

EXPLORING PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES DURING DISTANCE EDUCATION: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY

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Öz: Bu çalışmada, okul öncesi öğretmenlerinin uzaktan eğitim sırasında çocukların sosyal ve duygusal gelişimlerine yönelik uygulamalarını ortaya koymak amaçlanmıştır. Araştırmada belirlenen amaç doğrultusunda karma yöntem deseni kullanılmıştır. İlk olarak altmış iki okul öncesi öğretmeninden anket yoluyla veri toplanmış, ardından bu okul öncesi öğretmenlerinden yedi tanesi ile yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Elde edilen veriler, mevcut Türk okul öncesi eğitim müfredatına bağlı olarak öğretmenlerin en çok ve en az yer verdiği sosyal ve duygusal gelişim göstergelerini ortaya koymuştur. Öğretmenler ayrıca belirli göstergelere daha çok ve daha az odaklanmalarının arkasındaki nedenleri de açıklamışlardır. Bunlara ek olarak, öğretmenlerin çocukların ihtiyaçlarını karşılamak için yoga, hikâye tamamlama, rol yapma gibi çeşitli etkinlikler yaptıkları görülmüştür. Çocukların belirli sosyal ve duygusal ihtiyaçlarının ele alınması çok önemli olmakla birlikte, çocukların sosyal ve duygusal gelişim ihtiyaçlarının anlaşılmasına ve en verimli şekilde karşılanmasına olanak sağladığı için bütüncül bir yaklaşımın her zaman göz önünde bulundurulması gerektiği sonucuna varılabilir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: okul öncesi, uzaktan eğitim, sosyal ve duygusal gelişim, COVID-19 pandemisi

Abstract: The current study was conducted to reveal preschool teachers' practices regarding children's social and emotional development during distance education. A mixed-methods design was selected as the design for this study. First, data were collected from sixty-two preschool teachers through a questionnaire, and then semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven of these preschool teachers. The findings of the study revealed the social and emotional development indicators that teachers focus on the most and least depending on the current Turkish preschool education curriculum. Teachers also explained the reasons behind focusing and not focusing on particular indicators. Moreover, teachers were found to do various activities such as yoga, story completion, and role-play to meet children's needs. It can be concluded that although addressing the specific social and emotional needs of children is crucial, the necessity of a holistic approach should always be considered because it allows understanding the children's social and emotional developmental needs and meeting them in the most efficient way.

Keywords: preschool, distance education, social and emotional development, COVID-19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION

The early childhood period has an important place in individuals' lives, and it dramatically affects their later lives in various aspects. Studies show that early childhood education (ECE) has positive short and long-term effects on young children's school readiness and, cognitive and social development (Bakken et al., 2017; Dodge et al., 2017; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Havnes & Magstad, 2011). For instance, in a meta-analysis conducted by Camilli et al. (2010), it was demonstrated that children who attended preschool showed better social and cognitive development than those who did not. Similarly, children who went to preschool were found to be better at forming social relationships, developing proper communication skills, and expressing their emotions than those who did not receive early childhood education (Bakken et al., 2017).

The preschool period is also a crucial period of social growth in children (Bierman & Erath, 2006), and it is particularly an efficient time to develop social and emotional skills (Dobrin & Kállay, 2013). During this period, children experience social situations for the first time with their peers and adults other than their family members. Moreover, ECE enables children to manage their experiences, feelings and emotions, and build positive and rewarding relationships with others (Cohen et al., 2005). While ECE programs support children's development of particular social and emotional skills, it is equally important to understand the teacher's role in this process. Studies have revealed that preschool teachers strengthen the social and emotional development of children from an early age (Han, 2012; Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013; Wang et al., 2008).

Nowadays, due to COVID-19, teachers' role in supporting children's social and emotional development has gained even greater importance. The pandemic has undoubtedly affected children, causing an increase in their anxiety and stress levels (Mochida et al., 2021). These stressful conditions put them at a greater risk of experiencing social and emotional difficulties (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). The pandemic's impact on children may be explained in detail within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), children are at the center, and the entire environment influences their growth and development. A pandemic takes place in the chronosystem, which includes life-changing events and long-lasting effects on children. At this point, teachers who are a part of children's closest environment may support children's social and emotional needs to protect their well-being and help them overcome negative emotions. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to be aware of their critical role and practices in children's development.

However, with the pandemic, teachers' practices had to be reshaped accordingly. Distance education, which is a relatively new approach, has started to be implemented in early childhood education (OECD, 2020). Therefore, it is essential for teachers to understand children's social

and emotional needs and support them with appropriate practices. In addition, examining preschool teachers' work in distance education provides opportunities for social improvements, which can be shared with other teachers. However, due to the limited research in this area, it is unclear what preschool teachers' practices are in distance education, or how they support preschool children's social and emotional development. Thus, this study explores teachers' self-reported social and emotional development practices in preschool settings during distance education.

Within this framework, the research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are the social and emotional development gains and indicators that preschool teachers include in the distance education process?
2. What kind of activities did preschool teachers plan in terms of these social and emotional gains and indicators?

