

# Character Strengths in Early Years: Teachers' Awareness and Practices

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## Abstract

Developing character strengths in early childhood has attracted increased attention all around the world in recent years. Nevertheless, very few studies have examined teachers' awareness and practices concerning character strengths. The present study aimed to discover early childhood teachers' awareness of children's character strengths and classroom practices to reveal and develop these strengths based on the 24 character strengths included in the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues. Interviews were held with 25 early childhood teachers selected via criterion sampling method and the interviews were coded using content analysis. The main findings of the study show that the strengths teachers consider important in children are similar to those they frequently observe in children (i.e., curiosity, love, love of learning and creativity). Most teachers highlight the development of creativity in children, believing that adopting different perspectives, problem-solving and achievement would be improved through creativity. In addition, teachers suggested that self-regulation should be supported during the preschool period. Teachers' practices to develop character strengths in children were not found purposeful but limited to the national curriculum. Thus, the study discusses possible ways to raise teachers' awareness of character strengths and enhance their practices during early childhood. The theoretical and practical contributions of the study are also discussed.

**Key Words:** Early childhood period, early childhood teacher, character strengths, positive psychology

## Introduction

The focus on the strengths of individuals has increased with the positive psychology movement over the last two decades. Therefore, researches on character strengths have also accelerated. Character strengths are defined as qualities that emerge spontaneously, make the individual feel unique, energise and motivate internally (Brdar & Kashdan, 2010). In their comprehensive research, Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined 24 character strengths (VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues). According to this research, social intelligence, love, kindness, fairness, teamwork, perspective, leadership, bravery, love of learning, curiosity, appreciation of beauty, creativity, prudence, self-regulation, forgiveness, open-mindedness, modesty, persistence, zest, gratitude, spirituality, hope, humour and authenticity are classified as character strengths. This classification is not limited to any culture or group; it has been validated

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in different cultures as a universal classification (Biswas-Diener, 2006; McGrath, 2015; Park, Seligman & Peterson, 2006). Table 1 summarises the character strengths and virtues classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Table 1.  
*VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues*

Virtues	Character Strengths	Descriptions of character strengths
Humanity	Social intelligence	Being aware of his/hers own and others' impulses and feelings
	Love	Valuing close relationships with others
	Kindness	Be kind to others and do good for others
Justice	Fairness	Treating all people the same according to the concepts of justice
	Teamwork	Ability to work collaboratively as a member of a group or team
	Leadership	Organising and performing group activities
Temperance	Forgiveness	To forgive those who do wrong
	Modesty	Not bragging about his/her achievements
	Prudence	Careful about one's choices, cautious, not taking undue risks
	Self-regulation	Regulate emotions and behaviors
Transcendence	Gratitude	Thankful for the good, expressing thanks, feeling blessed
	Spirituality	Having consistent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life
	Hope	Expecting the best and working to achieve it
	Humor	Love to laugh and joke; make others smile
	Appreciation of beauty	Recognition and appreciation of beauty, excellence and/or performance in all areas of life
Wisdom	Perspective	Thinking and researching from different angles.
	Love of learning	Mastering new skills and subjects
	Open-mindedness	To think broadly and examine things from all sides
	Curiosity	Seeking innovation and being open to new experiences
	Creativity	Thinking about new and productive ways of doing things
Courage	Bravery	Not avoiding challenges or difficulties
	Persistence	Finish the work started
	Zest	Vitality, feeling alive and showing enthusiasm for any activity
	Authenticity	Telling the truth and presenting yourself truthfully

In recent years, character strengths have gained popularity in education due to their positive effects on academic achievement (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Shoshani & Aviv, 2012), resilience (Shoshani & Slone, 2017), well-being and happiness (Shoshani & Slone, 2013; Toner, Haslam, Robinson & Williamson, 2012; Weber, Wag-

ner & Ruch, 2016), life satisfaction (Gillham et al., 2011; Park, 2004; Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Park & Peterson, 2006; Shoshani & Aviv, 2012; Weber et al., 2016), meaning of life (Seligman, Rashid & Parks, 2006).

Individuals can have a good character only if societies assess strengths and attach importance to their development. Since early childhood is a period when children internalise social values and behaviours (Dereli-İman, 2014), it appears as a period that offers opportunities to develop character strengths. Many character strengths are observed during early childhood (Hoffman, 1975). Parents and teachers recognise and support prosocial behaviours, but they may often fail to observe these behaviours as they are not aware of children's character strengths (Lottman, Zawaly & Niemiec, 2017). However, some character strengths are negatively correlated with behavioural and emotional problems like anger, anxiety, impulsivity (e.g. Eisenberg et al., 2001; Erkan & Sop, 2018) and social adaptation problems (Li-Grining, McKinnon & Raver, 2019) in children. Implementing interventions for character strengths in a developmental framework requires parents and teachers to be aware of the character development process in this period. The application of character strengths in early childhood education means identifying and promoting each child's emergent unique character strengths (Lottman, et al., 2017).

