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Research Article

# Motivations and Barriers in Promoting Preschool Education\*

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## Abstract

This study is designed to explore the reasons for sending and not sending preschool age children to pre-schools at an early age by exploring the motivations for and barriers towards promoting preschool education in Turkey. It aimed to determine various stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge related to preschool education in order to promote high-quality and comprehensive preschool education. The research was conducted with 224 participants in five cities in Turkey. Qualitative data was collected through individual and focus group interviews and interpreted by content analysis and descriptive analysis. The findings indicated that families put forward the following reasons for sending their children to preschool: preschool education prepares children for school and helps form the habit of attending school, teachers' efforts in convincing parents to send their children to preschool, providing the care for the children of working mothers with preschool teachers, and preschool helps children develop social behavior. The following factors were reasons families did not send their children to preschool: economic conditions, perceiving the child as too young, concerns over practices at school, perceptions about the mother's role, and distrust of the transportation system. The results will help decision makers develop policies and strategies to heighten the general public's awareness of the need for early education, as well as better provide early education opportunities.

## Keywords

Preschool education • Motivation • Barrier • Pre-schooling • Dissemination of preschool education

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Research is well established in showing that access to a high-quality early childhood education has a direct and permanent effect at every stage of human development (Avila & Baldwin, 2007; Barnett, 2008; Blau & Currie, 2005; Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Reynolds, 1992; Reynolds, Mehana, & Temple, 1995). For this reason, in order to provide early education policies, countries determine their equality in opportunity policies and form new strategies. Many countries regulate their early childhood education practices through the state legislature and as part of the education system according to the socio-political developments of the country. These legislative regulations determine basic core values in areas like curriculum, institutional process, teacher education, personnel requirement, monitoring and finance, and parent-teacher cooperation (Banković, 2014; Karila, 2008; Kuisma & Sandberg, 2008; Sheridan, Williams, Sandberg, & Vuorinen, 2011).

Likewise, preschool education and the preschool teacher training system have been changed and developed in Turkey. Even though kindergartens opened before 1908, they became organized and widespread following the Temporary Preschool Law dated 23 September 1913. After two years, the Law Primary school bylaws were issued in 1915.

Accordingly, kindergartens were opened, whether attached or unattached to primary schools, in order to provide education for children aged four to seven (Akyüz, 1989; Cicioğlu, 1989). With the opening of kindergartens, the need for trained teachers in these schools arose. In the same year as the issuance of the bylaws, a kindergarten teacher education school providing one year of education was opened in Istanbul, but it was closed after four years of operation in 1919. In this period, 370 preschool teachers were educated (Oğuzkan & Oral, 1987) and preschool education took its institutional place in the education process in real terms.

However, for many years, the insufficient quality and quantity of early education, the changing position of women within the family and their active roles in real life due to rapid socio-cultural and economical changes, and, most importantly, the positive impact of early education on a child's development as proven by educational studies and brain surveys demonstrate the necessity to take certain measures in the early stages of care and education of children.

Early education gained functionality with the "Preschool Curriculum and Regulations," "Temporary Teacher Training Regulation," and "Preschool Regulation," all of which were issued in 1952 and cover the voluntary education process for students not at elementary school age (Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 1987). Today, early education is given by the Ministry of National Education, Ministry of Family and Social Politics, Ministry of Labor, Universities, and voluntary agencies in kindergartens, implementation classrooms, nurseries, and day care centers for

care and educational purposes. This multi-headed structure prevents education from reaching its desired quality level.

Educational programs for early education were prepared by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and Board of Education in order to give high-quality training to teachers. Program developments were made at various times to troubleshoot and practice new applications that were presented by scientific studies. Accordingly, current education programs were updated under the Education of Early Education Strengthening Project that was introduced by the Ministry of National Education, financed by the European Community, and technically supported by UNICEF. Currently, applied education programs are prepared separately for 0–36 months old and for 37–72 months old. An educational approach based on the Developmental Appropriate Program is adopted. In this approach, it is essential to consider the active participation of the child and the family, suitability of the requirements, and environmental properties. Thus, it aims to raise a child's behaviors in all development areas to a higher level by meeting his requirements and supporting interactions with each other in his development areas. Teachers who have graduated from the undergraduate program in early education from faculties of education are responsible for the implementation of this program in the preschool education institutes. Training is given in separate classrooms, formed according to their ages (3, 4, and 5). Classes are composed of 20–24 groups of children composed equally of each gender.

