

PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: PANDEMIC PERIOD

Fatih Dereli¹, Tuğba Türk Kurtça^{2*}

¹Department of Primary Education, Faculty of Education, Trakya University, Edirne, Turkey

²Department of Guidance and Psychological Counselling, Faculty of Education, Trakya University, Edirne, Turkey

fatihdereli@trakya.edu.tr¹, tugbaturk@trakya.edu.tr²

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Parent engagement contributes greatly to the teachers and parents as well as the child. Within the scope of this study, it was aimed to examine the opinions and practices of preschool teachers about parent engagement studies during pandemic period in depth. For this purpose, phenomenology, which is one of the qualitative research methods, was used. 53 preschool teachers who were determined with the maximum diversity sampling method participated in the study. The study employed a semi-structured interview form. The researchers gathered the study's data through online interviews and one-on-one phone calls with preschool teachers. The audio recordings from the participants' interviews were transcribed, and then inductive and comparative analysis were conducted. As a result of the research, the theme of parent engagement in the pandemic includes the parent as the teacher, activities, engagement problems and strategies to increase engagement. Research findings have shown that parent engagement has become necessary, even mandatory, especially during the pandemic period. Even, in this period, the concept of the parent as a proxy teacher draws attention. This research results showed that the importance of parents' engagement in education and parents' becoming better equipped in the education of their children. At the microsystem level, it is clear that the Ministry of Education should encourage parent engagement. At this time, it appears to be beneficial in terms of both addressing gaps in this area and following up-to-date studies by offering in-service training to teachers on Ministry of Education parent engagement studies. Furthermore, rather than relying on teachers' initiative, the Ministry should make parent engagement works mandatory.

Keywords: early childhood education, parent engagement, parents, family, pandemic, covid-19

INTRODUCTION

Many research and practices on early childhood have revealed that supporting the development of children positively affects all their development and success in the following years (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Pianta et al., 2012). Families come to the fore in ensuring the quality, effectiveness, and continuity of the supports to be provided in early childhood (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Voorhis et al., 2013). Families are the primary environment for children's development and learning, and they also have the opportunity to teach their children more than they can learn at school (Bartolome et al., 2020; Bredekamp, 2011; NEA, 2008). Early childhood education environments, on the other hand, play a secondary role, although they are

extremely important (Bredekamp, 2011). Considering that there are two main environments in which children can develop and learn, it is extremely important for teachers and parents to work together to enable children to reach their full potential (Epstein, 2009; Knoche et al., 2012).

The family is the most effective and economical system to support the development of the child and ensure permanence. Without parent engagement, your interventions with the child will fail. Without the parent, you will have little effect on the child and the interventions you make will not be permanent (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). In the findings of the studies conducted, it is emphasized that no matter how qualified schools provide services, it is not possible for schools to reach their goals unless the school is supported in the family environment (Knoche et al., 2012). Parent engagement provides continuity and cooperation between school and home, reinforcing the acquired knowledge and skills and thus ensuring continuity in education (Barbarin et al., 2010; Clarkin-Phillips & Carr, 2012; Garcia Coll & Magnuson, 2000; Gross et al., 2020; Smith, 2020). Many early childhood education programs implemented in the world attach importance to parent-teacher cooperation and parent engagement in strengthening the education of the child (Bartolome et al., 2017; Bredekamp, 2011; MEB, 2013a, 2013b; Pianta et al., 2012). It is seen that parent engagement is essential in early childhood education. Therefore, the child and family should be handled as a whole in early childhood education programs.

Pandemic and Early Childhood Education

The COVID-19 epidemic turns into a pandemic, causing major crises and changes in the field of education all over the world. The COVID-19 crisis particularly affects the education, care and well-being of children in early childhood negatively (OMEP, 2020; UNESCO, 2020a; 2020b; UNICEF, 2020; Xafis, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic prevents at least 90 million children across the world who are in critical period and need early childhood education from receiving this education (UNESCO, 2020c; UNICEF, 2020). Many young children who stay home away from the education environment cannot get the games and early learning support they need for healthy development (OMEP, 2020; UNICEF, 2020; Xafis, 2020; Yoshikawa et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is making the childcare and education crisis worse around the world (UNICEF, 2020).

