This knowledge is used in conjunction with understanding about individual children's growth patterns, strengths, interests, and experiences to design the most appropriate learning environment. Although the content of the curriculum is determined by many factors such as tradition, the subject matter of the disciplines, social or cultural values, and parental desires for the content and teaching strategies to be developmentally appropriate, they must be age appropriate and individually appropriate. Although many research findings suggest that parental involvement in the educational process increases student achievement (Bean, Bush, McKenry, and Wilson, 2003; Maton, Hrabowski III, and Greif, 1998), such involvement has not been successfully maintained in Turkish context; parents are usually away from the school. Interestingly enough, parents try hard to find informal ways of selecting the best teachers for their children during the process of enrollment, confirming a saying in Turkish "Do not spare the rod" said by parents to teachers. Parents ask their immediate environment such as relatives and very close friends, which teacher is better? So, parents try to get that teacher to become their children's teacher. Nowadays, this trend is changing with the new curriculum and policy changes at the national level.

Teacher education is an important part of developing educational policies. Therefore, emphasis has been placed in restructuring the primary education system in Turkey. In developing the teachers' qualifications, social and cultural values should also be incorporated into the process. Consequently, parental involvement gained importance, leading to a need for teachers to develop their interpersonal skills when working with families. Hughes and MacNaughton (2001) synthesized international studies and reported that good staff-parent relationship in early childhood benefit children, staff, and parents. Cooper and Christie (2005) emphasize the power of parents as an important stakeholder in education. Similarly, Sheldon and Von Voorhis (2004) found that higher quality programs were associated with wider implementation of parent-child interactive homework, higher level of parental volunteering, and more parents on decision making committees. Since parental involvement is such an important in participating educational process, determining parental expectations is vital to guide teacher preparation program and the development of the curriculum. It is expected that the result of this study will contribute to the teachers' qualification in the form of clear parental expectations. This study might also provide feedback to the existing curriculum studies from a different angle: the parents. The presented research focuses on this important, albeit neglected, topic. The aim of this study is to determine the parental expectations about what the basic qualifications of pre-school teachers should include.

Method

In order to determine parents' expectations concerning well-qualified preschool teachers, data were collected through interviews. The question "What are the main qualities of a well-qualified pre-school teacher?" was asked to 500 parents from different age groups and occupations, all of whom had a child going to the pre-school in different parts of Turkey. So, this study is a kind of nation wide survey. The profile of parents is shown at table 1.

Insert Table (1) about here

Parents in cities were from the middle class, and mainly had high school or university degrees. The collection of parents' opinions was completed with the help of university students at pre-school teacher training programs. These students were trained in data collection procedure and they were required to record the parents' answers without any changes or modifications.

Data Analysis

After many careful and analytical readings of the collected data, several categories emerged. The most important qualities of a well-qualified pre-school teacher as indicated by parents could be grouped into three categories: "professional", "personal" and "teacher behaviors and practices." Based on these thematic categories, all text was subsequently coded. Some comments from parents were collapsed into one category while others were expanded into various sub-categories. For example, some of the characteristics indicated by parents having similar contents like "s/he should speak well", "s/he should use Turkish well", "his/her speech should be understandable", "s/he should speak politely" were expressed by the researcher as "s/he should use Turkish proficiently". Alternatively, items indicating language proficiency, one of the components of the teacher qualifications, were elaborated on by the researcher to refer to different aspects of this proficiency, such as 'being careful about his/her speech with children', 'being careful about his/her choice of words', 'accepting speech style being effective on communication', 'having a good command of Turkish grammar', 'understanding the importance of intonation while speaking', 'being willing to improve vocabulary', 'being careful about pronunciation', and

‘evaluating the effect of careful speech in the language development of the child’. These two steps were repeated while forming items related to other components of the teacher qualifications. Finally, further sub categories were determined and all data categories were represented in a figure (see figure 1).

Insert figure (1) about here

Findings and Results

As it is shown in figure 1, parents expect preschool teachers to be competent in their profession, to have some personal characteristics, and finally, to be competent in their teaching behavior and practices.

Expected Professional Qualifications

Parents first and foremost expect preschool teachers to be experts in their field. Then, they expect preschool teachers to communicate with parents and children effectively, to spend effort for their professional development, to use Turkish language effectively and efficiently, to know and respect children’s rights, and to be ethical in their teaching practices. Each of these qualifications will be explained in the following paragraphs.