When the current structure of education in Turkey is assessed in terms of program, equipment, and teacher education, it appears that they have several characteristics in common with EU and OECD member countries. However, even though the starting age for early education in OECD countries varies, if early education is evaluated in terms of schooling rates, 71% of three-year-old children and 86% of four-year-old children participated in this non-compulsory education in 2014. The participation of four-year-old children at 94% was significantly higher in 2016. At least 90% of children aged three to four were enrolled in early childhood education in OECD countries—such as Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Island, Israel, Italy, Norway, Spain, and Sweden—and in most of the OECD countries have full enrollment in ECEC for five year olds ([Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development \[OECD\], 2016](#)). Even though the targeted schooling rate is set to 50% for three to five (37–72 months) years of age and 100% for five (60–72 months) years of age in the Ninth Development Plan for the year 2013 and despite all the efforts for promoting preschool education, at the beginning of the academic year of 2015/2016 the schooling rate for Turkey is 11.74% for three years of age, 33.56% for four years of age and 67, 17% for five years of age ([MEB, 2015](#)). These rates indicate that the desired and targeted levels in early education have not yet been met.

However, this transition is not always smooth and fast in nature for major stakeholders, who include preschool age children, their families, teachers, mukhtars, prayer leaders, representatives of the Board of National Education, municipality, and written/visual press. In order to promote preschool education, it is important to determine how those stakeholders perceive what their own attitudes are and what they think of not sending children to preschools. In addition, in order to increase schooling rates to acceptable levels at the preschool level, it is crucial to define and understand the context that policy makers deal with.

Therefore, this study has been conducted to determine the stakeholders' motivations for sending or not sending their children to preschool education. The results may inform decision- or policy-makers at all levels as they develop policies and strategies to increase the general public awareness of the need for preschool education, as well as provide preschool education opportunities by increasing awareness about how different stakeholders perceive preschool education.

### **Method**

This study was designed as a qualitative case study in order to explore the reasons the participants considered in sending or not sending their children to preschool. Case studies are used for describing an intervention or phenomenon and its real-life context when posing questions like “how” or “why” (Yin, 2003).

### **Participants**

The sampling process included criterion and maximum sampling procedures (Patton, 1990). Variables including geographical regions, migration patterns (incoming-outgoing), and schooling rates were considered the main factors affecting preschool education attendance; therefore, based on these criteria, five cities were determined. When selecting the participants, it was also ensured that both rural and urban settlements were represented. Finally, a total of 224 participants representing parents, preschool teachers, preschool students, imams (prayer leaders), mukhtars (head of village or neighborhood), and branch directors of provincial national education bodies (DoPNE) responsible for preschool education were included in the study (See Table 1). Selection of those participants was based on maximum sampling procedures.

Table 1  
*Demographics of Participants*

Participants	Number of Participants					
	Adana	Konya	Van	Erzurum	Ordu	Total
Parents	23	28	25	28	19	123
Mukhtar and imam	5	5	4	4	5	23
Student	15	5	18	5	4	47
Rep from DoPNE	1	2	1	1	1	6
Teacher	5	5	5	5	5	25
Total	49	45	53	43	34	224

### Data Collection Tools and Analysis

This study is part of a larger project based on mixed method analysis. In this paper, only qualitative data was used. Qualitative data was gathered from interviews and focus group discussions held with families, mukhtars, imams, preschool aged children, preschool education teachers, representatives from the Ministry of National Education, and representatives from the media.