Character can be developed by not only thinking or talking about it but also through practice (Park & Peterson, 2009). Family, teacher and peer relationships that socialise children, positive role models and various youth development programs play a critical role in the development of character strengths (Park, 2004). Positive role models, particularly during early childhood (Bandura, 1977), are the basis of good character. In this respect, people around the child are responsible for his/her character development and must behave consciously (Haslip & Donaldson, 2020; Park & Peterson, 2009). Early childhood teachers, those with whom children in the early childhood interact most, hold a unique position in this regard (Shoshani & Slone, 2017). As a matter of fact, character development of children in early childhood is considerably affected by the secure relationships with their teachers (Haslip, Allen-Handy & Donaldson, 2019). In character education, the responsibilities of the teachers in classroom are approaching children with love and respect, being a good role-model and correcting hurtful actions (Pala, 2011). While educators and parents have attached great importance to children's happiness and well-being, developmental positive psychology has showed limited interest in this area (Baker, Green & Falecki, 2017; Shoshani & Slone, 2017). Thus, there is a need for more information about the effects of character strengths on children's development (Lottman et al., 2017). In this regard, there is a considerable need for interdisciplinary studies of positive psychology and early childhood education. Despite the large body of international research in this area (e.g., Baker et al., 2017; Haslip et al., 2019; Haslip & Donaldson, 2020; Haslip & Donaldson, 2021; Shoshani, 2018; Lottman et al., 2017; Özdemir-Bişkin & Sop, 2021), these studies

are limited to certain cultures and provide limited information concerning character development during early childhood.

Parallel with the positive psychology movement worldwide, there has been an increased emphasis on social emotional learning focusing on children's positive qualities in Turkey, too (e.g., Özdemir-Beceren & Zembat, 2016; Yazıcı, 2019) and values education (Bakan & Şahin, 2018; Ekşi & Kaya, 2021; Özkan-Kılıç & Özbek-Ayaz, 2018). Similarly, studies specific to certain character strengths examined self-regulation (Bayındır & Biber, 2019; Keleş & Alisinanoğlu, 2018; Tekin & Koçyiğit, 2020), creativity (Dere & Ömeroğlu, 2018; Öncü, 2015; Yıldız & Güney-Karaman, 2017), curiosity (Alabay, 2020; Soydan, 2013), and leadership (Gündüz & Duran, 2016; Duran & Zembat, 2020). Moreover, a measurement instrument that measures character strengths based on parent statements, Early Childhood Character Strength Inventory (Özdemir-Bişkin & Sop; 2021), was adapted to Turkish to determine character strengths in the early childhood period. However, no training or intervention program is yet available to examine, discover or develop children's strengths as a whole. In this respect, there is a need for strength-based studies, character strengths intervention programs and positive education activities that aim to discover children's strengths in a holistic way for positive youth development in Turkey. In other words, determining early childhood teachers' practices concerning character strengths can be considered the first step in developing intervention programs. To develop such training programs, the present study aimed to see whether the existing educational settings designed by early childhood teachers support character strengths or not, determine teachers' awareness and reveal the role of these practices in developing character strengths. Thus, the study findings are expected to contribute to the literature and help plan and standardise positive education programs for early childhood. Considering that teacher modelling is very important for social, emotional and character education efforts, it is crucial to determine teachers' awareness and practices. Early childhood teachers' awareness of these character strengths, their level of attention to these strengths and the classroom activities they do to develop students' character strengths were determined on the basis of the 24 character strengths included in the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The research questions designed to this end are as follows:

RQ1: To what extent are early childhood teachers aware of character strengths?

RQ2: How to early childhood teachers' practices support children's character strengths?

RQ3: How to early childhood teachers collaborate with parents to support children's development?

RQ4: To what extent are early childhood teachers' support practices for children with lower character strengths?

## **Methodology**

### **Research design**

The study has adopted a basic qualitative research approach. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), basic qualitative research deals with how humans interpret life and what meaning they add to it; which also serves as an effective method to improve practice and better understand efficient educational processes. In this respect, teachers' awareness and experiences of character strengths in early childhood are presented.

### **Participants**

The participants were 25 teachers working at early childhood education institutions in different cities of Turkey under the Ministry of Education. The teachers were selected using maximum variation sampling among purposeful sampling methods. The main purpose of maximum variation sampling is to maximise the variety of participants composing the sample within the context of the topic of interest (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). When sending participation invitations to teachers, care was taken to ensure diversity in terms of their cities of duty, experience and school types. Table 1 shows the participants' demographic data.

