

Children's Views Toward Their Peers With Disabilities During Early Childhood

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Abstract

In this study, it was aimed to examine the opinions of preschool children towards their peers with disabilities and the characteristics that affect these views. This research is a qualitative study. In the research in which qualitative data analysis techniques are used, the basic data collection source is the semi-structured interview form. The study group consisted of 68 children between the months of 36 and 72 who attend kindergarten. In the analysis of the research findings, qualitative data were evaluated by content analysis. As a result of the research; In the post-test application regarding the appearance features of dolls with disabilities, the children in the age group of 3, 4 and 5; It was seen that they made definitions in the category of "describing the disability condition". In the post-test application regarding the playmate preference of the children, the majority; It has been observed that they accept dolls with disabilities as playmates on the grounds of "not having experience" and "presence of equipment" in the age group of 3, and "activity content" and "having experience" in the age group 4 and 5. In addition "What games would you like to play?" question's answers were evaluated, it was seen that all the children gave answers in the "games adapted to the disability condition" category in the post-test application.

Keyword: Disability, Disabled Perception, Professional Development, Preschoolers

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INTRODUCTION

It has been observed that children, fully-abled and disabled alike, spend an increasing amount of time together, playing with each other, developing, adapting to new settings and learning together in various environments (e.g. home, educational settings, informal environments and other social environments). Societal values, children's sense of societal belonging, and developmental and educational opportunities are all paramount in building the notion that children with disabilities – and families of those children – are all fully-fledged members of a society. Beginning at a young age, children start to become familiarized with – and collect information about – their environments. That the development of pre-school children is multifaceted, flexible, and changeable is highly important in terms of the quality of their relationships in later periods of their lives. Physical, mental, social, and emotional maturation during early childhood has a significant effect on children's social behavior, and each become a determining factor in the way they interact with their peers.

It is widely expected that children – fully-abled and disabled alike – will begin to socialize with their peers at a young age. Accordingly, the potential of pre-school educational settings in supporting social competency among peers is developed when disabled children have the opportunity to interact with their non-disabled peers (Guralnick et al., 2007). Moreover, when children attend pre-school educational programs during early childhood, they develop socially and academically in multifaceted ways (Diamond & Hong, 2010). This peer interaction process takes place by undergoing various phases parallel to children's development in the physical, cognitive, ethical, social, and emotional domains (Beyazkürk et al., 2007).

According to Piaget's 'Cognitive Development Theory', for cognitive development to take place in consecutive periods, one needs to reach biological maturation and gain experience through interactions with his/her environment (Angin, 2015). Accordingly, it is highly important to provide individuals with experiences that will help them in adapting to their environment as their brains and neural systems mature (Koçak et al., 2015). From Piaget's perspective, new experiences offered to children cause children to adapt by changing or updating their existing schemas, and contribute to their enrichment. (Diamond & Hestenes, 1996). Thus, children can develop a new schemata in relation to their peers and develop a positive attitude toward their peers with disabilities.

Accordingly, Kohlberg highlights that children's development of ethics is not based on age but that the advancement in their cognitive development builds a foundation for their moral development. It can be claimed that there is a parallel between the level characteristics (pre-traditional, traditional, and post-traditional levels) expressed in Kohlberg's 'Moral Development Theory' and the reasons underlying children's preferences of play friends (Yapıcı, 2015).

In non-selective educational environments, the presence of children with different characteristics is considerably important for the development of peer relationships. Studies that draw interest are those that examine the driving forces behind social interaction between disabled and fully-abled children, and those that seek to analyze children's understanding of the concept of "disability" at a young age. (Diamond & Hong, 2010; Diamond & Huang, 2005; Meyer & Michaelene, 2013; Ogelman & Sarıkaya 2014; Ozokcu, 2018). Research shows that children's understanding of disability follows the foreseeable developmental progress. Premack and Woodruff (1978) advocate that cognitive and affective structures which affect children's interpersonal skills begin to develop during early childhood. According to *theory of mind* children begin to distinguish between their own beliefs and those of others at age four. *Theory of mind skills* are those defined by understanding the wishes, beliefs and feelings of other people, while the theory emphasizes that this is an important social skill in interpersonal communication. It also states that starting at six years of age, children begin to think of the content of other people's mental conditions. In a study by Conant and Budoff (1983), it was revealed that preschool children have awareness solely of other children's emotional and physical obstacles, but could not understand the concept of mental retardation and/or emotional disorder. The study noted that awareness of these kinds of disabilities started to emerge in late childhood and early adolescence. A study by Diamond (1993) which examined preschool-aged children's awareness of

disabilities revealed that children were mostly aware of obstacles impacting motor and language skills. Accordingly, when preschool aged children were asked to explain possible reasons for another child's disability, their explanations were generally as follows: "*s/he can't do it as s/he is a baby*" (age), "*s/he can't walk due to those teeth braces*" (equipment used), "*s/he can't speak as s/he is in class*" (environment), or "*s/he can't walk as s/he broke his/her leg*" (accident or trauma).

In addition to the developmental characteristics of children in early childhood, factors such as context, educational environment, interaction among friends, and adults' attitudes affect decisions regarding peer selection, and ultimately determine the quality of peer relationships (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Hence, in children's experiences, ideas and feelings interact with each other and assist in the development of attitudes (Çetin et al., 2002; Gülay, 2009). Moreover, children's attitudes toward others can be developed by toys, books, the TV programs they watch, their observations of their peers, their parents, and their teachers.

In addition to all of these, to understand children's opinions, attitudes, and decisions as regards their peers who possess different traits from themselves, their cognitive developmental characteristics, social behavioral characteristics, individual differences, social status, and family attitudes should be taken into consideration. Studies to be done in this domain will bring about improvement in the quality of preschool education, formation of environments in which children will develop healthy social relationships, provision of timely and full support to children who experience problems with their peers, and prevention of problems before they occur. Moreover, it is believed that teachers will be supported and guided in the development of new educational materials and in the arrangement of educational environments and activity contents. In this case, the most important question should be as follows: 'What are the views of children showing normal development during preschool period regarding their peers with disabilities and what factors impact this development of views?' Based on this research question, the present study was conducted with the aim of examining the views of preschool children regarding their disabled peers and the factors that impact these views. To this end, the responses to the following questions were sought:

1. Is there a variation in the children's responses regarding their peers with disabilities' physical traits with respect to the scores obtained from the experimental research design?