The qualitative data was analyzed through content analysis. Face-to-face meetings and focus group discussions were transcribed and frequently repeated terms and words were determined. While coding the data, these concepts were used as keywords during data coding. After the completion of coding, concepts were determined and grouped under a common theme. Coding procedures were completed by three different researchers. Later on, those codings were compared. Based on the similarities between them, a final decision was made to determine the categories and themes. In order to establish credibility and internal validity, peer debriefing was used throughout the research. Thick description was also used as the validation strategy. The analysis results were reported verbatim from the data along with visual representations.

### Findings

This research aimed to determine stakeholders' reasons for sending or not sending children for preschool education according to a qualitative paradigm. Themes and categories were formed and named according to the emerging patterns gathered from families, mukhtars, imams, and preschool aged children, preschool education teachers, representatives from the Ministry of National Education, and representatives from the media. The themes and categories that emerged are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

*Themes and Categories in Findings*

Motivation	Barriers
Preparing children for school: “He should get used to school”	Economic Conditions: “We couldn’t afford it” Perceiving the child too young: “I pity him”
Contribution to Language Development: “They learn and speak Turkish correctly”	Concerns over Practices at School: “They teach the wrong things”
Efforts of Convincing: “Their teacher came and asked him to come to school”	Perception about the Mother’s role: “The mother is already home; she can give good care to them”
Women’s Participation in Business Life: “I work; therefore, I send my child to school”	Distrust in Transportation System: “I can’t trust the transportation system”
Transferring the Child’s Care: “S/he shouldn’t stay at home in an ‘overcrowded’ house”	Lack of Knowledge of Preschool Education: “People don’t know the importance and necessity of preschool education in our country”.
Gaining Social Behavior: “He should learn how to share”	

**Reasons for Sending Children for Preschool Education**

The findings revealed various reasons that participants put forward to support their choice to send their children to preschool education, which were also in line with the MoNE’s efforts in disseminating schooling rates. The themes that emerged are presented and narrated below.

**Preparing children for school: “He should get used to school.”** Among the reasons participants mentioned for sending their children to preschool education institutions, the most common was preparing children for primary education. Interestingly, this view was expressed in all the provinces and allocation units, *albeit* differently.

One of the reasons for sending him is to get him ready for primary school. The child who doesn’t attend a nursery school is unable to adapt himself to school in 6 months. (FG [focus group discussion]: mother, Erzurum, urban)

The children are educated there. The child learns everything there. When he starts school, he can be more productive. His mother can’t teach him. (Interview: Mukhtar, Erzurum, rural)

I send him so that he can be ready for the first grade. (Interview: Mother, Van, rural)

To prepare him for school. To put it in a simpler form, so that “adapt to a new environment”. (Interview: Imam, Ordu, urban)

He should be ready for education, before he starts attending primary school. (Interview: Mother, Konya, urban)

So, that he can be more knowledgeable. Here, nobody gains knowledge and 70% of people have come here through migration. People send their children so that they can be more knowledgeable before starting school. (Interview: Mukhtar, Van, urban)

The neighborhood mukhtar who described himself as an educator and managed a kindergarten in the urban area of Konya said:

Look, for example, a lady hasn’t sent her child anywhere for six years. When he was brought to our kindergarten, we couldn’t separate the child from his mother for 10 days.

When they start first grade, they don't find it hard to separate children from their mothers till they get used to school. (Interview: Mukhtar, Konya, urban)

The function of preschool education in preparing a child for primary education was well understood by participants:

The child feels good. I have experienced this. He can express himself very comfortably. During the first day of school, my son asked me why I was waiting for him. For example, he told me that I should go there when the school bell rings. In other words, I did not experience any difficulties. I think the reason for this is the preschool education. My son used to look at the crying children and, surprised, was asking me why they were crying. (FG: Mother, Adana, urban)

I went there in order to learn everything early at the primary school. I went there to receive good education. When I started the first grade, I can learn everything more easily. (Interview: Child, Erzurum, urban)

The preschool education is very important. The children don't know the language. Some children couldn't speak Turkish even in Haymana, which is affiliated with Ankara. The child is prepared by the family and then by the nursery school so that they can be ready for training. (FG: Chairman of Association, Erzurum, urban)

These comments indicate that participants considered preschool education as an opportunity for preparing their children for primary school in terms of mental, social, and language skills and getting them used to attending school. These are important reasons for families to send their children to preschool education institutions.