Table 2.  
*Demographic Data of Participants*

Participant (codes)	Gender	Age	Experience	Institution Type	City
T1	Female	37	15	Preschool	Balıkesir
T2	Female	33	11	Kindergarten	Burdur
T3	Female	35	11	Preschool	Burdur
T4	Female	35	12	Preschool	Burdur
T5	Female	38	13	Kindergarten	İzmir
T6	Female	25	4	Kindergarten	Van
T7	Female	26	4	Kindergarten	İstanbul
T8	Female	25	2	Kindergarten	Hatay
T9	Female	26	2	Preschool	Gaziantep
T10	Female	26	2	Preschool	Gaziantep
T11	Female	26	4	Kindergarten	Gaziantep
T12	Female	25	2	Kindergarten	Denizli
T13	Female	32	10	Preschool	Giresun
T14	Female	25	3	Preschool	Giresun
T15	Female	37	16	Preschool	Giresun
T16	Female	36	15	Preschool	İzmir
T17	Female	39	16	Preschool	İzmir
T18	Female	34	10	Preschool	İzmir
T19	Female	54	30	Preschool	İzmir
T20	Female	37	11	Kindergarten	Balıkesir
T21	Female	26	2	Kindergarten	Van
T22	Female	28	6	Preschool	Kayseri
T23	Female	36	14	Preschool	Denizli
T24	Female	30	8	Kindergarten	Şanlıurfa
T25	Female	33	11	Preschool	Şanlıurfa

As seen in Table 2, all the teachers are female aged between 25 and 54 with teaching experience ranging between two and 30 years. They were working in 13 different cities located in various parts of Turkey. In addition, all the teachers work with 4 to 6-year-old children in preschools and kindergartens affiliated to primary schools.

### **Data collection process**

Before initiating interviews, local university institutional ethic committee approval was obtained in order to confirm the study's conformity with research criteria and guidelines. The data was collected using a semi-structured interview form. The interview form was developed based on the information provided by the literature on character strengths in children. As the concept of character strengths is a novel research

area in Turkey, it was considered proper to prepare a guideline to inform teachers about character strengths in children. The interview included the 24 character strengths in the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and concerning explanations. The draft interview form was completed by adding the interview questions following the explanations. The draft form was reviewed by four experts, two in the field of guidance and psychological counselling and two in early childhood education, and the form was restructured upon their opinions. Later, pilot interviews were held with three teachers and the questions were tested for comprehensibility. The data from the pilot study were not included in the scope of the current study. Interview questions are given in Table 2.

Table 3.

*Interview Questions*

Research Questions	Interview Questions
To what extent are early childhood teachers aware of character strengths?	-The 24 character traits are qualities that we expect to be existent in children in early childhood and can be strengthened. Which of these qualities do you most commonly observe in children? -Which character traits do you least commonly observe in children? -Which three (3) character traits do you think are the most important? -Why did you choose these traits? Why do you think a child must have these character traits?
How to early childhood teachers' practices support children's character strengths?	-What kind of activities do you or would you plan to teach these qualities? Can you provide short examples of each strength? -How do you think the character traits you have chosen will contribute to children?
How to early childhood teachers collaborate with parents to support children's development?	-What are your class practices to support children who are weak in terms of the character strengths you have selected?
To what extent are early childhood teachers' support practices for children with lower character strengths?	-What are the practices you conduct or may conduct commonly with parents to teach these qualities?

The interviews were held on an online platform with the teachers. The participants were informed that their identities would be kept anonymous in the interviews, and the data would be kept confidential. The data were collected in November-December of the 2020-2021 school year. The average length of the interviews was 20-40 minutes.

### **Coding and data analysis**

The data were analysed using content analysis. In order to reach the concepts and relationships that can explain the qualitative data collected, the four main steps suggested by Yıldırım and Şimşek (2013) were followed. These steps are coding the data, finding the themes, arranging the codes and themes and finally describing and interpreting the findings.

Interview transcripts were coded by two researchers separately. Afterwards, the two researchers revised the transcripts through peer-coding coming together. In this regard, data were divided into meaningful sections based on the aims of the study and interview questions. The results of the analyses gave four themes: 1) Teachers' awareness of character strengths in children 2) Teachers' practices to develop character strengths of children 3) Teachers' practices for children in need of support for character strengths 4) Teachers' cooperation with parents in supporting children's character strengths. After determining the themes, the relations among them were discovered and the findings obtained were interpreted by the researchers.

Attaining maximum variety of participants was targeted for the validity and reliability of the study (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). For reliability, the data analysed were checked by another expert in the field of qualitative research. This expert examined the consistency of the research question and codes, the data and codes and the codes and themes. In addition, direct quotations of teachers were included in the findings in order to increase validity. To provide the readers with an opportunity to assess the accuracy of the study results, information about the scope, method and themes of the study was provided in as much detail as possible.

### **Findings**

#### **Early childhood teachers' awareness of character strengths in children**

Early childhood teachers were asked about the character traits they observe most and least in children concerning children's character strengths. The responses of the teachers are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4.