2. Is there a variation in the children's decisions regarding their play friend preferences with respect to the scores obtained from the experimental research design?

3. Is there a variation in the children's game preferences after the experimental research design?

METHOD

Research Design

The primary source of data collection in the present study, where qualitative data analysis techniques were utilized, was the semi-structured interview form. Qualitative designs focus more on the process rather than the products (Merriam, 1988). This research is a qualitative study. Researchers frequently resort to semi-structured interviews as they remove the limited standardization and flexibility, as well as the limitations present in questionnaires; moreover, they help gain in-depth information about the topic under investigation.

Sample

Children aged between 36-72 months and attending an independent kindergarten affiliated with the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and located in the Konyaaltı district of Antalya in

Turkey the population of the study. The sample group of the study was comprised of randomly selected 68 children aged between 36-72 months and attending kindergarten.

Data Collection Tools

Personal Information Form. Information regarding the children participating in the study were collected via a “*Personal Information Form.*” The analysis of the personal information of these children revealed that 19.1% (13), 33.8 % (23), and 47% (32) of the children were aged between 36-48 months, 48-60 months, and 60-72 months, respectively. As for their gender, while 53.7% were females, 46.3% were males.

Dolls with disabilities. A total of five “dolls with disabilities” were made to be used in the research study as materials to be used in the program and as instruments for analysis. During the process of defining the features of the dolls, the related literature was reviewed to investigate types of disabilities. The dolls were constructed in a way that they could cater to the aim of the study, that is, unveil children’s developmental characteristics and views in the best possible way. Moreover, the dolls were designed to reflect the predetermined type of disability in the best way possible. After a review of studies and the related literature, five dolls were produced to reflect Down’s syndrome, albinism, visual impairment and certain physical disabilities. The designed dolls with disabilities were submitted for expert opinion. Based on the recommendations of the experts, the doll reflecting Down’s syndrome was not included in the study as it could not be distinguished by the children. As a result of experts’ evaluations, a total of four dolls were determined to be used in the research. The dolls to be used in the research were given their final shapes and prepared for the study. The features of four dolls are described below:

1. *Visually Impaired Doll / Ahmet:* Ahmet represents a visually impaired male child. The doll is made of filling material and is approximately 35cm in size. To reflect the visual impairment, black eyeglasses and a white walking stick were used as accessories.

2. *Physically Disabled Doll / Ayşegül:* Ayşegül represents a female child who does not have either of her legs, and instead uses a wheelchair. The doll is made of filling material and is approximately 20 cm in size. To represent Ayşegül’s disability, a wooden wheelchair was made for her to sit and, thus, it was made ready for the study.

3. *Physically Disabled Doll / Elif:* Elif represents a female child neither of her arms. The doll is made of filling material and is approximately 35 cm in size.

4. *Physically Disabled Doll / Ömer:* Ömer represents a male child who does not have one of his feet. The doll is made of filling material and is approximately 35 cm in height. To reflect Ömer’s disability, a crutch was fixed to the doll.

‘*Evaluation Form of Children’s Views in Early Childhood Toward their Peers with Disabilities*’ In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the Program in multiple ways, an ‘*Evaluation Form of Children’s Views in Early Childhood Toward their Peers with Disabilities*’ was used. Initially, a semi-structured evaluation form was developed to collect data by conducting an in-depth examination of conceptual information.

To ensure the internal validity of the *Evaluation Form*, it was submitted for expert opinions. The final draft of the form was created based on the experts’ recommendations. The content validity ratio and item reliabilities of the semi-structured interview questions were calculated in accordance with the experts’ opinions. Subsequently, in order to identify whether or not the interview questions were appropriate and comprehensible, a preliminary interview was held with a total of three children - one from each age group (3, 4 and 5 years of age). At the beginning of the interview, the researchers explained to the subjects the aim of

the interviews and how they would proceed. The interview results were recorded on the interview form. The views of the subjects in the study remained limited to the responses they gave to the question in the semi-structured interview form.

The implementation phase of the *'Evaluation Form of the Views of Children in Early Childhood Toward their Peers with Disabilities'*: With the aim of identifying children's views regarding their peers with disabilities, the researchers asked the children whether or not they wanted to participate in the study. The children who were willing to participate in the study were asked the following questions: '1. How do you think s/he looks? 2. Would you like to have a play friend? (Answer: Yes/No) Why? 3. Which games would you like to play?' The researcher asked the children the questions for each doll separately, and their responses were recorded on the form. Each interview was held for approximately 15-20 minutes. In the study, a pre-test / post-test interview was held with a total of 75 students in the 3, 4 and 5-year-old age groups. A total of 68 forms, of which the pre-test/post-test implementation was completed, were evaluated as the data of the study.

The establishment and implementation of the Educational Program: The program for children aged 36-72 months was developed with the aim of positively supporting children's views of people with different physical characteristics and their social acceptance skills regarding differences. Moreover, it was structured in a way so as to enable the increase in positive experiences affecting a child's decision to include their peers in playtime activities. The philosophy of applied training programs is structured in the light of leading theories such as Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory, Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory, Premack and Wood-ruff (1978) Theory of Mind. While the content of the Educational Program was being planned, the related literature was reviewed and disabled groups as well as conditions creating different physical characteristics were taken into consideration. Toys that were developed as program materials and best reflecting the disability groups were given place in the learning process. The educational program was structured to include developmental content appropriate for 3, 4, and 5-year-old age groups. During the preparation of the program numerous methods and techniques were used to support children's development and social skills. Within the scope of the educational program, 32 activities, to be implemented three days a week for at least 20 minutes for eight weeks, and an alternative activity for each week were prepared. Subsequently, the educational program was submitted for expert opinion. In accordance with the recommendations of the experts, the necessary changes were made and the educational program was given its final form.