**Contribution to language development: “They learn and speak Turkish correctly.”** In some regions, the importance of preschool education on language development is considered as a factor supporting a family's decision to send their children to a preschool education institution. The development of language, which is expressed as learning Turkish well, is considered important by families in terms of preparing their children for primary school:

Our children fall behind learning Turkish. I have them watch television a lot at home, but it would be better for them if they learn these at school. When his friends start school, ours (meaning the speaker's own child) fall behind. He'll learn Turkish, but he falls behind in other subjects. If he could cope with this issue at the nursery school, he would be prepared for the primary school and wouldn't fall behind. (FG: Father; Konya, village)

We would want the children living in our village to learn Turkish well at the nursery school so that they can receive better education in the future. Families living in this region will send their child for this purpose. (Interview: Muhtar, Konya, village)

These comments indicate that participants considered preschool education as an opportunity to prepare their children for primary school in terms of their mental, social and language skills and to get them used to attending school. These are important reasons why families send their children to preschool education institutions.

**Efforts of convincing: “Their teacher came and asked him to come to school.”**

Convincing a family that preschool education is important plays a significant role in a family’s decision to send their children to a preschool education institution. Families are influenced by visits made by teachers, activities of non-governmental institutions, as well as interactions with their peers and neighbors regarding their experiences:

AÇEV (a non-profit organization working to improve mother-child well-being) came. Many things have changed. Teachers have taught a lot of things. Most of the mothers did not even know how to speak, but now they speak. Now, they can speak very well. (FG: Mother; Van, rural)

People consider preschool education as a place of care for a child. They send the child so that he leaves home. Even some people give instructions to others about what to do. However, so many things have changed here thanks to AÇEV. They send their children to be educated. They even ask what they do, which activities they do, and when. (FG: Deputy School Director; Van, urban)

I have only one child. He’ll start attending nursery school this year. All of my friends said good things. I hope my child will learn good things as well. (FG: Father, Konya, urban)

They should tour the houses one by one and tell parents that they would be provided with food there. Unless there is a promise like, “a daily good food will be given to your child and such contributions will continue,” they would not have sent their children to school. They don’t think that it’s important. However, as a teacher, I could realize this fact after I taught the first-grade students. (Interview: Teacher, Van, rural)

**Women’s participation in business life: “I work, therefore I send my child to school.”** A woman’s participation in business and the destruction of the nuclear family increase demands for preschool education. Generally, parents living in city centers have a greater tendency to send their children to preschool education institutions:

I work, therefore I send my child to school. (FG: Mother, Adana, urban)

Most of them send their children while they work. (Interview: Mukhtar, Adana, urban)

I work, that’s why I send him. (Interview: Mother, Erzurum, urban)

Sixty percent of families living in our neighborhood send their children to preschool education institutions. Working mothers send them to kindergartens as well. (Interview: Mukhtar, Adana, urban)

Here, in Konya, the number of working women is low. Women think that children can play at home in any case. However, working mothers would send them. (Interview: Mukhtar, Konya, urban)

**Delegating child care: “S/he shouldn’t stay home and house is overcrowded.”**

Some participants said that they wanted to send their child to a preschool education institution in order to delegate the child’s care. This attitude is made up of two parts. The first, generally observed in rural areas, is about protecting children from the negative aspects of the environment:



This is not a clean neighborhood; the children need to be educated. (Interview: Mother, Konya, rural)

Let this save the child from the street. (Interview: Mother, Konya, rural)

Senior members of the family would also support our decision to send our child, because they think that that's a safe place. (Interview: Mother, Erzurum, rural)

The second part stems from a desire to almost get rid of the child:

They consider the preschool education as a place for child care. They send him so he will be away for a while. (FG: Deputy School Director, Van, urban)

Actually, people living in this region transfer matters of education to schools. We leave the matter to them so that teachers take care of the situation. Some families send their children to preschool education institutions to keep them away, in order to relax for a while. (FG: Imam, Van, village)

So that the child leaves home and the house is no longer crowded. They even want to send those who are very little so that they will be away. (Interview: Imam, Erzurum, urban)

**Gaining Social Behavior: “He should learn how to share.”** One of the most important factors in parents' decisions to send their children to preschool education is to increase the children's socialization behaviors.