*Frequency of character strengths observed in children*

Character strengths observed most	n	Character strengths observed least	n
Curiosity	22	Prudence	17
Love	20	Fairness	12
Love of education	15	Self-regulation	9
Creativity	14	Spirituality	8
Kindness	13	Modesty, teamwork, gratitude	6
Leadership, Bravery, zest	9	Humour, Persistence	5
Forgiveness	8	Creativity, appreciation of beauty, authenticity, social intelligence, forgiveness	2
Social intelligence, Hope, Authenticity	7	Perspective, Bravery, Leadership, Kindness, Open-mindedness, Hope	1
Thinking from different perspectives	6		
Fairness	5		
Open-mindedness	4		
Humour	3		
Teamwork spirit, Gratitude, Appreciation of beauty, persistent	2		
Modest	1		

A total of 235 opinions were expressed about the most and least frequently observed character strengths in children in accordance with the VIA classification of character strengths. More than half the participants stated that they often observed curiosity (n=22), love (n=20) and love of learning (n=15) in children. The most commonly stated traits among the least observed strengths are prudence (n=17), fairness (n=12) and self-regulation (n=9).

The early childhood teachers were later asked about the character strengths they attached the most attention in early childhood, and more than half of them (n=26) expressed that they cared about creativity most. They stated that love (n=15), self-regulation (n=9), love of learning (n=8) and curiosity (n=6) are important. While mentioning the importance of creative strength, the teachers emphasised its necessity for thinking differently (n=5), problem-solving skills (n=5) and a successful life (n=4). For instance, talking about the importance of creativity, T<sub>1</sub> said “*The child acquires the skill of solving a problem in different ways. So that he can find a different way out every time he falls.*” Similarly, T<sub>16</sub> stated that creativity would bring advantages in finding solutions for problems and developing the existing ones when producing new things. Other two examples highlighting the importance of creativity are as follows:

*..the ability to look from different perspectives if the child is able to do this, he can show empathy in his relationships, respect differences in life, can think about different ways in solving problems. I believe the benefits of the ability to look from different perspectives are very valuable.*  
(T6)

*...Must be creative because creativity enables him to take different perspectives. Thinking keeps the mind active. It makes the student cognitively active. (T21)*

Another character strength cared for by teachers is the feeling of love. For example, T<sub>11</sub> explained that a child who loves and is loved knows the value of others better. Most of the teachers asserted that love is important for children to be happy, adaptive in their environment, show mercy to others and be considerate. Some of the quotations are as follows:

*A loving person is one who produces and generates profit for the society and himself. (T14)*

*I think being a loving person, knowing how to love and be loved is important to be a happy individual who can think reasonably. (T16)*

Other character strengths teachers consider important are being self-regulated and loving to learn. T<sub>21</sub>, a teacher who said self-regulation would increase intrinsic motivation for achievement and learning, emphasised the importance of managing emotions for learning to occur. Two teachers expressed the strength of self-regulation as follows:

*I think it is important that children internalise positive behaviours, and plan and demonstrate these behaviours by themselves. (T18)*

*He doesn't need help to be successful, knows his shortcomings or what he wants to do, regulates his behaviours this way. (T14)*

The teachers stated that love of learning is a prerequisite for children to develop themselves or acquire new information. T<sub>12</sub> stressed that love of learning is a strength, saying that it is a prerequisite for the child to develop himself or constantly learn new things, while T<sub>25</sub> emphasised the strength of love of learning as follows:

*...must be open to learning to be able to make progress and improve. (He) can be aware of (his) own self and main goal whichever profession he chooses in the future. (T25)*

As for the character strengths that are least frequently stated, two teachers highlighted the spirit of teamwork, two of them mentioned spirituality and two others addressed bravery as important character strengths. For instance, T<sub>1</sub> noted that she considered teamwork important as it boosts creativity and expressed her opinion as follows:

*What makes one idea a thousand is actually teamwork and it is a trait that boosts creativity. Also, it means that the idea of me turns into the idea of us for children in an ego-centric period. The child who enjoys succeed-*

*ing together, playing together will be happier and more successful in the future, as he will not only think about himself but also others.*

One of the two teachers highlighting the importance of spirituality stated that she considers spirituality as a way of finding yourself and your life purpose with her words, “...no matter what profession he chooses in the future, he must have high spirituality to be aware of his own self and main purpose in life” (T<sub>25</sub>). Another teacher T<sub>5</sub> thinking that curiosity is effective on readiness to learn in children claimed that if children are curious, they never feel afraid of trying. Character strengths that the teachers made no mention of are leadership, gratitude, persistence, forgiveness, hope, zest, modesty, appreciation of beauty, prudence and open-mindedness.

The teachers were asked how the character strengths they expressed would contribute to children in the future. Most of the teachers (n=9) stated that the character strengths they mentioned would bring achievement to children. T<sub>8</sub>, considering that these character strengths would come along with achievement, said “*When children acquire these character strengths, they can grow up a more successful, conscientious individual with strong characters as well as being good examples to society. It will provide them with the opportunity to do beneficial things for themselves and others and most importantly to be happy individuals.*”

Under the same theme, some of the teachers (n=8) emphasised that children would be happy and adaptive individuals to their environment. For example, one teacher who thinks self-regulation is important expressed her opinion as follows:

*I believe the character strengths I highlight will help my students be sensitive to themselves and their environment, achieve the consciousness of being “us”, be able to adapt to all events and situations, self-confident, cooperative and beneficial to their country and be successful individuals no matter what they do professionally.*