When considering the COVID-19 pandemic process specific to Turkey, on March 11, 2020, it was announced by the Ministry of Health that the first case was detected (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health, 2020; Yildirim, 2021). Schools were given a break on March 16, 2020, and distance education was initiated in all schools on March 23, 2020 (MEB, 2021; TEDMEM, 2020; Yildirim, 2021). As of June 1, 2020, preschool education institutions were reopened and allowed to continue education (MEB, 2021). However, many families prefer not to send their children to preschool education during the pandemic process due to COVID-19 cases (TEDMEM, 2020; Zeybekoglu-Akbas & Dursun, 2020).

The Present Study

Considering the needs and demands of children in pandemic period, it is possible to express them as the group that benefits the least from distance education (OMEP, 2020; UNICEF, 2020; Xafis, 2020). This situation indicates the need for countries and policymakers to take

urgent measures to continue education in early childhood education and to prevent and reduce possible learning losses (OMEP, 2020; TEDMEM, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). In this context, one of the alternative solutions that can be used most effectively and provide the necessary support by ensuring the sustainability of education and training in early childhood is to make effective practices by increasing parent engagement studies (OMEP, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). The aim of this study is to examine the parent engagement studies that teachers have included in their practices in depth by revealing the teachers' perceptions and thoughts about parent engagement in the pandemic period.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, it is aimed to deeply examine the parent engagement practices of preschool education teachers in the pandemic period. The phenomenology design, one of the qualitative research methods, was used in the study. Phenomenology studies aim to reveal opinions about one or more concepts or phenomena, subjective or objective experiences which are similar to other people and perceptions (Creswell, 2012). Interviews are conducted in this context to reveal the experiences and meanings of the events (Gall et al., 2007).

Participants

The working group of the research consists of 53 preschool education teachers who work in preschool education institutions in the 2020-2021 spring academic years. In order to examine the differences between teachers' perceptions and practices of parent engagement in the pandemic periods in Turkey in detail, working groups were formed according to the criteria of being in different provinces and working in different school types. Therefore, maximum diversity sampling, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used when selecting participants from the Turkey population. Also, during the epidemic, teachers who attempted to ensure parent engagement in any way were included in the study. Participants whose analysis results are included in this section consist of 53 people, 3 (5.66%) male and 50 (94.34%) female. The participants' ages range from 21 to 52. Participants' demographic information such as professional experience, and the type of institution they work for is shown in detail in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Participant

Participant Code	Gender	Teaching Experience (Years)	School type	Age Group	Participant Code	Gender	Teaching Experience (Years)	School type	Age Group
P1	Female	11-15	Pub. K.	4-5	P28	Female	1-5	Pub. N. C.	5
P2	Female	16-20	Pub. N. C.	4-5	P29	Female	11-15	Pub. K.	5-6
P3	Female	11-15	Pub. K.	5	P30	Male	1-5	Pub. N. C.	5
P4	Female	11-15	Pub. K.	5	P31	Female	1-5	Pub. N. C.	5
P5	Female	11-15	Pub. N. C.	4-6	P32	Female	6-10	Pub. K.	5
P6	Female	6-10	Pub. N. C.	4-6	P33	Female	6-10	Pub. K.	5