Other reasons for sending children to preschool education institution include the wish that they become “well-behaved” and “well-mannered”:

I agree that he should be sent to be a well behaved and well-mannered student. (Interview: Mother, Ordu, urban)

They would want them to learn something and be very well behaved. (Interview: Mother, Erzurum, urban)

So that he adapts to the environment easily and learns how to behave. (Interview: Imam, Ordu, urban)

Families send their children to preschool education institutions so that they socialize at early ages. Social behaviors include sharing, being extroverted, participating in group work, and being able to speak in front of a group. These skills are considered positive and to be gained during preschool ages.

But the child learns how to share, how to do a certain thing, how to help others, and how to perform group work at a preschool education institution. (Interview: Mukhtar, Konya, urban)

I'm content with the change in my child. I have seen positive changes both in my daughter and son. I'm very glad that I sent them. They were shy and introverted, but so many things have changed positively. Now I say I did the right thing to send them to a preschool education. (FG: Adana, urban)

My son didn't know how to share at all until he attended a preschool education institution. He wasn't used to sharing something or food with others. However, I saw that when he

finished his class, he became friendlier. He learned how to share everything he owns. (FG: Mother; Konya, urban)

I send him because it gives many great opportunities for social activity. Guardians who watch their performances at the end of the year would like to send their children as well, thinking that their child can do the same as well and he should be involved in such thing. When I watched a show, the things I saw were more than I expected. (FG: Mother, Konya, urban)

### **Barriers against Sending Children to Preschool Education**

The findings revealed various reasons that participants put forward to support their preference not to send their children to preschool education. The themes that emerged are presented and narrated as follows:

**Economic conditions: “We couldn’t afford it.”** A family’s economic condition has an impact on its decision to send children to preschool education institutions. However, it is important to understand how they express the problem and related concepts.

The first reason is the economic situation ... As I said before, the people living in our neighborhood are all immigrants from the east. I’m from the eastern side as well. The lack of money creates an obstacle to a family’s decision to send their children to a nursery school. (Interview: Mukhtar, Adana, rural)

They can’t send them due to monetary problems. (Interview: Imam, Erzurum, urban)

We advise families to send their children, but they say that they can’t afford it. They say that they can’t send them to a remote place. (Interview: Mukhtar, Van, urban)

Let me tell you: nobody would pay to be educated. These people don’t think that education is important. They don’t care for their children as much as they care for their animals. (FG: Mother, Van, village)

They asked us to pay 50 YTL (Approx. 20 USD). How can they pay it? They ask for money for papers as well and it will cost a lot, especially if they go to remote places as well. They don’t want to send them, fearing that it would be costly. (FG: grandmother, Van, urban)

This is an isolated neighborhood. Some children come to school from a distance of 4–5 km. None the families can afford to pay for the school bus, due to economic reasons. This neighborhood has many problems and receives migration. Those who are settled also have a lot of babies, and thus the population increases. (Interview: Mukhtar, Konya, rural)

**Perceiving the child to be too young: “I pity him.”** Families want their children to reach the age of six before sending them to a preschool education institution. They share their experiences with others and mostly think that the child can go to school at the age of six and would be too little to be sent before this. Participants whose children do not attend any preschool education institution were asked if they would consider sending their children to a preschool education institution and if the answer was yes, what would be the proper age for this. Participants’ views are given in Table

3. It shows that almost all the families want to send their children and that they consider six years of age the most appropriate time.

Table 3  
*Participants' Tendencies of Sending their Children to a Preschool*

		At what age would you like to send your children to a preschool?					Total
		age 3	age 4	age 5	age 6	I don't want to send him/her	
		f	f	f	f	f	
Are you planning to send your children to a preschool?	Yes	-	5	9	44	3	61
	No	-	-	-	-	5	5
Total							67

Similar attitudes were observed during focus group discussions held in the rural areas of Adana.