METHOD

A mixed-method design was used to collect data on social and emotional development practices from preschool teachers in this study. Mixed methods studies vary by design, and there are six types in total (Creswell, 2015). The explanatory sequential design used for this study to understand preschool teachers' social and emotional development practices in the distance education period. Combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies both embodies the strengths of research methods and provides a better understanding of research problems (Creswell, 2014).

The study group of the current research was selected with a purposive sampling method. Researchers used their personal judgment to determine study participants by considering the aims of the study (Frankel et al., 2012). A total of 62 preschool teachers (59 female, and 3 male) in Turkey who were actively involved in the distance education process participated in the questionnaire. For semi-structured interviews, the convenience sampling method was used. Due to the time limitations, easily accessible teachers were selected (Frankel et al., 2012). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven female preschool teachers.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected via a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol. The items of the questionnaire and protocol were prepared through the literature review and the objectives and indicators in the Early Childhood Education Program of MoNE (2013). The initial drafts of both the questionnaire and the protocol were sent to three experts in ECE. After their suggestions were taken, the questionnaire was piloted with five preschool teachers, and the interview protocol was piloted with three teachers. Some questions were changed in both instruments. The final questionnaire form consisted of 11 questions, whereas the final interview

protocol included seven questions. Before collecting the data, approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of a state university, and an informed consent form was provided to the teachers. The data were collected through Google Forms.

In this study, the data were analyzed through descriptive statistical analysis and content analysis methods. Statistical analysis was done with IBM SPSS 26, and the frequency of the indicators was calculated. The qualitative data were separately coded by two of the researchers. Codes and subcodes were analyzed through QDA Miner. Based on Miles and Huberman's formula (1994), the interrater reliability among coders was calculated as .84.

FINDINGS

First the frequency of the indicators was ordered from the most to the least. The reasons why teachers focused on these indicators were explored in depth. Findings on the indicators that preschool teachers mostly focused on their practices are presented in the following table.

Table 1. The Most Focused Social and Emotional Development Indicators in Distance Education by Preschool Teachers

MoNE Indicators

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	expresses themselves in front of the group	54	86,7	86,7
	explains positive/negative feelings using positive verbal expressions	51	82,2	82,2
	tells the feelings of others	49	80	80

As Table 1 demonstrated, the most selected social and emotional development indicators were '*expresses themselves in front of the group at about (86,7%), explains positive/negative feelings using positive verbal expressions (82,2%), and tells the feelings of others (80%)*' (MoNE, 2013) by the teachers during distance education. One of the reasons for selecting these indicators was expressed as quarantines that prevent children from socializing and their

exposure to conversations about COVID-19. Other reasons were described as the increase in egocentrism stemming from individuality and the introverted behavior of children as they are in constant interaction with technology at home. Also, the result indicated that teachers tend towards story completion, yoga, expressing feelings through art, and role-play activities to support these needs of children. Their rationale behind following these activities was to overcome children's fears and protect their well-being by focusing on themselves and calming down.

Table 2. The Least Focused Social and Emotional Development Indicators in Distance Education by Preschool Teachers

MoNE Indicators

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	tells the phone number	11	17,8	17,8
	says that different countries have their own cultural characteristics	21	33,3	33,3
	pays attention to the protection of works of art	23	35,6	35,6

As shown in Table 2, ‘tells the phone number (17,8%), says that different countries have their own cultural characteristics (33,3%), and pays attention to the protection of works of art (35,6%)’ (MoNE, 2013) were the least selected indicators by the teachers during distance education. Teachers said that they prioritized children’s psychological and physical health, therefore they focused least on these types of indicators. Teachers also highlighted that hesitation in going out during the pandemic and lockdowns prevented them planning field trips.

They also gave detailed information about their opinions regarding activity types and their practices. In the current study, the participants’ quotations were added below to clarify the findings.

P3 (Participant 3) expressed that she gave priority to the psychological well-being of children rather than academic achievement in distance education. Therefore, she pointed out the

importance of focusing on children's emotions and expressing their feelings in a healthy way by saying:

"My students love to listen to books, and they listen carefully. I wanted to continue our classroom routines during the pandemic process; after all, this is also a part of education. That is why we read a lot of books with the children during online lessons. I think it is very important to understand children's feelings. That is why we talked about the emotions of the characters in the book and what they might be feeling."

P5 stated that children have started to lose their sense of responsibility; thus, activities to support them in gaining this characteristic were needed. She expressed her opinion as follows:

"School is a more disciplined environment for children. At home, parents do what their child says most of the time. That is why children have started to lose their sense of responsibility. For instance, I give them some duties such as brushing their teeth; however, most of them do not brush. Therefore, the parents talked to me about this situation so, I started assigning them tasks to instill a sense of responsibility. For example, the children designed a material with their families, and each of them explained it during the online lesson. This both developed a sense of responsibility and taught patience."

These participants mainly concentrated on 'tells the feelings of others and expresses themselves in front of the group' indicator in their language activities. In order to support these indicators, they used interactive book reading, story completion, story creation, daily conversation, and nursery rhymes.

