

*Full Length Research Paper*

# A study on the views of preschool teachers and teacher candidates about the concepts of learning and participation

Semra Erkan<sup>1</sup> and Tuğçe Akyol<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Hacettepe University, Faculty of Education, Department of Primary Education, Ankara, Turkey.

<sup>2</sup>Afyon Kocatepe University, Faculty of Education, Department of Primary Education, Afyonkarahisar, Turkey

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**This study was conducted in order to examine the views of preschool teachers and teacher candidates about the concepts of learning and participation, and to explore how they perceive the relationship between the two. The study group comprised of 10 preschool teachers working at formal preschools located in Afyonkarahisar and affiliated with the Ministry of Education, and 10 teacher candidates who were senior students at Afyon Kocatepe University Education Faculty's Department of Early Childhood Education. Using the qualitative research method of phenomenology, the study collected its data through semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed by using content analysis under four themes: views about learning, views about participation, views about the relationship between participation and learning, and views about requirements for participation and learning.**

**Key words:** Learning, participation, preschool teacher, preschool teacher candidate.

## INTRODUCTION

Learning and development are linked by a dynamic relationship. In addition to being a mental process and action, learning has also been defined as a biological, social, emotional and cultural act (Tuğrul, 2012). It is a process that starts at childhood, continues through life, and involves changes in behaviors, knowledge, attitudes and skills (Ugaste et al., 2014). The learning process is also defined as a process of constructing new knowledge and behaviors (De Houwer et al., 2013).

The ever-present question whether it is nature or nurture that affects child development and learning has been answered as both (Inan, 2011). Preschool education is crucial in supporting children's development areas, and

improving their learning processes. The content of preschool education is dynamic and involves many interaction processes regarding learning (Broström et al., 2012). Even though preschool curriculum activities offer many learning opportunities, the characteristics of child and teacher are equally important in the process (Berthelsen and Brownlee, 2005). In order for children to make full use of instructional environments, the activities in the curriculum must be implemented using appropriate instructional techniques and methods (Zembat, 2012).

Learning is triggered by children's social and cultural experiences, or in other words, their life experiences. The process of forming and making meaning of experiences

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [nsemraerkan@gmail.com](mailto:nsemraerkan@gmail.com), [akyol.tugce@gmail.com](mailto:akyol.tugce@gmail.com).

lays the foundation for new experiences and ways of making meaning. This perspective requires that children should be active participants in the learning process (Pramling et al., 2006). Active participation is a process of grasping independence, developing critical thinking skills, and thus forming an identity (Karlsson, 2009; Westlund, 2011).

Preschool children learn faster in environments with rich stimuli where they can gain real life experiences, and observe and share various situations (Tuğrul, 2012). Preschool children learn via observation, listening and participation. This view asserts that learning occurs through "active participation" (Rogoff et al., 2003). Being active in the learning process requires children to participate directly (Dunphy, 2012).

It is essential that children participate actively and effectively in learning processes, and adapt their learning to suit new situations (MEB, 2013). Child-centered programs based on children's interests are influential in understanding the importance of child participation in the learning process (Berthelsen and Brownlee, 2005; Johansson and Pramling-Samuelsson, 2006).

Sociocultural theory posits that social interactions play a vital role in preschool learning (Yaşar, 2012). The Sociocultural theory also emphasizes the importance of interacting with, while constructing meaning (Erdiller, 2010). In addition, the sociocultural theory takes cultural expectations and interactions to be effective in learning processes (Anning and Edwards, 2006). For learning theories, participative activities and social practices historically and culturally support child development. In addition, these theories examine the effects of familial, social and cultural activities and pedagogical relationships between learning processes (Hedges and Cullen, 2012). Preschool children's participation processes are directly related to cooperative learning (Berthelsen et al., 2009).

Teachers also need certain skills in order to boost learning and participation processes in preschool programs (Johansson and Sandberg, 2010). Teachers who value children's participation can motivate them to learn (Berthelsen et al., 2005). Children need learning environments where they can be actively involved in making decisions about their own learning, in order to participate effectively in learning processes (Jordan, 2004).

James and Pollard (2008) state that barriers to the learning and participative processes of school children stem from teacher assumptions about children's capabilities, and how best they may be taught. Emilson and Folkesson (2006) examined the relationship between teacher control levels and children's participation processes, and concluded that increased control levels on the part of preschool teachers limit children's participation and listening skills, while decreased control levels support their participation processes.

Hännikäinen and Rasku-Puttonen (2010) studied the contribution of pre and elementary school teachers to children's participation processes, and found that the latter use more academic methods to encourage participation processes. In addition, the support that preschool teachers lend to children's participation processes, as well as creative and play-based activities develop children's sense of curiosity, and increase their interest in learning processes and motivation.