Mother 2: We would consider sending him, but he's too young now.

Mother 4: The education or school couldn't be bad, but we will wait for him to reach the age of 6.

Mother 1: Yes, we're planning to send him at the age of six. Can we send him before that age as well? (FG: Adana, rural)

The question of why not to send children under six was also asked during focus-group discussions.

Mother: Dear teacher, the child is reluctant to go at the age of 4.

Teacher: They come here at the age of 5–6.

Mother: I tried to send my 4-year-old son, but he cried and rejected going.

Father: It's very hard to wake up the child early in the morning. We try hard to wake him up, but he doesn't want to go. (FG: Van, rural)

During the focus group discussions in Van, it was emphasized that children should be sent to a preschool education institution generally at the age of six, but that if mothers are working, they can be sent at the age of four or five as well.

Father: He can't wake up at 6 in the morning.

Mother: So, we pity him.

Mother 1: Before the school, they send the child at the age of 6.

Mother 1: Working mothers send them, and mothers who are not working want to do the same and send their children as well.

Mother 2: They send the children at the age of 6, but only working mothers send them at the age of 4 or 5. When the term "preschool" is mentioned, the age of 6 comes to our mind.

Mother: I wanted to send him at the age of 5, but he wasn't accepted. There are also kindergartens, but they aren't free of charge and so only those who are working can send their children there. (FG: Mother, Van, center)

However, families are very concerned about how a three, four, or five-year-old child could handle dressing and taking care of his/her daily routines (such as cleaning themselves after using the restroom, etc.) and that teachers at schools cannot care for them as much as they can. This hinders their decision to send their children to a preschool education institution before the age of 6.

Can he go there at the age of 6? He even can't take care of himself and put himself upright. He can go there only when he can take care of himself, for example, at the age of 5. At home, his mother meets his needs, but is there any teacher at the school who can do the same? Teachers don't care for them at all. I don't know any teacher who can take care of them at the school. Then they should call it a kindergarten, which is very expensive. A 3-year-old child should attend a kindergarten. (FG: Mother, Erzurum, center)

**Concerns over practices at school: "They teach the wrong things."** Concerns over practices influence a family's decision to send their children to a preschool education institution. These concerns include:

- Children playing all the time instead of being educated.
- Education might cause problems in the future.
- Children may not be educated by qualified teachers.

The following statements point out these concerns in detail:

I have good connections with preschool education. I own a kindergarten, and I am an educator. Why don't people consider nursing schools as something good? Because people think that the children only learn how to play and they don't perform educational activities. They don't welcome this idea ... They think that the child can also play at home, and thus they don't want to send their children. (Interview: Mukhtar, Konya, center)

They don't think that the preschool education is sufficient. They want the level to be increased. They consider it as something aiming to keep the child busy. (Interview: Imam, Van, center)

I'm also an educator and chairman of the school council. I have two children. One of them couldn't attend a school, and the younger one is disabled. I carried my child on my back to the classroom. However, there are problems about the classroom in the school here, and a nursery school wasn't opened. It was opened last year, but 5 long-term teachers who have been appointed were for the 5th grade, in other words, they were extra teachers. However, they were appointed for the nursery school. This field requires different pedagogical formation. (Interview: Imam, Konya, rural)

Children couldn't be well educated at the school in our neighborhood, and our children were facing violence. Teachers aren't tender all the time. Teachers don't know the children. (Interview: Imam, Erzurum, center)

... in addition, families are afraid and they don't have confidence ... they need to trust the school to send their children there, but they don't rely on them. Children were facing violence at the school in our neighborhood. Then we started to control them, and the problems were resolved. But families should have confidence to be able to send their children. (Interview: Mukhtar, Adana, rural)

It is interesting to note that most of these concerns were raised by the Imams and Mukhtars. These concerns seem to develop barriers in the stakeholders' minds when it comes to making a decision about whether or not to send children to preschool.