The teachers who mentioned that individuals with high creativity will have their own perspectives in the future (n=7) also asserted that they would have a high level of self-confidence (n=5) and always be curious about learning all (n=4). For instance, T<sub>12</sub> uttered the following statements about a creative child: “*(the student) can look form different perspectives in any case of risk. When everyone else is afraid or anxious, he can control the risk by taking a different perspective because he doesn’t think ordinarily. Increased love of learning changes life perspective. He feels more self-confident as he learns and his desire to search increases day by day.*”

T<sub>21</sub> suggested curiosity and love of learning as important character strengths and said, “*I think their learning will be permanent and they will always take an active role in thinking. With the established sense of responsibility, the child will be able to plan the next step and be ready.*” Similarly, T<sub>11</sub> explained: “*if the child is curious, his love of learning never comes to an end. He isn’t contented with fixed patterns and always*

sees forward.”. T<sub>6</sub>, on the other hand, made the following emphasis:

*I encourage them through activities to develop and raise their sense of curiosity so that they have a lifelong sense of curiosity, curiosity gives a person excitement, it is a quality that shows a sign of life. I want my children to be curious about everything, which will keep them enthusiastic about learning.*

### **Early childhood teachers’ practices to develop children’s character strengths**

The teachers were asked about their practices to develop children’s character strengths. They expressed 13 different opinions under the creativity theme. They explained that they often plan activities that leave the child “free” (n=6) to boost their creativity; support them to offer different solutions with open-ended questions (n=3) and SCAMPER technique (n=3); and that they also included drama activities, plays and recycling activities. For instance, T<sub>16</sub> said she promoted creativity using the explanations “I try to conduct activities in which children can act freely rather than fixed ones. I want them to see what they can accomplish. I encourage them to express their opinions freely.”; T<sub>23</sub>, on the other hand, said “I try to offer different ways of solution during activities. I attempt to receive each child’s opinion. I use brainstorming very often. I try to include drama activities frequently.”

The teachers made the greatest emphasis on love (n=4) and empathy (n=3) in developing love as a strength in children. They stated that they used books very often (n=4) and they attached importance to drama activities (n=3) in order to boost these senses.

One teacher provided the following explanation about her practices concerning love:

*We prepare pet food and feed the animals in the street to nurture. I conduct activities of planting plants, taking care of and growing them and documentary like activities that introduce the world, different cultures for them to love everybody regardless of their religion, language or ethnicity (T8)*

The teachers expressed varying opinions about improving children’s self-regulation skills. The most commonly used practice to encourage self-regulation by teachers was giving responsibility (n=4). For example, T<sub>13</sub> explained she gave children responsibility through project work and said that she made her children keep collections and exhibit them at school. In addition to giving responsibility, the teachers also used modelling (n=2), drama activities (n=3) and books to develop self-regulation.

The teachers generally expressed common opinions about the improvement of love of learning and curiosity. They frequently highlighted the significance of curiosity to stimulate love of learning. Most of the teachers (n=11) stated that they used materi-

als that would stimulate children's curiosity according to their interests. T<sub>18</sub>, for instance, said she offered opportunities for stimulation and tried to arouse the children's interest through different materials, songs, plays etc. Similarly, T<sub>6</sub> explained, "*Being curious is a quality that children already have, but I ask questions to increase their curiosity, bring interesting materials to class and encourage them to learn about the things they are curious about by giving information that would attract their interest.*" T<sub>25</sub> stated that she placed stimuli that would arouse interest and curiosity around the classroom before starting an activity.

### **Early childhood teachers' practices for children who need support for character strengths**

The teachers were asked how they helped out children who need special support for character strengths. They said they often asked appropriate questions and used supportive talk (n=8), gave children responsibility in the class (n=7), paid attention to family cooperation (n=6) and role-play activities (n=5), and conducted behaviour reinforcement activities (n=6). T<sub>6</sub>, for instance, explained that modelling for children was important and promoted positive behaviour saying "*I express that I support their friends' positive behaviour and make speeches over it.*" Another teacher reported that she used supportive talk to help children to express themselves and gave them responsibilities to keep them active in class (T<sub>7</sub>).

As for supporting love as a strength, one teacher stated that unloved children can be noticed in the class and so she acted as a model for children adding "*They were more ill-tempered in the beginning. But as I showed my love to them, as I approached them with love, and as they realised the importance of approaching everything with love over other children, he starts to reveal his love, too.*" (T<sub>11</sub>). Another teacher (T<sub>18</sub>) stressed that she tried to make children feel loved unconditionally, even if they have negative behaviours and stated that she often introduced different materials and asked questions to raise children's curiosity.