In addition to language activities, P5 also focused on art activities during distance education. She emphasized children's feelings, particularly their fears could be understood through art:

"Coronavirus is a more abstract concept for children. Because they could not fully comprehend, some of them were afraid and were crying. In my opinion, a lot of negative news they heard on television also had a big part in this. Children are exposed in some way. For this reason, I wanted to make it a little more concrete for them. I brought them germ pictures, and we talked about how we could be protected. Then they drew the picture of the virus in their minds. Clarifying it was good for them in terms of expressing their fears and concerns."

P1 supported the opinions of P5 and added that children were worried about the situation, and expressing feelings is a good way to make them relax.

Different from art and language activities, P4 said that she concentrated on drama activities to enable children to understand each other's feelings and explained her opinions as:

"It is challenging for children to stand still in front of the computer. So, they did not listen to me much, especially at the beginning of distance education. I put them in various roles so that it would be interesting and develop empathy for children. For example, one day, some of them

became doctors, some became patients. We did many other activities like this. In this way, they understood the feelings of others, even me.”

In addition, P7 and P1 emphasized children’s changing routines in terms of movement. P7 asserted that:

“Children have been very inactive due to corona by staying at home. They always sit, so some of them started to gain weight, families also complained about it. This might affect children psychologically. For this reason, I thought that activities that involve movement and relaxing could be logical for them. Thus, we did yoga with children.”

In addition, P1 drew attention to the child with ADHD in her class. She indicated the adverse effects of the pandemic on the child’s social and emotional development. She stated that movement is a good way for the child to discharge his accumulated energy and emotions. Lastly, she added that involving movement activities in her daily plan contributes to children’s socialization and feeling better.

While six of the participants implemented activities to support children’s academic achievement, one of them explained that she did not perform any math activity during the pandemic. She expressed her ideas as follows:

“Obviously, it can always be focused on math. For example, families can do math activities with their children. Children can be exposed to math even while watching something. I think children’s psychology is more important than their academic success in this process.”

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Studies indicate that the importance of activities to support children’s social and emotional development in preschool education is critical (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). Therefore, during the pandemic, teachers have focused on the indicators and activities that best meet children’s various social and emotional needs. According to the findings of the study, it can be concluded that, in distance learning, teachers did not focus on all indicators equally. While teachers most often implemented the indicators of “expresses themselves in front of the group, explains positive/negative feelings using positive verbal expressions, and tells the feelings of others,” they focused least on “tells the phone number, and pays attention to the protection of works of art.” Similar to this finding, the curricula implemented worldwide to develop children’s social and emotional skills generally emphasize the improvements in children’s self-awareness and awareness of others’ behaviors, feelings, and thoughts (Barnett et al., 2008; WebsterStratton et al., 2008). Additionally, there have been improvements in children’s sense of responsibility and self-regulation skills. This finding supports why teachers gave more importance to some specific indicators more.

Another critical finding is that teachers mainly used art, language, play, and drama activities to support children's social and emotional development. These finding is consistent with the activities they performed before the pandemic. A study conducted with preschool teachers demonstrated that teachers generally focus on language, art, play, and music activities in their practices (Kızıldağ et al., 2018). The current study also revealed which activities preschool teachers performed the least to support children's social and emotional development. While teachers least used school trips, math, and movement activities in 2018 (Kızıldağ et al., 2018), literacy activities took over the place of movement activities in 2021. It is thought that the pandemic's conditions and precautions caused this situation during the study. However, the increase in the frequency of movement activities is remarkable. The movement of the body is a critical aspect of emotional expression and a way of reflecting emotions (Boone & Cunningham, 1998). In addition, children's movement experiences are a way of non-verbally expressing their feelings and lives (Thom, 2010). Thus, it may be highlighted that the increase in movement activities may positively affect children's social and emotional development.

Another significant finding in the study is the lack of science activities in teachers' practices. Although it is difficult to perform science activities in distance education, various activities, including germs and health, might be effective for clarifying viruses and helping children understand the pandemic. Moreover, teachers did not highlight the importance of play, which can support children's social and emotional development; indeed, play might be a solution for protecting children's well-being. Studies have also revealed that the environment that supports children's social and emotional development is provided through play (Kirk & Jay, 2018). Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) stated that play takes part in all developmental areas of the child and emphasized that it is an essential element in the child's social and emotional development.

Although addressing the specific social and emotional needs of children is crucial, the necessity of a holistic approach should always be considered because it allows to understand children's social and emotional developmental needs and meet them in the most efficient way. To make distance education more efficient in terms of developing social and emotional development in children's early years, efforts could be made to raise teachers' awareness.

The pandemic is not over yet in the world, and face-to-face education can return to distance education again. Thus, creating online environments where teachers share information with each other may help them best understand the social and emotional needs of children and perform comprehensive activities in this context. Also, in order to raise awareness about the impact of the pandemic on children and their needs, online sources on this subject, related billboards, and posters may be created. It allows parents to be aware of what they can do to provide the best experiences for children. Moreover, parents become involved in the developmental process of their children more.

Reaching a small number of participants in this study limited the validity of the study. The study could be done with more participants. It is also believed that detailed studies examining different developmental areas of children will contribute to the literature.

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