Field expertness: Almost all parents expect preschool teachers to be knowledgeable about child development, nutrition, health, and to have an awareness of early childhood education principles and techniques. Knowledge of child development covers knowing about development stages, individual differences, and child development in general. Parental expectations differ in a way that mothers expect preschool teachers for more caring side such as health, and nutrition.

Being knowledgeable in child development: According to parents, preschool teachers should be able to:

- Comprehend the basics principles of child development and developmental periods of children
- Understand the theoretical background of child development
- Understand the relation between education and development
- Recognize developmental differences
- Identify the developmental needs of children
- Define reasons for developmental differences
- Understand the roles of teachers on child development
- Articulate the differences among different stages of childhood development
- Evaluate the developmental needs of the child
- Evaluate developmental characteristics of the child
- Evaluate the relation between different domains of development
- Evaluate child development as a whole
- Evaluate the external factors effecting development
- Understand why children at that age ask such questions
- Evaluate education programs according to different ages
- Evaluate the characteristics of development at different ages

Awareness of early childhood education: Preschool teachers are expected to understand and value the importance of early childhood education. Therefore, they should recognize the importance of children’s interests and skills during early childhood education, compare different views on pre-school education, establish the relationship between pre-school education and its effect on later stages of education, recognizing the importance of adult’s behaviors in childhood education. Finally, preschool teachers are expected to be able to:

- Evaluate differences among approaches in pre-school education
- Evaluate the importance of pre-school education in terms of cognitive development
- Evaluate the similarities among approaches in pre-school education
- Evaluate the effects of education on development
- Evaluate the environmental factors affecting the child’s health
- Evaluate how children programs on TV affects on child development
- Evaluate the place of children publications in pre-school education

Individual differences: Preschool teachers are expected to be able to observe children in their natural environment. Within this environment, they should be able to understand the importance of specific behaviors depending on individual differences among children, identify individual differences of children using their knowledge about the characteristics of different developmental stages, and finally, differentiate individual differences among children.

Nutrition: Preschool teachers primarily are expected to recognize the relationship between health and nutrition, evaluate the effect of nutrition on development, be willing to teach nutritious habits to children, and pay attention to their own behaviors while modeling nutritious habits for the children.

Health: Parents expect preschool teachers to be sensitive to children's health, to have basic knowledge about the human body, to take measurements for childhood illness, to be alert to the symptoms of diseases, and to evaluate the environmental factors affecting the child's health.

Professional development: Rapid changes in science and technology make parents think that professional development is important for preschool teachers to develop and maintain their skills. Professional development is mentioned usually by working, university graduates fathers. The following statements show that parents also expected preschool teachers to:

- Be aware of what is going on in life and use those life information in teaching
- Participate in scientific meetings related to his occupation
- Volunteer to follow up on technological developments
- Be sensitive to scientific developments in his occupation
- Recognize extraordinary situations and events in class- only recognize?
- Be willing to solve the problems of children
- Produce educational opportunities in accordance the local facilities
- Evaluate children individually
- Guide children to produce solutions about daily problems
- Attend exhibitions about education
- Be willing to read publications in the field
- Follow scientific innovations about his own field through internet research
- Read publications related to his occupation

Proficient in using Turkish language: When the expected qualifications were analyzed specifically, it became clear that almost all parents expect preschool teachers to speak Turkish well, understandably, and politely. They were also expected to be careful about their speech with children and their choice of words, have a good command of Turkish grammar, understand the importance of intonation while speaking, be willing to improve vocabulary, be careful about pronunciation, and evaluate the effect of careful speech in the language development of the child. In addition, they were also expected to evaluate the effect of correct speech on the linguistic development of the child, to pay attention to choosing words while speaking, and to be willing to improve their own vocabulary.

Communication: Preschool teachers are expected to communicate with parents and children effectively. Parents actually find communications between teachers and childrens communications more important than their communications with pre-school teachers. Parents expect pre school teachers to explain them what happened at day care centers during the day. In addition, they should be knowledgeable about basic notions of communication, accepting the effect that one's way of speaking can impact communication, recognize the importance of communication in human interactions, follow the media, read a daily newspaper, and finally be willing to cooperate with the family.