It is vital that preschool teachers guide learning processes in line with children's interests and needs, and support their participation processes. In developing children's learning and participation processes, teachers' ideas and experiences are also important. An examination of the related literature reveals that there are limited studies in Turkey about the views of preschool teachers and teacher candidates about the concepts of learning and participation. Therefore, there is a need for such studies.

This study aims to determine the views of preschool teachers and teacher candidates about the concepts of learning and participation, and to explore how they perceive their relationships. In order to attain these purposes, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are preschool teachers' views about learning?
2. What are preschool teachers' views about the relationship between learning and participation?
3. What are preschool teacher candidates' views about learning?
4. What are preschool teacher candidates' views about the relationship between learning and participation?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research design

The study has a qualitative nature, and uses the design of phenomenology. This method "investigates various reactions to, or perceptions of, a particular phenomenon", and aims to help researchers "gain insight into the world of his or her participants", and describe the perceptions and reactions of these participants (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2008). Yıldırım and Şimşek (2008) argue that this kind of research may not present certain or generalizable results but it might reveal examples, explanations and experiences, which can help us identify and comprehend a phenomenon. Phenomenology was the best suited tradition because it focused on the specific experience of the participants and how they felt and perceived their experiences. As the study aims to explore participation and learning processes of pre-school teachers and pre-service pre-school teachers, the phenomenological design was utilized in this study. The presence of a relationship was expected to be found between the perceptions of teachers and student teachers and the phenomenological approach.

### Participants

The study used the purposive method of criterion sampling to

recruit participants. This method covers the study of all situations that meet a set of pre-specified criteria (Patton, 2002; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005). The study group included 10 female preschool teachers working at formal preschools in Afyonkarahisar affiliated with the Ministry of Education, and 10 teacher candidates (3 males; 7 females) who were senior year students at Early Childhood Education Department, Faculty of Education, Afyon Kocatepe University. Five of the preschool teachers were teaching at an elementary school preschool program, while the remaining five were working at independent kindergartens. One teacher had 17 years of professional experience; two, 16 years; two, 10 years; three, 6 years; and two, 2 years. Eight of the preschool teachers were Early Childhood Education graduates and 2 were Child Development graduates.

### Data collection tool

In this study, semi-structured interviews were held with preschool teachers and teacher candidates to examine their views about the concepts of learning and participation, and the relationships between them. Interviews provided us with a deeper understanding of unobservable processes such as experiences, attitudes and thoughts (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2008).

After obtaining the consent of preschool teacher candidates for interviews, one-to-one meetings were held with them at pre-specified dates in the meeting hall at the Education Faculty. The interviews took approximately 15 to 20 min and were recorded with the permission of the teacher candidates. The consent of preschool teachers was also obtained for the interviews, after which meetings were held at a specified date in the staffroom of their respective schools. The interviews took approximately 15-20 minutes and were recorded with the permission of the teachers.

The data collection tool used in the study was a semi-structured interview form. The form was designed by the researchers after reviewing the literature and included an introduction stating the purpose of the study and questions involving demographics. The form also included seven open-ended questions to obtain in-depth information about teachers' and teacher candidates' views on learning and participation. The semi-structured interview forms were then examined by four field experts for internal validity. With their suggestions, necessary revisions and additions were made, and the forms were finalized.

### Data analysis

The data obtained were analyzed by the qualitative data analysis method of content analysis. This was done in the 4 stages of data coding, theme identification, code and theme arrangement, and definition and interpretation of findings (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2008). In the first stage, all recorded interviews were transcribed. Two researchers read all of the forms, and coded them. To ensure reliability between, a series of meetings were held for partly coded data and comparisons were made. The resulting inter-coder reliability was 0.88. In the second stage, themes were built by using the codes, and agreement was sought over these themes. The third stage involved the arrangement of data according to codes and themes, and it was resolved that no new themes emerged other than the previously decided ones. In the final stage, the findings were interpreted and reported by the researchers.

## RESULTS

As a result of the analysis, the findings were categorized

into four themes: views about learning, views about participation, views about the relationship between participation and learning, and views about participation and learning taking place.