Data Analysis

In the analysis of the research data, qualitative data were evaluated by means of content analysis. The preference underlying content analysis was based on the need for a systematic analysis of the qualitative data. In the analysis of the data obtained from the responses in the children's *'Evaluation Form of the Views of Children in Early Childhood Toward their Peers with Disabilities'*, the descriptive analysis technique was used and the data were summarized and interpreted. The aim of the descriptive analysis was to present comprehensible data to the readers, who could use them if they wished to do so. In this case, data were formed in accordance with the concepts put forward by the research questions and presented by taking into consideration the questions used in the interview (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011). In evaluation of the interviews, the researcher examined the data obtained and categorized them under certain concepts. Subsequent to this process, the data were coded based on the choices that were formed and a code list was established. The reliability of the research study was ensured by comparing the codes formed by the researcher and an expert in the field. At least 70% of agreement needs to be reached between the coders to obtain reliability in a study (Balcı, 2011). The average of the reliability ratios between the coders for all the questions was found to be 90%. In the final stage, children's views were organized and presented within the framework of the identified concepts and the related literature. The calculations of numbers were based on the total number of children (n:68).

Accordingly, the children were asked the following questions in relation to the dolls that represented the disabled:

1. How do you think s/he looks?
2. Would you like to have a play friend? (Answer: Yes/No) Why?
3. Which games would you like to play?

The responses to the question *'How do you think s/he looks?'* were evaluated in two categories. These categories were coded as follows: For responses where the disability condition was not realized, No=0 - *'General description'* (He is wearing sunglasses to avoid the sun etc.), and for responses where the disability condition was realized, Yes=1 - *'Describing the disability condition'* (His eyes don't see; he's using a walking stick to walk).

The responses given to the question *'Would you like to have a play friend? (Answer: Yes/No) Why?'* were evaluated in three categories. Based on the studies by Killen & Stangor (2001) and Diamond & Hong (2010), each justification were coded within the categories of traditional justifications or ethical justifications reflecting ethical reasoning. Traditional justifications were reflecting social order and traditional expectations, including *'Differences in talents'* (e.g. *"I wouldn't because she doesn't have feet; she can't walk"* etc.) or *'The presence of equipment'* (e.g. *"I would because she is in a wheelchair."*) The justifications based on earlier experiences were coded as *'Having experiences'* (e.g. *"I would because she can play basketball and tennis"*) since the child's attention is implicitly focused on his/her friend's ability to participate in the activity. *Ethical justifications* were coded as reflecting adaptation and focusing on the *'Activity content'* (e.g. *'we'll play games; she'll draw with her feet; she'll tag with her head'*). These responses were coded as reflecting ethical justification as they implicitly focused on the child's conceptualization of equality.

The responses given to the question *'Which games would you like to play?'* were evaluated in two categories. *'General games'* refers to the game preferences made by disregarding the condition of ability or disability. *'Games adapted to the disability condition'* refers to the games preferred by taking into consideration the disability or the type of disability.

FINDINGS

The findings obtained in the study are presented in Tables 1 to 6.

Table 1. Children's conditions of encountering disabled individuals

Age (years)	Yes	No
3 (n:13)	1	12
4 (n:23)	1	22
5 (n:32)	3	29

It can be observed in Table 1 that 1 child in the 3-year age group (n:13), 1 child in the 4-year age group (n:23), and 3 children in the 5-year age group (n:32) have previously encountered a disabled individual.

Table 2. Distribution of Children's Answers Regarding the Appearance Characteristics of Dolls with Disabilities

Age Groups (years) (N:69)	Dolls	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
3 (n:13)	Ahmet	-	13	13	-
	Ayşegül	10	3	13	-
	Elif	3	10	13	-
	Ömer	2	11	13	-
4 (n:23)	Ahmet	5	18	23	-
	Ayşegül	22	1	23	-
	Elif	21	2	23	-
	Ömer	16	7	22	1
5 (n:32)	Ahmet	7	25	32	-
	Ayşegül	32	-	32	-
	Elif	30	2	32	-
	Ömer	23	9	32	-

Ahmet- Visually impaired; uses a walking stick
 Ayşegül- Uses a wheelchair
 Elif - Has neither arm
 Ömer- Doesn't have one foot; is using a crutch

As can be observed in Table 2, from the responses given to the question, “*How do you think s/he looks?*” in the pre-test administration, it can be understood that none of the children in the 3-year age group realized the kind of disability Ahmet had (-), while the disabilities of Ayşegül, Elif, and Ömer were realized by 10, 6, and 2 children, respectively. As for the children’s responses in the post-test, it was observed that all the children (n:13) had realized the physical characteristics of the dolls. As for the children in the 4-year age group, it was revealed in the pre-test administration that the type of disability of Ahmet, Ayşegül, Elif, and Ömer were realized by 5, 22, 21, and 16 children, respectively. In the post-test administration, the physical characteristics of Ahmet, Ayşegül, Elif, and Ömer were found to be have been realized by 23, 23, 23, and 22 children, respectively. As for the children in the 5-year age group, 7, 32, 30, and 23 children were found to have realized in the pre-test administration the disability type of Ahmet, Ayşegül, Elif, and Ömer, respectively, while in the post-test administration 32 children were found to have realized the disability type of all four dolls: Ahmet, Ayşegül, Elif and Ömer.