**Perception about the mother's role: "The mother is already home, she can care for them."** The fact that the entire responsibility of educating and taking care of a child at preschool age is perceived as the mother's duty is an obstacle to sending a child to a preschool education institution. During meetings in Van, people mostly thought the mother was the one responsible for taking care of a small child.

Here, the most important reason for not sending children to schools is that the men living in Van meet all the needs of their wives at home. Look, there is a dishwasher even in the house of the poorest family. A dishwasher is one of the final needs of a family. Therefore, our wives don't have so much to do at home, and the only thing they should do is care for and educate the children. (FG: Father, Van, urban)

My wife's aunt told my wife: "His mother is staying home and she's not helpless, so you don't need to send the child." Then my wife refused to send the child. (Interview: Mother, Van, urban)

I also regret sending him. Yes, the children were learning at school, but their mothers can teach the same things at home as well. (FG: Mother, Father, Van, rural)

**Disbelief in transportation system: "I can't trust the transportation system."** The families do not trust the transportation system and are reluctant to send their children via the designated transportation means.

... as this neighborhood is sparse, some families can't pay for the school bus, and thus they can't send their children. Some others also don't trust schools in remote places, and thus they don't send them. It's very hard to collect the children. (Interview: Mukhtar, Konya, rural)

We don't send our children to school by school bus. (Interview: Father, Konya, rural)

There's no school in the vicinity, and we don't want to send him to remote places. These places aren't so safe. (Interview: Mother, Van, rural)

**Lack of knowledge of preschool education: "People don't know the importance and necessity of preschool education in our country."** The majority of teachers interviewed thought families did not have knowledge of preschool education and did not understand its function properly. Statements made by families supported this.

People don't know the importance and necessity of preschool education in our country. Even the majority of families and educators consider preschool education institutions as schools for caring for children and think teachers are nannies. We should tell educators and then families that preschool education prepares a student for school and primary education and show them concrete examples. (Interview: Teacher, Van, urban)

The most important reason is that they aren't informed about preschool education adequately. They also don't try to educate themselves on the issue. (Interview: Teacher, Van, urban)

The number of families who consider the initial years of a child's educational life as important is limited. Certain parents aren't knowledgeable about child development. While educating parents, I noticed that mothers who are interested participate in the education, but others don't think that it's an important issue. (Interview: Teacher, Ordu, urban)

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

Preschool education has the power to reduce the developmental inequalities of groups at risk as well as to support the healthy development of children. For this reason, countries determine national policies for preschool education. This study, which aimed at determining the barriers to children's access to preschool education was conducted in cities where the preschool education schooling rate was low. The findings of this study indicate that the problems in promoting preschool education are multifaceted and should be approached from different perspectives. The perceived needs of preparing children for schooling and of children to gain social behaviors, the efforts of convincing campaign through local and central administrations, women's participation in business life, and the contextual conditions (including economic and social factors) lead families to send their children to preschool. However, the economic conditions, perceiving the child as too young, concerns over practices at preschools, perception about the mother's role, distrust in the transportation system, and a lack of knowledge of preschool education seem to hinder parents from enrolling their children in preschool.

Over the last few decades, there has been a tendency toward extending the number of years of compulsory education in order to ensure children's acquisition of basic skills in the education systems of almost all countries. Children are starting their formal education at earlier ages. For example, in Europe, the starting age of formal education rates for children three, four, and five years of age has increased 15.3%, 7%, and 6.3% respectively between 2000 and 2009. This rate reached 77% for three-year-olds, 90% for four-year-olds, and 94% for five-year-olds in 2009 (Eurydice 2012). This rate is expected to reach at least 95% for the children at the age of four and above by 2020 according to the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation (as cited in Niron, 2011). Belgium, Denmark, Spain, France, and Iceland already reached that aim by 2009 (Eurydice 2012).