P7	Female	11-15	Pub. N. C.	4-5	P34	Female	1- 5	Pr. K.	4
P8	Female	1-5	Pr. K.	5-6	P35	Female	11-15	Pub. K.	5- 6
P9	Female	16-20	Pub. N. C.	4-5	P36	Female	16-20	Pub. K.	4-5
P10	Female	6-10	Pub. N. C.	4-5	P37	Female	6-10	Pub. K.	5
P11	Female	6-10	Pub. K.	5	P38	Male	6-10	Pub. N. C.	4-6
P12	Female	11-15	Pub. N. C.	5-6	P39	Female	11-15	Pub. K.	5
P13	Female	1-5	Pub. N. C.	5	P40	Male	1-5	Pub. N. C.	4-5
P14	Female	16-20	Pub. N. C.	4-6	P41	Female	11-15	P.D.N.	5
P15	Female	6-10	Pub. N. C.	4-6	P42	Female	11-15	Pub. N. C.	5
P16	Female	11-15	Pub. K.	5-6	P43	Female	1-5	Pr. N. C.	5
P17	Female	1-5	Pub. K.	4	P44	Female	1-5	P.D.N.	4
P18	Female	6-10	Pub. K.	5	P45	Female	11-15	Pub. N. C.	5-6
P19	Female	6-10	Pr. N. C.	5-6	P46	Female	16-20	Pub. K.	5 +
P20	Female	11-15	Pub. K.	4	P47	Female	21 +	Pr. K.	6
P21	Female	21 +	Pub. K.	5-6	P48	Female	11-15	Pub. K.	4
P22	Female	1- 5	P.D.N.	2-3	P49	Female	21 +	Pub. N. C.	5-6
P23	Female	11-15	Pub. K.	5	P50	Female	1-5	Pr. N.C.	5-6
P24	Female	1- 5	Pub. K.	4-5	P51	Female	1-5	Pr. N.C.	4-6
P25	Female	11-15	Pub. K.	3-4	P52	Female	1-5	Pub. N. C.	5
P26	Female	6-10	Pr. N. C.	6	P53	Female	16-20	Pub. N. C.	4-5
P27	Female	1-5	Pub. N. C.	5-6					

*Pub. N. C.= Public Nursery Classroom, Pr. N.C.= Private Nursery Classroom, Pub. K. = Public Kindergarten, Pr. K.= Private Kindergarten, P.D.N.= P.D.N.

Measures

Semi-structured interview form was used in the research. The interview form prepared within the scope of the study consists of 30 questions to determine the demographic characteristics of the participants, and prepared within the framework of the relevant literature (Ersen, 2020; Gross et al., 2020; Gorur, 2020) to examine the parent engagement perceptions and practices of the working group in detail. The consists of 6 semi-structured interview questions and 7 sounding questions prepared within the scope of the relevant literature in order to examine the opinions and practices of preschool teachers on parent engagement in the pandemic period. The suitability and understandability of the interview form was evaluated by 3 field experts and 2 preschool teachers. Within the scope of expert recommendations, two questions was added. The interview form questions were brought to the final structure after their understandability was stated by the preschool teachers. During the interview, no changes were made to the questions, only sounding questions were added when needed.

Data Collection Procedures

The interview form developed within the scope of the research was used in the interviews after Trakya University Ethics Committee approval (Decision date: 24.02.2021, Decision number: 2021.02.36) was obtained. The data of the study were obtained by the researchers through online interviews (via Microsoft Teams and Zoom) and phone calls with 53 preschool teachers individually. The longest of the interviews took 74 minutes and the shortest one took 24 minutes. The questions in the semi-structured interview form were asked to the teachers and their answers were recorded.

Data Analyses

The audio recordings obtained from the interviews of the participants were transcribed, then inductive and comparative analysis was performed. Inductive analysis aims to reach concepts and relationships that can explain the collected data. The basic process conducted in this analysis is to gather similar data within the framework of certain concepts and themes and to interpret them in a way that the reader can understand (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2013). Within the scope of this method, induction was used to examine the themes emerging from the participants' own expressions and the parent engagement practices of the participants within the framework of the guideline conceptual framework.