Table 3. Children's Answers Regarding the Physical Characteristics of Dolls with Disabilities

Question 1: How do you think s/he looks?					
Age	Dolls	Pre-Test	N	Post-Test	N
3 (n:13)	Ahmet	He wears sunglasses to avoid the sun; he’s worn them to look cool; he’s an old man.	13	His eyes can’t see; he’s using a walking stick to walk.	13
	Ayşegül	She doesn’t have legs, nor feet; she’s using a chair.	10	She doesn’t have feet; she’s using a wheelchair.	13
	Elif	Her hair is black; her dress is beautiful.	10	She doesn’t have arms nor hands.	13
	Ömer	He has a crutch for old people; his foot is in his body; he has a repair tool.	11	He doesn’t have a foot; he’s walking with a crutch.	13
4 (n:23)	Ahmet	He wears sunglasses to avoid the sun; he’s going to the beach.	18	His eyes can’t see; he’s visually impaired.	23
	Ayşegül	She doesn’t have any feet, nor any legs; she’s sitting in a car.	22	She doesn’t have any of her feet nor legs; she’s using a wheelchair.	23
	Elif	She doesn’t have arms nor hands.	21	She hasn’t got either of her arms.	23
	Ömer	He doesn’t have one foot; he has a crutch.	16	He doesn’t have one of his feet; the crutch allows him to walk.	23

5 (n:32)	Ahmet	He's a cowboy; he's old; he's worn sunglasses to avoid the sun;	25	His eyes can't see; he feels the obstacles with a walking stick.	32
	Ayşegül	She doesn't have either of her legs; she has a wheelchair; she has a car.	32	She doesn't have either of her feet nor legs; she's walking with a wheelchair.	32
	Elif	She doesn't have arms; she doesn't have hands; she can't touch anything.	30	She doesn't have either of her arms; she's got no arms.	32
	Ömer	He doesn't have one foot; his crutch helps him to walk.	23	He doesn't have one of his feet; he has a crutch; it helps him walk.	32

As can be observed in Table 3, in the pre-test administration, the majority of the students in the 3-year age group used statements within the 'general definition' category to respond to the question, 'How do you think s/he looks?' for Ahmet (n:13), Elif (n:10) and Ömer (n:11), while they used statements in the category of 'defining the disability condition' only for Ayşegül (n:10).

Most of the children in the 4-year age group were found to have used statements in the category of 'General definition' in the pre-test administration for Ahmet (n:18), while they used statements in the category of 'defining the disability condition' for Ayşegül (n:22), Elif (n:21) and Ömer (n:16). In the post-test administration, it was observed that all the children had used statements in the category of 'defining the disability condition' for Ahmet (n:23), Ayşegül (n:23), Elif (n:23) and Ömer (n:23).

The majority of the children in the 5-year age group were observed to have used statements in the category of 'general definition' in the pre-test administration for Ahmet (n:25), while their responses fell within the category of 'defining the disability condition' for Ayşegül (n:32), Elif (n:30) and Ömer (n:23). In the post-test administration, all the children were found to have used statements in the category of 'defining the disability condition' for Ayşegül (n:32), Elif (n:32) and Ömer (n:32).

Table 4. The distribution of children's responses regarding their play friend preferences

Question 2: Would you like to have a play friend?					
Age Groups (years) (n:69)	Dolls	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
3 (n:13)	Ahmet	5	8	10	3
	Ayşegül	4	9	11	2
	Elif	3	10	12	1
	Ömer	4	9	12	1
4 (n:23)	Ahmet	8	15	18	5
	Ayşegül	6	17	19	4
	Elif	7	16	18	5
	Ömer	5	18	20	3
5 (n:32)	Ahmet	17	15	27	5
	Ayşegül	18	14	26	6
	Elif	15	17	28	4
	Ömer	13	19	27	5

Ahmet - Visually impaired; is using a walking stick
Ayşegül - Uses a wheelchair
Elif - Has neither arm
Ömer - Doesn't have one foot; is using a crutch

As presented in Table 4, with respect to the play friend preference of the children in the 3-year age group, it was observed in the pre-test administration that 5, 4, 3, and 4 children had decided to include Ahmet, Ayşegül, Elif, and Ömer, respectively, into their games, while in the post-test administration, it was revealed that Ahmet, Ayşegül, Elif, and Ömer were accepted by 10, 11, 9, and 12 children, respectively, as play friends.

As for the children in the 4-year age group, it was revealed in the pre-test administration that Ahmet, Ayşegül, Elif, and Ömer were accepted as play friends by 8, 6, 7, and 5 children, respectively; in the post-test administration 18, 19, 18, and 20 children were observed to have accepted Ahmet, Ayşegül, Elif, and Ömer as play friends, respectively.

With respect to the children in the 5-year age group, it was observed in the pre-test administration that Ahmet, Ayşegül, Elif, and Ömer were accepted as play friends by 17, 18, 15, and 13 children, respectively, while the post-test administration revealed that Ahmet, Ayşegül, Elif, and Ömer were accepted as play friends by 24, 26, 25, and 26 children, respectively.

Table 5. Children’s responses in relation to their play friend preferences

Question 2: Would you like to have a play friend? Why?						
Age	Dolls	Pre-Test	N	Post-Test	N	
3 (n:13)	Ahmet	<i>I wouldn't because</i> I didn't like his name, clothes, eyeglasses.	11	<i>I would because</i> even though he cannot see, he can play.	10	
		<i>I would because</i> in that way I will have a friend.	2	<i>I wouldn't because</i> he is visually impaired.	3	
	Ayşegül	<i>I would because</i> I liked him/her; she has a car.	11	<i>I would because</i> we will play with her car; we will travel.	10	
		<i>I wouldn't because</i> she doesn't have feet; she can't play games; she can't walk like me.	2	<i>I wouldn't because</i> she doesn't have feet; she can't play.	3	
	Elif	<i>I would because</i> I would play; I liked her a lot.	3	<i>I would because</i> she can play games with her feet.	12	
		<i>I wouldn't because</i> she doesn't have arms; she can't play.	10	<i>I wouldn't because</i> she can't hold my hand.	1	
	Ömer	<i>I would because</i> I liked him/her; I would play.	4	<i>I would because</i> he can play games; I like friends like these.	12	
		<i>I wouldn't because</i> he doesn't have a foot, so I can't play.	9	I don't want to play with him.	1	
	4 (n:23)	Ahmet	<i>I would because</i> his eyes can't see, so I will help him/her.	8	<i>I would because</i> he can play games, sing songs, dance.	21
			<i>I wouldn't because</i> his eyes are impaired; he is wearing glasses because he can't see.	15	<i>I wouldn't because</i> I didn't like [him].	2
Ayşegül		<i>I would because</i> she is very beautiful; I will help when her hands get tired.	6	<i>I would because</i> she has a car; we can go fast; we will play games.	20	
		<i>I wouldn't because</i> she doesn't have feet; she can't walk, can't run.	17	<i>I wouldn't because</i> she doesn't have feet; no, I didn't like her.	3	
Elif		<i>I would because</i> she should not be left alone; I will feed her.	7	<i>I would because</i> we will play games; she will draw pictures with her feet; she will tag with her head.	18	
		<i>I wouldn't because</i> she doesn't have hands; how can we play games?	16	<i>I wouldn't because</i> I didn't like her. She doesn't have arms; she can't do anything.	5	
Ömer		<i>I would because</i> I will find his foot and fix it on; I will help him.	5	<i>I would because</i> though he is different, he can play games; he will dance with one leg.	20	
		<i>I wouldn't because</i> he doesn't have a foot; I wouldn't like a friend without a foot.	18	<i>I wouldn't because</i> I didn't like him. There will be differences between us; he doesn't have one; I can't go near him.	3	