Many teachers frequently highlighted the importance of creativity during the interviews. For example, T<sub>23</sub> said she used brainstorming and picture books to boost children's creativity and gave the following example: "*Everybody has a drawer for which they are responsible and must organise. They have some responsibilities they must fulfil on certain days of the week (the child of the week, assistant of the day etc.). I observe and encourage them to behave with love and respect towards all their friends.*" Some of the teachers gave the following examples for boosting creativity:

*I try to include creativity in each activity I plan. While telling a story, I stop at some point and make the children complete it. I try to make them produce works with collage or waste materials. I provide them with an opportunity to display dance figures during music activities. I let them set up play activities themselves. (T<sub>21</sub>)*

Most of the teachers (n=6) stated that active participation of children in role-play activities is significant in gaining character strengths. They claimed that drama is effective in cultivating a certain behaviour or extinguishing an undesirable one in children. For instance, T<sub>4</sub> expressed that drama activities are essential in promoting children's fair behaviour and that she preferred imitation plays. Likewise, T<sub>5</sub> said she observed children playing house in their free time and planned language activities and drama works according to her evaluations based on her observations. Another teacher who plans drama activities described her practices as follows:

*I give children an opportunity to lead the activities and assign them active roles in the drama activities to promote their communication. (T10)*

In addition to activities, some of the teachers (n=6) pointed out the importance of cooperation with families. T<sub>16</sub>, for example, expressed that she cooperated with families and supported them in the activities at home. Similarly, T<sub>15</sub> said she worked with families and that she included activities that promote children's self-regulation behaviours with the support of the family. Only one teacher emphasised the importance of spending one-to-one time with the child, and gave the following example:

*I interact with the child individually and try to reach his opinions. Asking the correct questions while chatting is very effective and we take the child on a journey of discovery. (T2)*

### **Teachers' cooperation with parents in supporting children's character strengths**

The teachers were asked what kind of common actions they took with parents to support children's character strengths and all the teachers stressed that family participation activities were important in this regard. According to the teachers' expressions, they mostly plan individual meetings and interviews (n=18), include parents in educational activities (n=10), employ family communication activities (n=8) and organise family education activities (n=5). Touching the importance of the necessity to inform parents about every matter, T<sub>2</sub> explained that she prepared weekly and monthly newsletters and highlighted the importance of interviews as follows: "*We chat about children's behaviours in the class and at home by holding frequent meetings. During our discussions, I give parents the opportunity to share the methods that give out easier results in similar problems, compare their approaches and think about adapting them to their own children.*" T<sub>3</sub>, stating that it is important to include parents in activities promoting character strengths, highlighted that playing with parents both increased their interaction with children positively and taught children the rules and respect each other's rights. T<sub>13</sub> expressed the necessity of making the family a part of education and receiving their support in all matters as follows: "*...I believe we need to get their support in every matter. I ask them to read stories in family participation activities. I*

want them to make job presentations. On school outside days, we play with parents and children.”

In the context of family interaction activities, the teachers stated that they used communications and writing methods. For example, T11 expressed that communication was important in this regard, as it strengthened the relationship between them and added: “I plan unusual activities and make parents feel curious about their outcomes so that they can fuel children’s curiosity. As children grow up imitating their parents I tell them to be honest with their children.” Eight of the teachers said they used family communication activities mainly for domestic activities and for sending informative texts about child-parent relationship. As an example:

*I want them to read stories to their children and have talks about it, which enhances the ability to empathise in children by putting themselves in the place of the hero in the story. (T6)*

Some of the teachers emphasised the importance of family education activities in child-parent relationship and promoting character strengths in children. For instance, T<sub>16</sub> expressed the significance of family education as follows: “It is important to manage to direct families to training and to inform them about its contribution to them and their children. I try to support families to be good observers to able to notice their children’s qualities, or pretend that a lacking quality exists and correct this.” In addition, one teacher, T24 explained that parents were indifferent about family participation and that she had difficulty including families in education.

## **Discussion**

The present study has revealed significant results. The most remarkable result is that teachers focus more on specific character strengths while neglecting some of them. In-class activities, on the other hand, are mainly intended for the overall development of the child rather than improving a certain character strength. The teachers mentioned love, creativity, love of learning, self-regulation and curiosity more frequently as character strengths in children.

The teachers were asked about the character strengths they observed most and least frequently in children during early childhood. Most teachers stated that they noticed curiosity, love, love of learning, and creativity. In similar studies, being full of love, curious, creative (Park & Peterson, 2006; Shoshani, 2018) humorous and kind (Park & Peterson, 2006) caught attention as the most frequently observed character strengths in young children. It is seen that curiosity and love of learning, which the teachers in the present study observe most frequently in children, are listed under the virtue of wisdom in the Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) VIA classification of character strengths. These strengths are positive qualities that are closely related to cognitive abilities. In fact, teachers mentioned love of learning as a prerequisite for the child to

improve himself or acquire new information. According to the VIA classification of character strengths, love is associated with the virtue of humanity (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In this respect, children with higher levels of love were seen to value close relationships with others more (Peterson & Seligman 2004) and were happier (Park & Peterson, 2006). These findings show that promoting love increases social and positive feelings not only during childhood but also in adulthood (Hutcherson, Seppala & Gross, 2008). In short, it would be significant to notice and promote the strengths of love, curiosity and love of learning that are frequently observed in children by the teachers for children's cognitive and social-emotional development.