In Turkey, there has been a decrease in schooling statistics in preschool education due to the changes made according to the regulation number 222 dated 01/05/1961. Downgrading the schooling age to 66-month-olds and leaving it up to the parents to decide if their 60-month-old is to start school led to a drastic decrease of schooling rates from 65.16% in 2011/2012 academic year to 39.72% in 2012/2013 (MEB,2015)

This situation can be explained simply by the nature of compulsory education, but it can also be explained with the attitudes of parents who believed that 6 years of age is too early to send their children to preschool. On the other hand, parents' views of "a child should go to school at the age of 6, it is too early before that age" might lead to a concern that their children would not get any preschool education at all. On the other hand, as also stated among the reasons to send children to preschool education, "gaining sharing behavior," which could be discussed in terms of emotional regulation, peer acceptance, self-control, and taking precautions, supports the documented literature well (i.e., Shala, 2013; Wentzel, 1996, 1999). For this reason, especially in the United States, early access programs exist for children to make a good start and acquire school readiness (Denham, 2006; Peth-Pierce, 2000). In addition, the findings related to preparedness for school and developing those habits are in line with Reynolds' (1991) study with 1,539 children and their parents, where the findings indicated a strong effect of preschool education on later literacy and math achievement. However, it should be noted here that there is a contradiction in this study between the reasons parents posit for sending their children to preschool and their appreciation of year 5 and above as the appropriate age for starting preschool education in this study. This contradiction can be explained by the barriers families face, such as the household budget. Families are requested to contribute tuition since early education is costly and expensive to operate. In addition, transporting children to schools seemed to be another economic problem. Some countries implement various solutions to these problems. Pakistan, for example, provided free transportation to preschools, provided stipends, and increased financial government support for voluntary organizations supporting early education (World Bank, 1996).

In Australia, children participating in preschool education between 2008 and 2011 were found to be relatively stable, with low schooling rates in disadvantaged areas where non-English-speaking regions and indigenous families lived. Monitoring population trends in the areas at risk is thought to be effective in increasing participation in preschool education and to better inform policy and service provision (O'Connor et al., 2016)

It is understandable that some incentives do not cover preschool aged children as they do in the case of compulsory education. Yet it would not be realistic to expect families of certain socio-economic backgrounds to embrace the same understanding. In their case, it would be necessary to extend those incentives to preschool. Financial incentives to increase the pre-school enrollment rate may result in child abuse since parents may send their children to the school for solely this reason.

The finding related to parents' unwillingness to send their children to preschool at the age of 6 is quite remarkable. The downgrade of compulsory education to 66 months

old and families' perceptions regarding this age level seemed to be the main barriers to early childhood development. The research is well established to show that early childhood education has a tremendous impact on a child's later development (Carneiro & Heckman, 2003; Cunha & Heckman, 2007; Cunha, Heckman, Lochnerand, & Masterov, 2005; Heckman 2006; Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). It is noteworthy that disadvantaged families and their children would benefit at the maximum level from preschool education and that it helps to bridge the opportunity gaps they suffer from (Halle et al., 2009; Heckman, 2008). In particular, Campbell and Ramey's (1994) study showed how preschool education impacts children's cognitive and academic development. Therefore, it is important to take necessary steps to reverse the existing notions about age, to establish the requirement for starting preschool education at earlier ages, and to (re-)educate parents.

According to a recent report prepared by the World Bank titled "The Development and Dissemination of Preschool Education in Turkey," it has been emphasized that the dissemination of preschool education is only possible by a comprehensive and/or focused approach in practice. The report proposes two models for Turkey: Sweden's model, which is a model for nationwide practice, and New Zealand's model, which focuses on earlier childhood education with a special emphasis on minority groups (i.e., Maori). However, in this report, the Chilean model is a more comprehensive model for children under supervision and is a kind of combination of the previous two models (World Bank, 2013). This model aims at both disseminating preschool education and reaching disadvantaged groups. However, several measures must be taken to prevent misapplications and their repercussions, such as negative attitudes about and decreased demand for preschooling. The participants in this study have stated that a determined focus on disseminating preschool education, increasing awareness, meeting the demands, and conducting ongoing assessments are needed. Based on these results, it is suggested that certain measures need to be taken and policies set.

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