5(n:32)	Ahmet	<i>I would because</i> he can't see; he doesn't have any friends. I will help him.	17	<i>I would because</i> I'll help him play games. Although he can't see, he can play; he can see obstacles with his stick.	27
		<i>I wouldn't because</i> he can't see anything; he will fall; he can't play.		<i>I wouldn't because</i> his eyes can't see; he may bump into people; he may fall; he can't play.	
	Ayşegül	<i>I would because</i> she has a car; I'll help her; we can wander around; we'll play games.	18	<i>I would because</i> she can play basketball and tennis; she has a car.	29
		<i>I wouldn't because</i> she doesn't have feet; they will laugh at her; we won't be able to run; she's broken; we won't be able to play.	14	<i>I wouldn't because</i> she can't play; she'll fall.	4
	Elif	<i>I would because</i> I'll help her.	15	<i>I would because</i> I'll help her; it would be interesting to play with her; she can do activities with her feet and mouth.	28
		<i>I wouldn't because</i> we won't be able to eat food; my friends will laugh at her; she won't be able to play games; I'll get sad.	17	<i>I wouldn't because</i> she doesn't have arms, she can't play games with hands	4
	Ömer	<i>I would because</i> I'll play games; I'll help him; he probably doesn't have friends.	13	<i>I would because</i> I liked him a lot; we can play hopscotch; he can hit the ball with his crutch.	27
		<i>I wouldn't because</i> he won't be able to play as he can't walk; I can't play football; he'd walk slowly.	19	<i>I wouldn't because</i> he won't be able to run with me; he can't do sports.	5

As can be observed in Table 5, the pre-test administration responses to the question 'Would you like to have a play friend? Why?' showed that the majority of the children in the 3-year age group did not accept the dolls as their play friends and used statements within the category of 'presence of equipment' for Ahmet (n:11) and within the category of 'differences in abilities' for Elif (n:10) and Ömer (n:9); yet, they accepted Ayşegül (n:11), using statements falling in the category of 'presence of equipment'. On the other hand, in the post-test administration, the majority of the children accepted all the dolls as their play friends and used statements falling in the category of 'having experience' for Ahmet (n:10), Elif (n:12) and Ömer (n:12) and statements within the category of 'presence of equipment' for Ayşegül (n:10).

In the pre-test administration, the majority of the children in the 4-year age group were observed not to have accepted the dolls as their play friends based on statements in the 'presence of equipment' category for Ahmet (n:15) and in the 'differences in abilities' category for Ayşegül (n:17), Elif (n:16) and Ömer (n:18). On the other hand, in the post-test administration, the majority of the children were found to have accepted the dolls as their play friends and used statements in the category of 'having experience' for Ahmet (n:21), statements in the 'presence of equipment' for Ayşegül (n:20), and statements in the 'content of activity' category for Elif (n:18) and Ömer (n:20).

In the pre-test administration, the majority of the children in the 5-year age group were observed to have accepted Ahmet (n:17) and Ayşegül (n:18) as play friends and used statements within the categories of 'differences in abilities' and 'presence of equipment', respectively. On the other hand, they did not accept Elif (n:17) nor Ömer (n:18) as play friends based on statements falling in the category of 'differences in abilities'. In the post-test administration, the majority of the children were observed to have accepted all the dolls as their play friends; they used statements in the category of 'content of activity' for Ahmet (n:27), Elif (n:28), and Ömer (n:27) and statements in the 'having experience' category for Ayşegül (n:29).

Table 6. Children’s responses regarding their game preferences

Question 3: Which games would you like to play?			
Age	Dolls	Pre-Test	Post-Test
3 (n:13)	Ahmet	Hide and seek, house, will throw away my toys	Hide and seek, tag, touch and find
	Ayşegül	Hide and seek, tag, house, card game	Hide and seek, playing with toys in a sitting position
	Elif	Drawing, tag	Foot games, hide and seek, doing legos by foot
	Ömer	Drawing, house	Hide and seek, hopscotch, we’ll play ball, fixing a foot and running
4 (n:23)	Ahmet	Hide and seek, tag, house	Walking methods, tag, obstacle game, football or he’ll hit the ball with his walking stick
	Ayşegül	House, dancing, chair race, hide and seek	Basketball in a wheelchair, tennis, running by car
	Elif	House, musical chairs, face to face game, hide and seek, tag	Football, hide and seek - can tag with her foot, foot boxing, tag
	Ömer	Hide and seek, tag, dancing, play sitting games	Hopscotch, football, basketball, tennis, swimming
5 (n:32)	Ahmet	Hide and seek, tag, hopscotch, blind man’s buff (his eyes are already closed)	Tag (<i>he’ll always be the tagger</i>), I can play whatever he can play, can draw pictures, hide and seek (<i>can see with his walking stick</i>)
	Ayşegül	Tag, musical chairs, ball bouncing by hand	Playing in sitting position, playing tennis in a wheelchair, basketball, swimming, can draw
	Elif	House, musical chairs, throwing stones into the sea (<i>will throw with her foot</i>)	Hide and seek; she’ll tag with her foot/head, food game without a hand, drawing with feet, feet boxing
	Ömer	Holding and walking him, house, tag, can play in sitting position	Hopscotch, football, tennis, swimming, hopping

As can be observed in Table 6, in the pre-test administration the children in the 3-year age group preferred to play the games in the category of ‘*general games*’ with Ahmet (n:13), Ayşegül (n:13), Elif (n:13), and Ömer (n:13), while in the post-test administration, they were found to have preferred to play the games in the category of ‘*games adapted to the disability condition*’ with Ahmet (n:13), Ayşegül (n:13), Elif (n:13) and Ömer (n:13).