### Views about learning

Preschool teachers (n=6) and teacher candidates (n=5) defined learning as "behavior change". In addition, teachers (n=2) and teacher candidates (n=3) mentioned the effects of experiences in the learning process while defining learning. One teacher candidate referred to the importance of experiences in learning as follows:

*"I believe learning in preschool completely stems from experience. Even how we enter the classroom as teachers is important, each action may lead to learning. We can even turn the dropping of a toy on the floor into learning"*

The majority of preschool teachers (n=9) stated that children learn by doing and living. One teacher also mentioned the importance of participation in the process, and aligning the levels of activities with children's development. When the teachers were asked to exemplify learning, some (n=5) mentioned science experiments. They also added the processes in music (n=1), art (n=1) and literacy (n=1) activities and modeling (n=1) as examples. One teacher exemplified learning as follows:

*"We teach recycling but we want it to be permanent, we don't want it forgotten. For the school art activity, we built a cute and fun recycling box, where we leave extra pieces of paper after activities. Then our principal calls the collectors and they arrive to take the contents of the box. This is a concrete thing. When we involve the children and teach them by doing, they learn permanently."*

Teacher candidates, on the other hand, mentioned different activities such as science (n=2), Turkish-language (n=2), music (n=1), literacy (n=1), mathematics (n=1), art (n=1), drama (n=1) as examples of learning situations.

One teacher candidate stated the following example:

*"During my internship, I carried out some work on painters. We examined some of Salvador Dali's pieces together with the children and we analyzed each component of his paintings. For instance, there was a painting of happiness. We analyzed the whole painting talking about why the people in it were happy or people lying on the bed, who was lying next to whom, what was*

*there on the bed. Then I cut half the painting off and gave them to the children to complete the painting. They remembered it well."*

Preschool teachers and teacher candidates defined learning as "the process of creating behavior change" thus emphasizing the cognitive aspects of learning, while at the same time mentioning the principle of "learning by doing" in learning processes. The fact that teacher candidates did not limit learning situations as teachers did, and gave more example of activities may be as a result of their ability to combine the knowledge gained from their courses with practice. At the same time, it was a positive finding that teachers gave examples of learning situations that involved play, as this shows their awareness of the role of play in learning.

### Views about participation

Preschool teachers defined participation as (n=4) children being "willing to learn and active in activities". Some teachers (n=2) also emphasized the critical role of family in child participation. Some teacher candidates (n=4) defined participation as children's active involvement in an activity, while one mentioned the importance of family and school management in the participation process.

Preschool teachers gave the following examples as situations where children's participation was encouraged: drama (n=3), play (n=2) and science (n=2). Teacher candidates, on the other hand, gave the examples of music (n=2), play (n=2), art (n=1), drama (n=1) and science (n=1). One preschool teacher gave the following example on the participation process:

*"The qualities of autumn are discussed. Then all children become storks and fly. The teacher interviews the storks like a news reporter. As if she's holding a microphone, she asks questions like 'Where are you flying to dear storks?', 'What would happen if you didn't migrate?' or 'Are you going to stay here always?'. Until today, I've always received correct responses, the children get happy and want to join and play again."*

One teacher candidate gave the following example:

*"We did the seven step dance, lively and with music. I didn't tell the children the activity was starting. The music started and they all gathered, wondering what was happening. Then I turned the music off and told them we were going to play a great game and asked them to do what I did. I then put the music on again and they joined me and we had great fun. We repeated it three or four times."*

Teachers and teacher candidates also mentioned the importance of visuals in the participation process. One of

the teachers emphasized this as follows:

*"When there is visual material, participation increases. Children love visual presentations. It makes it easier for them to participate."*

A teacher candidate also expressed the importance of visuals:

*"The more the visuals, the better the participation."*

In addition, some teachers and (n=2) and teacher candidates (n=2) stated that, children's interest was crucial for participation to take place. Teachers stated the following about this:

*"We need to get down to children's development levels; we need to make them feel interested. If it's interesting, I think learning will happen."*

*"If the children are interested and if it's present in their lives, they participate more. But if it's absent from their lives, they become less interested in things that are unfamiliar to them."*

Teacher candidates stated the following about this issue:

*"For more participation, we need to draw their attention and do things that will get them interested"*

*"I think participation will be ensured by continuously attracting their attention and going to their level, for instance sitting on the floor with them and touching each one, talking, showing interest in each child."*

In addition, some teacher candidates (n=3) talked about the role of the teacher in the participation process. One teacher candidate stated:

*"If teachers prepare more effective activities, they create more participation and take some weight off their own shoulders. Participation is much better on a day when the teacher plans how to manage the class, what questions to ask and so on, as compared to going to work unprepared."*

The findings showed that teachers and teacher candidates defined children's participation in a similar way. Judging from the definitions and examples given by teachers and teacher candidates, it was seen that they limited the participation process to classroom activities. Considering that participation processes should include active listening and involvement of children in decision-making processes, teachers and teacher candidates seem to need support in gaining more information and experiences.

### Views about the relationship between participation and learning

The majority of preschool teachers (n=9) and all teacher

candidates pointed to a direct relationship between participation and learning. Teachers referred to this relationship as follows:

*“Learning requires living inside the event, learning and participation are inseparable...”*

*“The more involved the child is, the better the learning...”*

Teacher candidates stated the following regarding the relationship between learning and participation:

*“The child should actively participate to learn. I believe the two are related and parts of a whole.”*

*“The more the participation, the more the learning. There is a direct relationship between them.”*

It is a positive finding that the majority of teachers and teacher candidates were aware of the relationship between learning and participation.