The least frequently observed character strengths, on the other hand, are prudence, fairness and self-regulation; additionally, some teachers highlighted qualities like spirituality, open-mindedness, modesty, teamwork and gratitude. Studies conducted with young children report that more complex and sophisticated character strengths like open-mindedness, forgiveness and spirituality do not fully develop until adolescence (Park & Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Since the acquisition of complex qualities necessitates cognitive maturity (Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1932), it is an expected fact that these strengths increase with age (Ruch, Weber, Park & Peterson, 2014). It can be asserted that the teachers observed such strengths as prudence, gratitude and spirituality less frequently in young children in the present study as the development of these virtues requires certain cognitive maturity. However, instead of expecting gratitude from a young child, it must be taught to him (Park & Peterson, 2006). Character strengths are in fact qualities that can be developed through purposeful interventions. In other words, individuals can learn to be prudent, grateful, fair or open-minded with proper interventions.

On the other hand, opinions about the development of self-regulation skill are rather different. Some theories claim that self-regulation skills develop around four years of age (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Thus, self-regulation skill is an area of importance in the early childhood period. Studies report that children with poor self-regulation skills risk developing emotional and behavioural problems and have difficulty establishing positive relationships with their peers and teachers (Eisenberg, Valiente & Eggum, 2010; Erkan & Sop, 2018). On the other hand, since children with high self-regulation are more likely to display behaviours that are appropriate with the standards in social settings like school (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), it is normal that these children can control their own emotions and behaviours in the school environment (Weber et al., 2016). Teachers might be attaching more importance to self-regulation due to its positive results, but they stated that they observed this quality less often in children in their classes. Therefore, it was remarkable that they tried to include activities to improve children's self-regulation skills in their classes.

Almost all the early childhood teachers emphasised creativity as the character strength they considered important to be boosted in children. Many of the teachers be-

lieve boosting creativity during this period will bring along adopting different perspectives, problem solving and achievement in children. In the related literature, Güven and Karasulu-Kavuncuoğlu (2020) found that children's creativity and problem-solving skills are positively correlated. In the present study, the teachers were observed to mention cognitive processes more often. This is not an incorrect perception as there are studies revealing the relationship between creativity and cognitive processes (Çuhadaroğlu, 2016), but one reason why the teachers touched more upon the strength of creativity might be the fact that they use the national curriculum for early childhood education. In the study they examined the early childhood education curriculum Koçin and Tuğluk (2020) found that the gains were mainly related with skills like critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, communication, responsibility and awareness of different cultural characteristics. In addition to the clear statement in the curriculum of "boosting creativity is in the forefront", it is also stated explicitly that attention must be paid to the enhancement of creativity while planning developmental gains (Ministry of National Education, 2013). Therefore, the teachers' focusing on cognitive processes is an important and acceptable finding.

The teachers, frequently making an emphasis on the importance of creative strength, stated that they planned activities that left students' opinions free to boost this strength and tried to discover children's different perspectives by asking open-ended questions. Some teachers highlighted the importance of drama activities in boosting creativity. In fact, planning classroom settings where students can make their own choices on the journey of learning and enjoy discovering; and directing open-ended questions that will help children reinforce and internalise the processes they discover are important in revealing virtuous behaviours (Danoff, Breitbart & Barr, 1977). Specifying strategies for learning through building connections between events with creative activities and planning activities that would support children's language development provide them with different learning opportunities (Saracho, 2012). However, studies conducted to support creativity in young children are generally based on understanding creativity. Providing open-ended materials and encouraging children to participate in creative activities are among the strategies employed by teachers. Similar to the findings of the present study, Aljughaiman and Mowrer-Reynolds (2005) stated that teachers held strong beliefs about boosting creativity, but their practices failed to do so appropriately. It is considered that teachers need to develop a more specific understanding in supporting children's creative development and adopt different viewpoints to boost their creativity by offering individual opportunities.

Following creativity, the teachers emphasised the importance of love. Similarly, other studies have revealed that early childhood teachers prioritise children's being full of love and respect (Ogelman & Sarıkaya, 2015; Güzelyurt, 2020; Uzun & Köse, 2017). Teachers expressed that children with the strength of love would be more sensitive to their environment and be happy individuals by developing self-respect. As

a matter of fact, there is evidence showing that love increases individuals' happiness and life satisfaction (Park et al., 2004; Ruch et al., 2014; Shashoni & Aviv, 2012). Moreover, feeling secure in an environment where they are loved and values will positively affect children's learning processes (Tillman, 2014). The teachers were seen to highlight the feelings of love and empathy together to improve the strength of love. In previous studies, early childhood educators reported that children's empathetic and helpful behaviours were indicators of love (Haslip et al., 2019). Children who develop more empathy tend to enjoy friendship with their peers and solve problems in cooperation (Griggs et al., 2009). In this respect, it can be thought that the teachers approached empathy and love with a holistic perspective since empathy relates to emotional socialisation in children (Taylor et al., 2013). The teachers expressed that they used picture books for children and included drama activities to enhance the feelings of loving and being loved. In a similar study, Uzun and Köse (2017) found that early childhood teachers employed story books and drama activities to improve love as a value. Particularly activities of reading stories to children are often preferred in character education (Haslip et al., 2019).