In the pre-test administration, the children in the 4-year age group were found to have preferred the games in both the ‘*general games*’ and ‘*games adapted to the disability condition*’ categories with Ahmet (n:23), Ayşegül (n:23) and Ömer (n:23), while they preferred to play only the games in the ‘*general games*’ category with Elif (n:23). In the post-test administration, it was observed that the children preferred to play the games in the category of ‘*games adapted to the disability condition*’ with Ahmet (n:23), Ayşegül (n:23), Elif (n:23) and Ömer (n:23).

As for the children in the 5-year age group, it was observed in the pre-test administration that they preferred to play the games in both the ‘*general games*’ and ‘*games adapted to the disability condition*’ categories with Ahmet (n:32), Ayşegül (n:32), Elif (n:32), and Ömer (n:32). In the post-test administration, it was found that they preferred to play the games in the ‘*games adapted to the disability condition*’ category with Ahmet (n:32), Ayşegül (N:32), Elif (n:32), and Ömer (n:32).

DISCUSSION

There are various developmental factors that shape children’s views of other people, influence their decisions, and affect their peer relationships during early childhood. During this period, crucial development stages (social development, ethical development, and mental development etc.) shape children’s thought processes and impact peer relationships. Furthermore, periodic differences in children’s mental development, which are in direct correlation with their age, shape their views and judgements of other people. Teacher implementations and educational approaches during early childhood can also have an impact on children’s social relationships and decisions regarding peer selection.

As one of the sub problems of the research study, the answer to the question “*How do you think s/he looks?*” was sought in order to identify the children’s views regarding the disabled dolls’ physical characteristics. The evaluations in the ‘*general definition*’ category of all the dolls of the three-year age group children’s pre-test administration in the study revealed that none of the physical characteristics of any of the disability groups were noticed. As for the children in the 4 and 5-year age group, it was noticed in the pre-test administration that only Ahmet’s (18) disability condition was unnoticed; as they used statements like “*He’s worn eyeglasses to avoid the sun, he’s going to the beach/ cowboy*” etc. and made definitions in the ‘*general definitions*’ category. In the post-test administration, it was observed that all the children in all age groups had noticed the physical features of the disability group and made definitions in the ‘*defining the disability condition*’ category (“*He has a walking stick, it helps him to walk / visually impaired / he does not have one foot*” etc.)

According to Piaget’s ‘*Cognitive Development Theory*’, children in the 3, 4 and 5-year age groups are in the pre-operational stage. In this stage, children are still not able to organize their thoughts. To construct their own thoughts and realities, children develop symbols. Mental symbols are cognitive structures of events, people, and objects (Angin, 2015, Schunk, 2011). Thus, when the research findings were examined accordingly, it could be observed that when the children confronted a visually-impaired individual wearing black glasses and holding a walking stick, their evaluations in the pre-test were expressed based on their existing symbols, as “*He’s wearing eyeglasses to avoid the sun, old man*” etc., and they developed thoughts independent of the disability conditions. In children’s experiences, black eyeglasses were coded as *sunglasses*, while a walking stick was coded as *a tool used by elderly people* only. Thus, when children are faced with such conditions, their evaluations of the disability conditions vary based on their existing symbols. Based on the results obtained from the research findings, it was revealed that children in all the age groups had made evaluations in the ‘*general definitions*’ category for Ahmet, who was visually impaired, in the pre-test administration, but did not use statements associating Ahmet’s equipment (eyeglasses, walking stick) with the disability condition. However, it was observed that in accordance with older age characteristics and educational program implementations, children of older ages had a higher level of awareness in relation to disability groups that could be associated with their own experiences.

Evaluation of the research findings based on the ‘*Theory of Mind*’ indicate that between the ages of 2.5 and 5 years “*children experience a significant conceptual change in their understanding of people*”. This developmental change emerges in their ability to notice themselves and others from different perspectives, which is defined as “*mental skills*” (Şahin et al., 2019). Hence, children who develop theory of mind skills can distinguish individual differences and can evaluate others’ knowledge, beliefs, and needs within the scope of a certain task (Wellman, Cross & Watson, 2001; Miller, 2002). Moreover, there is consistent research evidence indicating that children of pre-school age have a basic understanding of physical and affective incompetencies (Diamond & Hong, 2010). In their studies, Diamond and Hestenes (1996) showed photos of different disability groups to pre-school aged children. While these children defined the child with a hearing aid and a wheelchair as ‘*disabled*’, they did not define the child with Down’s syndrome as being disabled. Moreover, Diamond (1993) asked the children some questions regarding the disability condition. The responses children gave in relation to the disability condition were focused on concrete and observable physical characteristics (e.g. equipment) or the reason underlying the disability; for example, “*it happened as a result of an accident.*” These results demonstrate that in relation to physical disability, children focus on observable features and, to decide whether a child is disabled or not, they can only focus on one or two certain features. In addition, it was highlighted that if a disabled child in class were not using any special equipment, children were not able to notice the disability condition of their peer at first sight (Diamond & Hestenes, 1996).

When the findings obtained in relation to the first aim of the present research, the above-mentioned research results, and the related literature are all taken into consideration, it is observed that there is consistency among the children’s responses to the question ‘*How do you think s/he looks?*’ Accordingly, the disabled dolls presented to the children in the educational program and the new experiences obtained in relation to types of disabilities can be reported as the reasons underlying the

positive variance in children's post-test administrations. Accordingly, the different methods and techniques in the educational program, children's recognition of disability types and features, their development of a common understanding regarding disabled children's lives, their development of empathy through learning processes, and the activities focused specifically on the difficulties experienced by disabled children and specifically on what they '*can do*' can be shown as the factors contributing to the development of children's higher level of awareness of their peers with physical disabilities. Moreover, the arrangement of inviting a guest into the classroom and implementing participatory activities has expanded children's experiences with respect to obtaining a detailed perspective regarding the physical characteristics of individuals who use a wheelchair, who are visually-impaired, or who are missing limbs.