In qualitative research the findings are evaluated in terms of credibility and transferability instead of the conventional criteria of validity and consistency and conformability instead of the conventional criteria reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest crucial techniques for establishing and enhancing credibility and validity. Techniques such as long-term commitment, continual observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, checking for members are techniques for ensuring validity. Methods for determining transferability have proven by thick description. Inquiry audit is technique for establishing dependability. Techniques for establishing conformability have proven by conformability audits. Presenting the transcripts to the requested people and analyzing them by computer also increases the credibility (Whittemore et al., 2001). In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants to ensure the credibility of this research. For the points that are not understood during the interview, sounding questions were asked. In addition, to ensure credibility, the researchers analyzed the interviews with the MAXQUDA program by transcribing them one-to-one. Each researcher did the coding separately. As a result of the comparison, a standardized approach was provided which led to the development of a coding manual. In addition, in order to ensure transferability, detailed features of the participants were mentioned and direct quotations were included. The results obtained were shared with the participants to ensure confirmation.

RESULTS

In this section, the answers given by the participants to open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews were analyzed. As a result of the analysis, the themes related to parent engagement experience in the pandemic period are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the participants' views.

Themes	Sub Themes
Parents as the teacher	More importance (17), mandatory (7)
Activities	Communication (28), sending and checking activities (25), preparing brochures and bulletins (10), online live lessons (14), using social media actively (5), sending tutorial video (2)

Obstacle and Problems	Access (14), inability performing an activity (12), lack of parent (18), lack of material (6), bystanding role of parent (3), do the activity for her/his child (5)
Increasing Strategies Effects	Problem-solving (13), reach one by one (11) Happiness (5), get to know better (5), inscreasing father engagement (2), despondency (2)

Parent Engagement Experience in Pandemic Period

The most striking theme regarding parent engagement during the pandemic period is that parents take on the role of teachers. In addition, it is seen that activities that can be done with emergency remote education are planned in this period. Themes related to family life during the pandemic period are parent as the teacher, activities, problems of engagement and strategies to increase engagement.

Parent as the Teacher

Participants stated that parent engagement gained more importance and even became mandatory during this period. P27 said,

“We were mostly in the position of giving instructions from outside in this period. As all the practices were at home, families had to take on a second teacher role too much. It is unlikely that we can do these in front of the screen.”.

“I think we have the most parent engagement in this pandemic period. (Giggles) It is very important, that is, I do not speak only for preschool; this is for all grades”.

Activities

Parent engagement activities were carried out by communicating, sending and checking activities, preparing brochures and bulletins, adding parents to online live lessons, and using social media actively during the pandemic process. Communication with families was achieved through meetings, phone calls, video chat, and messaging. P5 said :

“I was sending messages to parents about these. We were having meetings on WhatsApp. We were talking about this period in meetings. I was talking about the process. Like 'what can we do in the process.’”.

Face-to-face training activities have been adapted to emergency remote education. P7 stated:

“I made the games played and experiments done, of course, by including families, during live lessons online.”.

Stating that social media is actively used P36 stated:

“We use social media accounts because of this pandemic”.

During the pandemic period, parent engagement activities were usually carried out as a control by sending an activity to the house. P8 told about this process as follows:

“We send home samples of activities and activities. We send activity videos via WhatsApp and such communication ways. We send the videos we choose with the children....”.

On the other hand, P31 said,

“.... I checked and received feedback to ensure their engagement in the activities.”.

Obstacle and Problems

The problem experienced in closed schools, there are problems such as access, doing activities, limitation of choice, material issue, and parents work. Internet and technology access problems are experienced in terms of access. In terms of access to technology, P16, who mentions that the preschool child cannot use the computer due to the presence of another child at home said:

“My other son attends the lesson at the same time, so there are those who say there is no other computer.”.

P32 stated:

“At first, I had some parents who could not attend distance education in two or three lessons because they could not use technology.”.

Therefore, the issue may be that the parent is not competent to use a computer. During an activity, the parent may not understand the activity, the student may not want to do the activity with the parents, and the parent may be impatient. P3 stated:

“It is not very active and effective. Yes, the mother of the child is sitting together with her child. Sometimes it turns into torment rather than parent engagement. The parents come to a point like 'Do it child!'. ...”.

