

Preschool teacher education as an example of an open social system

Belkis Tekmen*, Faculty of Education, Baskent University, Baglica Kampusu, 06790, Ankara, Turkey

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Abstract

With the realization of the substantial long-term educational, social, and economic benefits produced by high-quality preschool education, preschool teachers' education has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Moreover, other than the studies that focus on providing evidence for the impact of preschool education on children's outcomes, there are studies that show large benefits occur only when teachers are professionally prepared and adequately compensated. On the other hand, studies focusing on program evaluation or educational systems mainly consider the issue from a more structured and multidimensional view. In this respect, as an example of open social systems, teacher education depends on many interrelated components that affect each other directly or indirectly. The aim of this study is to review and discuss some of these components of preschool teacher education in the Turkish context such as the student selection policy, faculty development, recruitment policies and competencies of the graduates. Current issues of preschool teacher education and related documents are reviewed within the light of the research in order to understand the context within a macro perspective.

Keywords: preschool teacher education, educational policy, open social system, Turkish context.

1. Introduction

There is a quotation at the front page of a recent educational policy report prepared by the “Centre on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes” (CEELO Policy Report, 2016) saying that “Young children’s learning and development depend on the educational qualifications of their teachers”. This perspective gives a huge importance to the preschool teacher education programs. Debates surrounding both pre-schooling and teacher education are hot issues of discussion, particularly since Turkey increased compulsory education from five to eight school years and the recent regulations on the structure of this compulsory education. These structural changes concerning four plus four years or the content of the curricula yield the interest mostly on to the developmental issues of the children, but on the other hand there is an increasing attention on the professional development of teachers at all levels due to the qualifications issues. In addition to this, recognizing teacher quality as an essential component in improving the effectiveness of education programs, and the impact of this improvement on young children’s outcomes (Barnett, 2003; Bekman, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Whitebook, 2003) has resulted in the increase of related research and policy studies. Research findings show that children who are educated by teachers with a bachelor's degree in child development, early childhood education or specialized training are found to be more sociable, perform cognitive tasks at a higher level and exhibit more developed use of language and perform better academic success than children who were cared for by less-qualified adults (Dwyer, Chait & McKee, 2000). Along with the research attesting to the long-term impacts of high-quality early childhood education programs on children's cognitive, social and psychomotor development; there has been an increased demand for qualified early childhood education teachers (Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal & Ramey, 2001). However, educating qualified teachers with the proficiencies of their profession makes their educational process more challenging than ever. This is especially so in societies such as that of Turkish, where socio-cultural and economic characteristics are subject to rapid change (Kayhan & Kilic, 2011); attaching importance to children’s education in the early periods and training their teachers effectively result in the outcomes necessary for the well-being of society in the long-term.

In addition to these concerns, globalization, democratization and urbanization are three main concepts influencing Turkey’s social, political, cultural, economic and educational life (Demir & Paykoc, 2006). Since Turkey aims the membership of the European Union, this long lasting aim shapes educational policy by involving these three processes. Related reports prepared by the European Commission (2005), indicate that teachers in high-quality education systems need to be graduates of higher education along with the bachelor’s degree including knowledge on subject matter and pedagogy, and they should have the skills and competencies to guide and support their students with an understanding of social and cultural dimensions. However, having a higher education degree in preschool teacher education alone does not guarantee teacher competence (Hyson, Tomlinson & Morris, 2009). Whether or not a preschool teacher has the intended competencies is mostly determined by the pre-service education they are exposed to. The experiences gained through their education have a great influence on their professional development (Kayhan & Kılıç, 2011). Moreover, the training model, training period, entry requirements, academic staff development, curriculum and instruction processes and graduate recruitment policy of the program they attend, all play distinguishing roles in the professional qualifications of the teachers and establish the quality of the education they will provide to the preschool children.

As mentioned above, in recent decades, preschool education and preschool teacher education has gained both political and public priority resulting in the increased demand for preschool education and the preschool teacher profession (Kavak, 2010). It is the teachers who will primarily enable preschool education to be perceived as an indispensable requirement and the quality of preschool education depends mostly on the teachers’ characteristics and the training received by them. Considering these issues, teacher education and preschool teacher education in particular, can be studied as a big and open social system including many interrelated components.

2. Components of this open social system: Recent regulations on the structure and content

Improving teacher quality is at the forefront of reform studies of education systems. In particular, recent PISA test results, organized by the OECD, bring up the issue of rethinking teacher education in many countries. One of the major structural changes was to extend the duration of teacher training for primary schools to four years. In order to achieve this aim, elementary education departments were restructured in July 1992. As the Higher Education Council (HEC) is responsible for the supervision of universities in Turkey, articles 22-23 of the Higher Education Law 2547 state the minimum criteria and working conditions, assignments and promotion of faculty. The same articles also state that universities may add additional conditions, but they cannot lower standards. The program was redesigned in 1998 with the reform of education faculties under the control of the HEC; it became a section within the Department of Elementary Education (04.11.1997, article number 97.39.2761). By 1997, the HEC rearranged all the teacher education departments, which resulted not only in the structural changes, but also in the curricula content.