Another important finding is the teachers' explanation that self-regulation should be developed during early childhood. They envisaged that self-regulation would increase intrinsic motivation in achievement and learning. Similarly, studies show strong relationships between children's achievement and self-regulation (Baumeister, Leith, Muraven & Bratslavsky, 2002; Duckworth & Carlson, 2013; Ponitz, McClelland, Matthews, & Morrison, 2009). Moreover, Hernández et al. (2017) stated that children who display appropriate classroom behaviour are usually those who are highly self-regulated. Hence, positive teacher-children relationships can be established more easily with children who are highly self-regulated (Berry, 2012), and learning will be more effective in such a positive setting.

In the findings concerning the teachers' practices to enhance the character strengths of children who need support in character strengths, more than half the teachers expressed that they made supportive talks, gave children responsibilities in the class and included role-play activities. Some teachers mentioned the importance of family cooperation. According to studies conducted on character education of young children, it is important that they gain experience through real-time interaction with their parents and peers (Mei-Ju et al. 2014). Similarly, in the present study, the teachers stated that in-class role-play and drama activities are significant for children to gain experience. While acting out a role at school or home, children sometimes pretend to be a teacher, a mom or dad, or a sister or brother. If teachers are good observers, they can observe many character strengths and help children build a positive belief in themselves by associating their actions with their emotions (Proctor, 2017). For example, in a pretend play, uttering such a sentence 'You are so kind to your baby, you love your baby very much just like your mother loves you' can be effective in internalising love as a char-

acter strength.

The teachers stated they cooperated with parents in developing children's character strengths, usually planned individual meetings and included parents in educational activities. Studies conducted on young children's character strengths (Ekşi, 2003; Hasanah & Deiniatur, 2020; Mei-Ju, et al., 2014) also focus on the importance of the family in character education. In this respect, while designing curricula and interventions intended for developing children's character strengths the cooperation of parents and teachers with whom children have direct interaction is necessary to establish a quality educational setting. Moreover, since character values of teachers and parents may be different from each other, educators must frequently contact parents and share opinions.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Planning a detailed qualitative study was seen as crucial in identifying the strengths that early childhood teachers observe and aim to observe in children and better understand their concerning practices. Reviewing studies carried out in this regard, it could be asserted that the present study is the first to reach these goals as there are only a limited number of studies in Turkey.

Regarding the character strengths that are most and least commonly observed in children by the teachers in the study, the findings are consistent with those found by previous studies. This results reveals that fundamental strengths like curiosity, love, love of learning and creativity during early childhood are observed similarly in different countries (Park & Peterson, 2006; Shoshani, 2018). On the other hand, the qualities requiring advanced cognitive functions such as prudence, fairness and spirituality are encountered less frequently in different countries in a similar way can mean that the developmental characteristics of early childhood are not yet sufficient for these strengths. However, teachers' inclusion of activities that would also develop strengths requiring more advanced cognitive functions could help in noticing and acquiring these skills.

The strengths that the teachers expressed no opinion about in the rank order include leadership, gratitude, persistence, forgiveness, hope, zest, modesty, appreciation of beauty, prudence and open-mindedness. At schools, teachers are rather inclined to focus on and improve maladaptive behaviours. Therefore, studies can be planned to inform teachers about the importance of discovering and fostering character strengths, because the negligence of these strengths in the early childhood period is the cause of social and emotional problems that may more clearly occur in the following years. Another remarkable conclusion drawn from the study is that the character strengths considered necessary by the teachers are almost the same qualities as the strengths they observed in children. This can mean that teachers draw more attention to and try to improve the character strengths they consider important. Opportunities for in-service training must be increased to prevent this and promote practices to develop

other character strengths as well. On the other hand, teacher practices intended for children's character development remain at a limited level. It is important to create an environment where children's special strengths are fostered at schools. To this end, teachers are expected to carry out individual studies with children. As children spend most of their time at school, teachers should plan educational programs to develop children's character and should definitely include parent cooperation in this process. Approaching strengths as a whole and supporting them purposefully through activities is significant for character development.

Although the results of the study yielded important findings, some limitations must be discussed. First, as the early childhood teachers had not participated in a seminar or training on character strengths prior to the study, they were given a short informative form about the VIA Character Strengths before the interviews so as to create a common perspective. Organising a more enlightening training program about character strengths for teachers would enable researchers to obtain more specific results about practices (e.g., sample activities of practices, sharing picture storybooks etc.) in future studies. Second, the teachers were asked to consider only three character traits in the interviews. Although this seems to be a limitation, it was planned to place the findings in a debatable framework by the researchers. The reason for including 24 character strengths in the present study was to develop a profile that would reveal teachers' awareness of character strengths because there is no previous study showing teacher awareness of children's character strengths in Turkey. Specific character strengths can be selected instead of all 24 in future studies, thus providing more in-depth analyses.

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