The parent's inability to participate in distance education because of their employment causes the child not to participate, either. P23 said:

“Parents who do not participate in distance education activities say that cannot participate because they work. Children either visit their grandparents or go to countryside. That's why they cannot participate.”.

In addition, the participants stated that they could not diversify parent engagement during this period and limited the activities with materials at home. Also, some parents are just in the role of bystander. P35 said;

“incompetent parents, only watching parents...”

Strategies for Increasing Engagement

In order to increase parent engagement, teachers are looking for a solution by identifying the problem. For this, they try to reach parents one-to-one. They also stated that they are open to continuous communication. P2 said:

“I tried a lot to reach children whom I could not reach. For example, about things they didn't understand, there were people who said 'I don't understand here' for an activity, I wrote private messages to them one by one. In this process, the only thing I could do would be to reach all of them individually. So I tried to do that.”

P21, on the other hand, said:

“Learning the source of the problem is an important step to produce the solution. Since this problem is usually caused by communication, I try to solve the problem by changing the channel. For example, if the message is not sufficient, I inform via individual phone calls.”

Again, at the point of communication, P4 said:

“Constant communication with parents, one-on-one meeting and positive language, an appropriate language, I think using your language was the most important key.”

During this period, problems were solved by carrying materials to parents, delivering them to parents by printing out the activities, designing activities without materials, making use of home materials, and working out of hours.

Effects

Parents, according to teachers, get to know their children better as a result of parental involvement. P22 expressed this situation as:

“Parents can learn more about their children. They can realize the features of their children that they do not know.”

The child becomes happy if the parent engagements. Teachers stated that students whose parents did not participate were upset as a negative effect of parent engagement activities. P22 said:

“When the parent does not participate, the student can be both unhappy and grumpy.”. During the pandemic, father engagement has risen.

P49 stated:

“I saw that even fathers who were not particularly involved had a good time by participating.”

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Within the scope of this research, the parent engagement experiences of preschool teachers during the pandemic were examined. As a result of the analysis, themes related to family participation during the pandemic were revealed. The theme of parent engagement during the pandemic includes the parent as the teacher, activities, engagement issues and strategies to increase engagement. The theme of parent as teacher draws particular attention.

In early childhood education, parent engagement activities are implemented as family education activities, parenting, family communication activities, engagement of families in educational activities, home visits and activities that can be done at home, individual interviews and meetings, engagement in management and decision-making processes (Epstein, 2010; Ozlen-Demircan, 2018; Temel, 2015). Univar (2010) also teachers mostly home visits, sends phone calls, interviews while dropping off and picking up the child, making individual interviews with families, and sending photos of school activities within the scope of parent engagement, (Abbak, 2008; Univar, 2010). Studies have also found that parent engagement occurs mostly through engagement in classroom activities (Abu & Kaymaz, 2020; Akkaya, 2007). In the findings of this study, it is seen that parent engagement becomes mandatory during the pandemic, and even the parent assumes the role of a teacher. Emphasis is placed on the importance and necessity of the parent engagement the pandemic period (Senin & Halim, 2021). Teachers mostly check the prepared activity by sending home events in this process. Yoshikawa et al. (2020) states that especially children who cannot be supported by their parents during the pandemic process will be at a disadvantage. It is because children in this period need support in using technology. Regarding this issue, Davis et al. (2020) also drew attention to the importance of parents as a new role as Proxy educators and their psychological well-being. Campos and Vieira (2021) have found that school and home are intermingled in terms of time and space, and the teacher and the parent share roles in this period.