The examination of children's responses to the question "*Would you like to have a play friend? Why?*" was identified as the second sub-problem of the present research study. The examination of the research findings showed that there was an increase in the post-test scores in all the age groups, when compared to the pre-test scores, in relation to the children's responses regarding preferences of play friends. Accordingly, it was observed in the pre-test administration that the majority of the children in the 3-year age group did not accept disabled dolls as their play friends based on '*presence of equipment*' ("I did not like his eyeglasses" etc.) and on '*differences in abilities*' ("She doesn't have arms; she can't play" etc.); they only accepted Ayşegül, who used a wheelchair, as a play friend by presenting the '*presence of equipment*' as a justification ("I liked her, she has a car" etc.). On the other hand, in the post-test administration, it was observed in children's responses regarding their preferences of play friends that the majority of the children accepted all the disabled dolls as their play friends with justifications based on '*having experience*' ("He can play although his eyes can't see" etc.) and '*presence of equipment*' ("We can play with her car, we can travel" etc.). The majority of the children in the 4-year age group were observed not to have preferred disabled toys as play friends in the pre-test administration with justifications based on '*differences in abilities*' ("He does not have feet; he cannot walk. / She doesn't have hands; how can we play? etc.) As for the children in the 5-year age group, it was observed in the pre-test administration that they accepted as play friends both (visually impaired) Ahmet based on the category of '*differences in abilities*' ("He can't see; he has no friends at all" etc.) and Ayşegül (with a wheelchair) based on the category of '*presence of equipment*' ("She has a car, we'll travel" etc.), while they did not accept as play friends both Elif ("She has neither arms") and Ömer ("He doesn't have one foot") with justifications based on the category of "*differences in abilities*" ("I can't play football with him, he'll walk slowly" etc.). However, in the post-administration of the children in the 4 and 5-year age group, it was revealed that the majority of the children accepted all the dolls as their play friends with justifications based on the categories of '*content of activity*' ("She can do an activity with her feet" / "She can dance" etc.) and '*having experience*' ("He can play even if he can't see, he can see with his walking stick" etc.).

Based on Piaget's '*Constructivist Theory*', the importance of interaction with peers in a child's development of multiple perspectives was focused on during the evaluation of the findings obtained in relation to the second aim of the present research study. From Piaget's perspective, conflicts arising from peer relationships within a group cause children to experience an imbalance, forcing children to make adjustments (Soares & Serrano, 2014). Accordingly, children's play friend preferences can be influenced by the symbols they possess in relation to peer selection. In social development, peer relationships can shape children's relationships and experiences as well as their future social-emotional adaptations. The examination of peer relationships reveals that peer relationships display different characteristics at different ages. These characteristics are shaped based on the social environment the child is in (peer relationships, classroom rules, teacher behaviors etc.), individual characteristics (social skills, aggressive social behaviors etc.) and peers' interactions with each other (Buysse, Goldman & Skinner, 2002; Soares & Serrano, 2014; Yazgan İnanç & Yerlikaya, 2011).

In terms of the *Moral Development Theory*, Kohlberg expanded Piaget's views regarding cognitive development and sought to reveal the relationship between cognitive skills, social perception and skills, and moral reasoning. Accordingly, Kohlberg highlights that children's development of ethics is not based on age but that the advancement in their cognitive development builds a foundation

for their moral development (Yapıcı, 2015). It can be claimed that there is a parallel between the level characteristics (pre-traditional, traditional, and post-traditional levels) expressed in Kohlberg's *'Moral Development Theory'* and the reasons underlying children's preferences of play friends. From this viewpoint, it is noticed in the present study that in the pre-traditional level, children's decisions on the consequences of events or those based implicitly on personal interest and mutual tendencies (Deniz, 2008; Yapıcı, 2015) use traditional justifications (*differences in abilities, presence of equipment*) in relation to friend preferences: *"I wouldn't want a play friend because she doesn't have arms, she can't play" / "I would like to have a play friend because she has a car"* etc.).

Furthermore, in Piaget's *'Moral Development Theory'* the first period is defined as the heteronomous period. In this period, while deciding whether a behavior/condition is favorable or unfavorable, children take into consideration the consequences of the behavior or condition in subject. If the behavior/condition leads to negative outcomes, that behavior/condition is considered unfavorable. As an example from the present research data, the statement *"I wouldn't want to be friends because she doesn't have arms; she can't play"* can be regarded as a feature of the heteronomous period. It is notable that the pre-test statements of specifically the 3-year age group children regarding play friend preference display heteronomous period characteristics. When the pre-test responses in the category of 'differences in abilities' of the 4 and 5-year age group children (e.g. *"I wouldn't want to be friends because she doesn't have hands, how can we play?"* or *"He can't play because he can't walk, I wouldn't be able to play football, he will walk slowly"*) are evaluated in light of Kohlberg's *'Moral Development Theory'*, it can be deduced that play friend preferences are impacted by personal interest that is observed in the purely self-centered stage and by the characteristic of basing everything in life on reciprocal relationship (Aslan, 2015).

Thus, upon the examination of various study findings, it has been observed that when normally developed children include their peers in their games, they notice the features impacting a physically disabled child's participation in daily activities (Diamond & Hestenes, 1996). Moreover, Diamond and Hong (2010) state that during the pre-school period, children start to understand the effects of physical disability on participating in activities requiring motor skills, whereas the understanding of disability impacting cognitive development develops during final childhood and teenage periods. Similarly, in a study by Buysse (1993), it was revealed that most children had at least one common friend and that the child's identification, level of development and specific behavior features (e.g. being target-oriented, the ability to respond, the activity level) impact children's friendship condition. In addition, friend characteristics, similarities between a child and a friend, spending pleasant times together, and inclusive educational environment have also been reported. Similarly, in a study by Dietrich (2005), it was observed that the primary factors that affected childhood friendships were similarities in play styles, opportunity to engage in similar activities, similar knowledge and areas of interest, closeness, and parental factors. In a study conducted by Beyaztürk, Anlıak and Dinçer (2007), it was reported that the educational program, educational environment, the teacher, and parents' attitudes played a significant role in children's relationships with their peers. Another study, conducted by Çulhaoğlu, İmrak, and Sığırtmaç (2017), revealed that normally-developing children found children displaying incapacities as capable, and accepted their participation in all activities and helped each other, but did not accept them in activities that they believed they could not do.