### **Views about requirements for participation and learning**

Preschool teachers stressed that for children to learn and participate, their socio-emotional (n=5), linguistic (n=5), cognitive (n=3) and motor (n=2) development skills need to be shapen. Teachers stated that, for learning and participation to take place, children must have better *“listening, sharing, self-expression, small muscle, creative, rule-abiding, decision-making”* skills. Some teacher candidates (n=4) stated that learning and participation depended on supporting children’s entire development areas. One teacher candidate stated:

*“I can’t single out cognition. I think cognitive, motor, self-care, socio-emotional, linguistic skills are all needed to develop. We cannot think on a single dimension. Participation can be maximized and learning ensured by advancing all development areas.”*

Teacher candidates also stated that skills such as *“attention, listening, respecting others’ characteristics and expressing oneself”* need to be developed. It was noteworthy that teacher candidates emphasized the advancement of all development areas for learning and participation, and stressed the developmental aspects of the program.

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Aiming to determine the views of preschool teachers and teacher candidates about the concepts of learning and participation, and also their perceptions of the relationship between the two, the present study found that preschool

teachers and teacher candidates defined learning as “a process of behavior change”.

Preschool teachers stressed the principle of “learning by doing-living” in the process of learning, while teacher candidates gave examples of more varied activity types than teachers. Johansson and Sandberg (2010) studied the views of preschool teachers and teacher candidates about learning and participation, and concluded that the majority defined learning as information acquisition and thought it to result from interactions, experiences and play.

In a study by Broström et al. (2012) examining the views of preschool teachers about learning, teachers most commonly mentioned processes supporting children’s social development and initiatives as well as play activities. The preschool teachers in Ugaste et al. (2014) study emphasized the importance of positive interactions with children, attitudes that support their emotional well-being and cooperation with families as prerequisites of learning. In addition, they also mentioned teacher-family cooperation and children’s previous learning experiences as prerequisites. The emphasis that most preschool teachers and teacher candidates placed on the principle of “learning by doing and living” and the emphasis they placed on the role of play in the learning process are parallel to other results reported in the literature.

Another result of this study has been that teachers and teacher candidates define children’s participation in a similar way, and limit the participation process only to classroom activities. In addition, it is worth noting that teachers and teacher candidates stressed the role of arrangements that interest children and child-centered practices in the participation process. Teachers’ role in the participation process by teacher candidates may be explained by the fact that they have discovered the importance of professional skills in this issue. Children’s participation processes in preschool institutions is said to depend on teachers’ knowledge and skill levels (Johansson and Sandberg, 2010).

Sandberg and Eriksson (2010) explored preschool teacher views about participation and found that they thought participation was linked to emotional well-being, belonging, interaction, communication and activities. Hännikäinen and Rasku-Puttonen (2010) found in their study that teachers tried to enrich children’s participation processes by increasing their involvement in activities and offering them opportunities in line with their interests and needs.

In addition, they stated that valuing participation in classrooms enhances interaction and cooperation. The preschool teachers studied by Broström et al. (2015) defined participation as the interactions between teachers and children, and stated that it benefits from supporting children in making their own decisions and giving them chances to make their own choices.

The results showed that the majority of teachers and teacher candidates thought there was a direct relationship between participation, learning and skills from different development areas needed to be improved for participation and learning to take place. Some teacher candidates, on the other hand, believed that all development areas needed to be fostered for participation and learning to take place. Berthelsen and Brownlee (2005) stated that teachers who value children's participation processes motivate their learning as well.

Johansson and Sandberg (2010) finding that the majority of preschool teachers and teacher candidates thought there was a relationship between learning and participation corroborates the findings of this study. In Loizou and Avgitidou (2014) study, preschool teachers emphasized the importance of play in children's learning and participation processes, and stated that teachers needed to be supported in their endeavors. Insulander et al. (2015) stress that active learning needed to be promoted to support children's participation processes. The teachers and teacher candidates that Johansson and Sandberg (2010) studied emphasized that social, cognitive and creative skills is needed to be improved to foster learning and participation processes in children.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the results of the study, the following recommendations can be made:

1. In-service training programs can be organized to develop preschool teachers' learning and participation processes.
2. Pre-service training programs can be organized to develop preschool teacher candidates' learning and participation processes.
3. Comprehensive studies may be conducted to observe learning and participation processes in the preschool period.
4. Within the scope of teaching practice, teacher candidates and classroom teachers may exchange ideas about developing learning and participation processes.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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