Commitment to children rights: Although existing literature does not mention this qualification, even though it is a few (15/500), Turkish parents expect preschool teachers to be aware of and defend or respect children's rights. Preschool teachers are expected to treat all children equally, to understand basic human rights, to be informed on children's rights, and to respect privacy.

Ethics: Many teachers associations have ethical codes for the teaching profession; however, pre-school teachers do not have those ethical codes. It is interesting that a few university graduate parents expect preschool teachers to be ethical in their practice. This also shows us that ethical guidelines are wanted and necessary. Another important issue is that parents expect preschool teachers to understand the principals of Atatürk. In addition, they should show empathy to kids and their parents, understand problems and to help kids to solve their problems effectively, and respect privacy etc.

Expected Teacher Behavior and Practices

Parents expect preschool teachers to be able to prepare enriched learning environments, materials, and activities. Parents also expect teachers to use individualized education techniques for each individual child. Preschool teachers should be competent in teaching content and multidisciplinary areas, too.

Those expectations were mainly mentioned by fathers. Their expectations give a clue that they see early childhood education as preparation to elementary school.

Competent in preparation of enriched learning environments: Preschool teachers were expected to be competent in the following skills:

- Preparing activities to aid children in the development of their cognitive abilities
- Evaluating the impact of learning environments on development
- Believing in the importance of arranging appropriate environments to provide development opportunities or enrichment
- Preparing a playground for children
- Understanding the importance of play in a child's life
- Producing games/plays applicable in the learning environment
- Being careful about security and safety on the playground
- Paying attention to the preparation of learning environments

Competent in using reflective teaching: Parents expect preschool teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of different teaching techniques. The following statements show that parents also expect preschool teachers to be competent in using appropriate assessment techniques.

- Being able to evaluate the factors affecting development in a learning environment
- Choosing appropriate instruments to assess child development
- Observing children at play to use observation data in his/her teaching

Competent in the preparation of materials: Parents first expect preschool teachers be willing to prepare and use educational materials in educational settings. Second, they were expected to use more economical sources while preparing instruments. Third, they were also expected to use computers in preparing the education materials. Finally, they were expected to assess the appropriateness of the materials

Competent in the preparation of individualized education: Statements like "Using educational techniques according to different ages", "Taking individual differences into consideration in a learning environment", "Evaluating the education techniques according to individual differences" show that parents expect teachers to pay attention to individualized education.

Competent in using appropriate teaching techniques: Parents also mention using appropriate teaching techniques. Parents expect preschool teachers to use educational techniques according to development stages, to recognize differences among teaching techniques, to prepare educational programs suitable to the developmental level of children, and to use the principles of development in planning teaching activities.

Competent in teaching different content areas: When parents' statements were sub categorized it was seen that parents expect preschool teachers to teach math, art, and music. Most of the following statements made by parents show that they value teaching math:

- Having basic knowledge in mathematics
- Planning activities related to mathematics depending on theoretical background
- Having knowledge about basic notions of mathematics
- Using real objects in teaching basic mathematics
- Using mathematical concepts in daily activities
- Establishing the relationship between daily activities and basic mathematical notions
- Evaluating the development of mathematical notions in children
- Understanding the development of quantitative ability of children

Parents expect preschool teachers to teach basic math concepts because they believe that while their children go to elementary and high school they will be successful in math and science, so those students will easily pass the university entrance examinations. The underline of this expectation is related to passing the university entrance examinations in the future. So, preschool education is a kind of investment for future. When it comes to art and music teaching parents expect preschool teachers to believe in the importance of folk dance in pre-school education, to believe in the importance of developing the teacher's skill of playing an instrument, to be willing to play a musical instrument, to have knowledge about basic notions in music, to use different techniques in painting, and to encouraging children to draw pictures.

Competent in teaching multidisciplinary areas: The following statements reported by parents show that they expect preschool teachers to be competent in teaching in multidisciplinary areas, such as sex education and special education. Parents indicated the following criteria:

- Identifying the characteristics of sexual development
- Identifying the special education needs of kids
- Being able to answer children's questions about the history and geography of the country
- Understanding the theoretical background of sex education

Expected Personal Qualifications

Parents expect preschool teachers to have caring personalities, to be social, assertive, responsible, self-confident, and persistent. Those characteristics were mentioned mainly by mothers. It is important for preschool teachers to be model for children. Those characteristics are:

Caring: Parents expect preschool teachers to have a caring personality. They say that preschool teachers must be alert to the potential problems among children, be willing to teach the nutritious habits to children, be respectful of individual basic needs, accept that every child is unique, believe in the importance of the use of caring expressions and meet children's needs immediately.