The biggest obstacle to parent engagement during the pandemic is seen as the inability of the parent to get permission from the place where they work. Also families' not paying enough attention to preschool education emerges as a problem. Crites (2008) states that parents' lack of knowledge and working conditions are a major obstacle to engagement. Orcan-Kacan et al. (2019) also found that time limitations and the need for care of another child are the biggest obstacles to parent engagement. Besides time problems, the inability to understand the importance of preschool education also prevents engagement (Abu & Kaymaz, 2020). Families need to be informed that the sooner their children participate in their early childhood education school life, the more their children's gains will increase (Dearing et al., 2006; Swick et al., 2006). Although families have the most detailed information about their children, many parents need to learn more about the effects of educational experiences on their child's development. Therefore, educators need to inform parents about what they do and why (Dearing et al., 2006;

Duran, 2005; Swick et al., 2006). During the pandemic period, parents can do activities instead of their children.

When the answers of the participants are examined within the scope of the research, the obstacles to parent engagement during the pandemic differ. There were problems related to remote emergency learning such as the parents' lack of technology use skills, the use of the computer at home by another child, and internet connection problems. At the same time, it was found that the child did not want to do activities with parents during the pandemic period and had to design activities by using the materials at home.

Participants mentioned the positive effects of parent engagement in the way that parents realize their importance in their children's education and spend quality time with their children and emphasized that they have the chance in terms of getting to know students and parents more easily. Bay et al. (2018) also put forward opinions supporting results such as school belonging as a result of the research. Parent engagement primarily provides cooperation between school and home (Welch & Sheridan, 1995). In this way, the education of children continues both at home and at school and becomes continuous (Barbarin et al., 2010; Garcia Coll & Magnuson, 2000). Duran (2005) also stated that parent engagement contributes to the development of the school program, improves parenting skills and leadership spirit in terms of the family, and facilitates the contact of families with the school and the society. He also added that it contributed to teachers to do their job more effectively. When studies on parent engagement in early childhood are thoroughly reviewed (Clark & Ladd, 2000; Fei-Yin Ng et al., 2004; Grolnick & Farkas, 2002) they reveal the effects of parent engagement on children's future school success (Foster et al., 2005; Weigel et al., 2006). It was revealed that children of families involved in parent engagement studies have low school absenteeism, have less behavioral problems, have better social skills (Denham et al., 1991; McNamara et al., 2010), and adapt to school and that it has long-term positive results such as the desire to receive an education after high school. Teachers stated that father participation increased during the pandemic period. It has become a necessity for fathers to take an active role in children's social and educational lives, especially with the participation of mothers in business life (Kocatepe & Bilgi, 2018). However, in some cases, it is possible that the father works longer and the mother does not take part in the business life. In this case, again, mothers can come to the fore in engagement. As a result of this research, it is seen that especially mothers play an active role in parental engagement during the pandemic process. This study conducted is based on the perception of the teacher. Therefore, the teacher may not have complete information about parent-child interaction at home. For example, Karadeniz and Kahyaoglu Cakmakci (2021) found that during the pandemic process, fathers spent time with their children both in outdoor games and games set up with materials at home.

On the other hand, the participants of this study stated that the negative aspects of parent engagement was the children's sadness due to the absence of their own parent. Participants develop strategies such as planning the appropriate time for the parents, including other family members they care for, in order to include families more. They provided flexibility to facilitate parental engagement during the pandemic. Dinkmeyer and Carlson (2006) stated that when working with families in early childhood, teachers should pay attention to being flexible, reliable and accessible.

CONCLUSION

Most of the participants in this study are female teachers. It is thought that studies involving more male teachers can be designed in the future. At the microsystem level, it is obviously clear that the Ministry of Education needs to support parent engagement. At this point, it seems valuable in terms of both eliminating the deficiencies in this regard and following up-to-date studies by providing in-service training to teachers on parent engagement works of the Ministry of Education. In addition, parent engagement works should be made obligatory by the Ministry instead of leaving it to the teacher's initiative. Besides most of the participants did not focus on educating families in parent engagement and they mentioned the parents' lack of knowledge about development. For this reason, it is important to organize training for families on child development, communication with children, etc. Furthermore, strategies on how to strengthen distant education in preschool education should be devised, just as they are for other grades of education.

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