With this regulation, undergraduate programs for preschool teacher training were developed (which is more than 60 now) and the HEC planned a common program including the description and credits of the courses. However, eight years later, in 2006, another revision study was conducted regarding the following issues: 1) criticism of the insufficiency of programs that they are not competent enough to ensure the contemporary knowledge and skills required by the Ministry of Education and non-governmental organizations which are the future employers of the graduates; 2) the need for adaptation and modernization for all primary education programs; 3) the need for defining learning outcomes for all departments and courses according to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

For all of the above reasons, some reorganization of course structures and program content also took place. After these revisions, programs contained three types of courses mainly, which are subject knowledge and skills 50%, world knowledge 20% and professional knowledge and skills 30%. Each teacher training department had different course schedule and faculties were given the authority to rearrange the courses up to 25% of total credits by elective courses (HEC, 2006). Teaching practice course which is also included in the total credits is needed to be succeeded in the practice schools attended at the senior year of the program. In preschool teacher education program there is an additional practicum course at the sixth semester named "School Experience". They try to obtain experience in real school implications at these courses both under the supervision of the school teacher and the faculty instructor.

Teacher candidates' assessment and evaluation on the courses are performed by means of written exams, assignments, portfolio evaluations, presentations, group work, projects and monitoring of teaching skills.

2.1. Acceptance to the Program

In order to understand the characteristics of the input of such a system, which indicates the teacher candidates in this case, acceptance procedures to the program should be defined. In order to get accepted to higher education institutions in Turkey, one should hold a diploma from a secondary education and there is an entrance examination which is conducted by the Student Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM) once a year centrally. Those that graduate from a department of a faculty of education obtain a bachelor's degree and are entitled to be a teacher. Other than completing the designated total credits of the program, there is not any supplementary completion exam.

2.2. Recruitment of the Graduates

When we look at the existing preschool teachers still working in preschools, they are mostly graduated from “Girls’ Technical Higher Schools” or “Departments of Child Development” or “Preschool Teacher Education Program”. In addition to the graduates of higher education institutions, there is a majority of teachers who received two year pre-license programs from the education faculties; after receiving this pre-license they have attended pre-license completion courses and have graduated from different university departments such as Psychology or Social Services (MNE, 2009). Graduates of the Preschool Teacher Education Programs, in other words the output of this open social system plays a very significant role to understand the quality of the education obtained, however, it is not the only indicator of the system effectiveness, since there are many sub-factors included such as the social and physical environment, personal characteristics, parental factors and the type and the quality experience gained in the pre-service education.

The conditions for the recruitment of teachers for public schools are regulated by “Educational Regulation on Recruitment and Transfer of Teachers of MNE”. In accordance with these requirements; being suitable to the position to be recruited in accordance with resolutions of the Turkish Education Board, one should graduate from teacher training programs approved by the HEC. However, pedagogic formation certificate with the higher education institutions are also considered as equivalent of a teacher training department diploma. Health report is also needed to prove not to have any health problems that might render them incapable of serving. Other than these requirements, the most critical issue to be recruited for civil servant positions is to gain at least a base point or above for the area where s/he will be recruited in the “Examination of Civil Servant Selection”. This base point differs year to year and area to area according to the need and the budget reserved by the government. In addition to the civil servant positions, graduates are recruited in the private early childhood education and care centers. Since the preschool education is not included in the mandatory education yet in Turkey, these private institutions play a great role for the recruitment of the graduates. Related with the supply-demand ratio of the system and the qualifications of the teachers, some temporary solutions are considered from time to time. For example, in order to fulfill the increasing preschool teacher requirements and to facilitate the adaptation of teachers who are working in preschool settings but have graduated from other teacher departments, the MNE worked in collaboration with the universities to hold in-service courses (HEC, 2006). The biggest step in increasing the schooling rate for early childhood education was taken in 2009 with the selection of 35 pilot districts. The MNE hired 5,356 teachers in 2009, which is more than the total number in all the other departments of teachers (MNE, 2009).

2.3. Faculty Development

As mentioned above, a number of revision studies were performed between the years 2006-2008, especially on primary education (1st to 8th grades); as a consequence, programs were revised and shifted to the current model (HEC, 2006). These new arrangements have mainly focused on the curriculum and the structure of the program. However, preschool teacher education programs have a low status in most higher education institutions and low on the priority lists regarding resources for research and development projects.