In the above-mentioned research studies, it was observed that children in early childhood period have the tendency to establish positive friendships, act mutually in actions and emotions, enjoy spending time together, develop social skills and interactions, play games, display mutual emotional support and establish friendships based on commonalities. Accordingly, there were striking parallels between the related literature presented above, theories of development, and the present study's research results.

The following can be listed as some factors accounting for the variation in the results in the educational program implemented in the present study: children's participation in similar activities to their peers with disabilities, sharing based on common interests, the preparation of activities adaptable

to a given disability, and disabled children's desire to share similar experiences with their able-bodied peers. Furthermore, the variation in the findings can also be accounted for with the teacher's use of active strategies in the educational environment to enable the participation of able/disabled children, the teacher's positive attitude, and implementations that bring cooperation and collaboration skills to the fore and mutually supporting/meeting needs. In addition, disabled dolls were placed in different centers where they assumed different roles during the program to ensure that children saw them frequently (e.g. assuming the role of a science person in the science center, assuming the role of child reading a book in the library etc.). All these may have had a positive impact on the children's preferences of play friends.

The last sub-problem of the present study was based on the examination of the responses given to the question "*Which games would you like to play?*", which was asked in relation to the disabled dolls. In the pre-test implementation of the children in the 3-year age group participating in the study, it was observed that they preferred the games within the '*general games*' category, while in the post-test implementation, they gave responses within the '*games adapted to the disability condition*' category. As for the children in the 4-year age group, it was observed that they preferred to play the games in both '*general games*' and '*games adapted to the disability condition*' categories in the post-test with the dolls named Ahmet (n:23), Ayşegül (n:23) and Ömer (n:23), while they preferred to play the games in the '*general games*' category with Elif (n:23). In the post-test implementation, however, all the children were observed to have given responses in the category of '*games adapted to the disability condition*'. The children in the 5-year age group preferred to play the games within the categories of '*games adapted to the disability condition*' and '*general games*' in the pre-test implementation, while all the children gave responses within the category of '*Games adapted to the disability condition*' in the post-test implementation.

As no study examining preschool children's views regarding their preferences of games with their peers with disabilities was found in the related literature, comparisons in relation to this finding could not be made. However, the findings of the present study have been evaluated in light of the symbol concept, the organization of symbols and adaptation concepts highlighted in Piaget's '*Cognitive Development Theory*'. Accordingly, as children interact with each other in early childhood, they start to acquire new knowledge in their process of making sense of the world. Moreover, as children's symbols start to become more detailed, the process of organizing symbols continues (Trawick-Smith, 2018). Consequently, new symbols are formed for the information that cannot be explained with old symbols, via adaptation. When the findings of the present study were evaluated, it was observed that in the post-test after the implementation of the educational program, the children changed their existing symbols of the games they knew based on the disability condition and implicitly made adaptations. To illustrate, the 3-year age group children provided the following response for a doll that did not have arms: "She can make lego with her feet". The same age group children said, "We can fix a foot and play" for a doll that did not have one foot. Similarly, children in the 4 and 5-year age group were observed to have defined the games in '*games adapted to the disability condition*' category in the post-test implementation in more detail. For example, they defined suggested a "running with a car" game for the doll in a wheelchair, and children in the 5-year age group suggested a 'feet boxing game' for a doll with no arms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study added a new chain to the limited number of studies on research problems revealing preschool children's views regarding their peers with disabilities. However, there are numerous areas that need to be uncovered in relation to evaluating preschool children's views of their peers with disabilities. In this section, based on the findings of the present study, certain recommendations are made for further studies.

Upon the evaluation of the findings obtained in the present study and other research results, it has been noticed that children's physical participation, in relation to learning contents, should be at the utmost level since it is one of the most influential factors in children's choice of friends and games.

Accordingly, ensuring that the activity contents to be produced and implemented encourage the physical participation of all children —disabled or not — will play an important role. Various studies (Buyse, Goldman & West, 2008; Çulhaoğlu-İmrak & Sığirtmaç, 2017; Diamond & Hestenes, 1996; Diamond & Hong, 2010; Dietrich, 2005; Soares & Serrano, 2014; Yazgan İnanç & Yerlikaya, 2011) report that no problems are experienced in peer relationships when children participate in activities with their disabled friends as long as the disabled children overcome the given challenges; however, problems are experienced in peer relationships when there are conditions that impede physical participation in activities. Moreover, these studies highlight the positive impact of participating in similar activities on peer relationships. Accordingly, it can be recommended that teachers, in light of Piaget's 'Cognitive Development Theory', arrange activity contents in the most appropriate way in order to create positive schemata for disabled children and, thus, provide them with positive experiences.

The most important means through which children express their dreams, feelings, and opinions are the toys they play with (Özyürek & Erzurumluoğlu, 2016). In addition, the role of toys in shaping children's gender roles, peer relationships, and social perceptions is considerably important (Güney, 2012). Evaluating the toys present at preschool educational institutions in Turkey, it is notable that there are no toys with physical disabilities. Thus, children tend only to gain experience of physical disabilities when they meet or see a disabled person in their social environment. In the present study, the fact that children met disabled children in their learning centers had a positive impact on their awareness, peer preferences, and game selections. It can be extrapolated that it would be effective for teachers to expose children to dolls that represent not only normatively-abled, but also disabled physical characteristics. In this way, it is possible to conclude that when children meet people with different appearances in their social environments, they will develop a more innate acceptance.

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