Social: Parents expect preschool teachers to be social. They expect preschool teachers be positive about other people, to listen to others' ideas, to know the rules of living in a community, to recognize the importance of obeying the rules, to be cooperative, to define interpersonal limits, and to have communications skills.

Assertive: Another expected personal characteristic is being assertive. Parents expect preschool teachers to be consistent in behaviors, to defend their own ideas, to be consistent and determined in applying decisions, to be patient while answering children's questions, and to be consistent in making decisions.

Responsible: Parents expect preschool teachers to be responsible while performing their jobs. They expect preschool teachers to perform their jobs carefully, to carry the responsibility of their behaviors, to be willing to take over the responsibility, to be punctual, to tell the truth, to complete tasks on time, to understand the importance of working actively, and to plan well.

Self-confident: Being self confident is another expected personality characteristic of preschool teachers. Parents expect preschool teachers to be confident, to express themselves appropriately, to be respectful of human rights, and to put forward different suggestions about his or her work issues.

Persistent: Being persistent is the last expected personality characteristic that parents have for preschool teachers. Parents expect preschool teachers to keep their promises, to be determined, and to be respectful of others' opinions.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study is based on parents' opinion about professional qualifications of pre-school teachers and the components deemed necessary to improve pre-school teacher training programs. As a result of this study, teacher qualifications in accordance with parental expectations were classified into 3 groups: professional, personal, and teacher behavior and practices. These qualifications show that pre-school educator need to be competent in their field, and prepared with the corresponding instructional skills. Moreover, personality characteristics are also stressed by families since they are expecting preschool teachers to be a role-model for their children. When the parental expectations were analysed it is clear that there are differences in relation with their expectations. Mothers mainly emphasize caring side and expect pre-school teachers to have caring personality. It seems that mothers expect pre-school teachers to take their role as care giver. On the other hand, fathers focused more on education side thinking that pre-school teachers should provide basic skills which will be helpful in their children's future education. The results of this study are emerged from the opinions from parents in different regions of Turkey, and who are mostly high school and university graduates and usually work at cities. As a result, based on those expectations, a model can be merged, covering both education and caring side of early childhood education.

The results of this study can be used by pre service teachers, in service teachers, day care center administrators, and policy makers. Pre service teachers can benefit from the results of this study to arrange and design their courses to meet the needs of parents who are the one of the important stakeholders. If candidate teachers know what the expectations are they may prepare themselves accordingly. Consequently, their frustrations or conflict with parents can be reduced or kept at minimum. This, eventually, may affect their job satisfaction. The results of this study can be helpful for in service trainers, too. Since, there is curriculum change and application of Total Quality Management system in Turkish education system, parental expectations are important. In this sense, during the in service training, those expectations, and how those expectations can be met can be discussed. As a result, a training program can be developed and applied.

The results of this study can be consumed by day care center administrators. Since they are the applicant of TQM system at their center, they should know what parents expect from pre service teachers because those qualifications can also shows what kind of service they need. The quality of services can be determined by meeting those needs. The results of this study can be used by policy makers and curriculum developers on designing and planning the human resources. Policy makers also benefit from the results of this study. Taking parents' expectations into consideration provide valuable input to the educational system when making decisions on policies, and designing curricula both for schools and in-service training programs. As a consequence, such consideration will add up to the success of existing policies.

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Table 1: Parents' Profile

PARENTS'S PROFILE	f	%
LEVEL OF EDUCATION		
Elementary	69	13,8
secondary	62	12,4
High school	194	38,8
faculty	175	35,0
TOTAL	500	100,0
AGES		
21-30 ages	184	36,8
31-40	251	50,2
41-50	55	11,0
50 +	10	2,0
TOTAL	500	100,0
GENDER		
Mother	335	67,0
Father	165	33,0
TOTAL	500	100,0

Figure 1: Parental Expectations of Pre-school Teachers' Qualifications