Research findings on teacher training also draw attention to the quality of the academic staff as they establish another important component of this social system. Their educational background, their teaching and research experience, their course load are all significant factors affecting the quality of the education that the teacher candidates in the system are exposed to. Article 35 of the Higher Education Law No 2547 (HEC, 2006) considers the needs of teaching staff in higher education institutions. In addition to this law, some of the needs of teaching staff in preschool teacher education programs are also met in the ‘Law concerning students to be sent to abroad to study’ (No 1416 ‘Law concerning students to be sent to abroad to study’).

Thus, graduates of different departments were sent abroad to have graduate degrees in early childhood education doctorate programs to be positioned at faculties in newly developed preschool teacher education programs in Turkey (Eurydice, 2009).

3. Current Issues in Preschool Teacher Education in Turkey

Teaching as a profession has some requirements and, therefore, offers a unique and essential service, emphasizing intellectual techniques with long periods of training. On the other hand, however high its quality is, no teacher education program can be entirely responsible for ensuring candidates' teaching skills and subject knowledge. Productive learning or children's sufficient and healthy development cannot be guaranteed by a diploma. Therefore, it has generally been believed that the profession needs continuous skills upgrading; as a result of this, candidates are expected to develop high competencies in various teaching skills (Mizikaci, 2006). Among the issues related to preschool teacher education in Turkey, the candidates' profiles, and transferring the theory into practice and the competency of the graduates are some of the process components of this big open social system of teacher education.

3.1. Candidates' Profiles

It should be helpful to define socio-political decisions in an educational plan and if the social and psychological characteristics of the teacher candidates are known prior to their acceptance on the program. There are a number of studies that aim to understand the profiles of teacher candidates, both internationally and nationally. With the focus on preschool teacher education, the following are some of the research findings.

The study conducted by Kabadayı (2010) demonstrated that the majority of the participants came from relatively low socio-economic level families. In another demographical research Arslan's (2007) investigated the primary school teachers in Turkey and supported Kabadayı's (2010) findings on the socio-economic status of the participants. In their study, Erkan, Tugrul, Ustun, Akman, Sendogdu & Kargi (2002) also indicated that 77% of pre-service preschool teachers came from a low socio-economic background.

Furthermore, when the educational qualifications of the participants' parents were asked, less than half of the fathers and three-fourths of the mothers had no more than primary education (Erkan et al., 2002). In addition, among the candidates that came from single income working families only the father had a paid job. These findings related to the socio-economic levels of the candidates are almost in line with the conclusions based on an investigation of 821 pre-service preschool teachers in various universities in Turkey (Erkan et al., 2002).

In analyzing the Turkish context, findings of a survey study conducted by Kabadayı (2010) strongly point to the need for developing the qualities and perceptions of the teacher candidates. Their perceptions and motivations at the beginning affect their whole education process. It is vital to explore the characteristics of the input or in other words, the 'who' component of the teacher education system. Their attitude, perception and motivations at the very beginning establish their level of attention and their entire learning process.

In addition to the national studies about teacher candidates' characteristics, the study conducted by Aksu, Daloglu, Yıldırım, Kiraz and Demir (2008) presented important findings with regards to the demographic profile, socio-cultural values and educational views of trainee teachers. In their study, they collected data from 18,226 students in the first year from 65 education faculties in Turkey. Findings showed that the majority of the students were public school graduates (97%). When it came to the socio-economic status of their parents, 21% of the mothers had never attended school and only

5% of mothers and 15% of fathers were higher education graduates. Furthermore, 82.4% of the mothers were unemployed and most of the fathers were working in civil servant positions. Their attitudes about the profession showed that 21% of them chose teaching because of the guarantee in finding a job and the comfortable working environment; 28.5% chose it because of their entrance exam scores, and 51.2% choose the profession because they wanted to become teachers (Aksu et al., 2009). Although these results were collected from various programs in the education faculties and analyzed as one group, it can give an idea about the overall situation of the teacher candidates in Turkey and make reference to the teacher candidates in the preschool teacher education programs.

3.2. *Transferring the Theory into Practice*

Moreover, it should also be noted that having a degree in teacher education does not guarantee teacher competence. Although the quality of the program is mainly identified by how well it prepares new teachers to the actual classrooms (Hyson, Tomlinson & Morris, 2009), it does not mean that every graduate is fully competent on the intended qualifications. In order to analyze the quality of a teacher education, the degree of the program grounding the candidates in knowledge of child development and academic subject areas or providing them opportunities to practice new teaching skills are way more important factors. The identification a competent teacher describes the type of the teacher the system expects. However it needs complicated measures and process evaluation to understand and assess the ability to influence children's development in a positive way and supporting the learners' needs, which are way too important than knowing the literature or having a high score in the "Examination of Civil Servant Selection". Therefore, improvement of the quality of teacher education requires a good monitoring and evaluation system, both for theoretical and practical aspects.

In order to prevent insufficient preparation for the profession, there is a need to organize a functional relationship between theory and practice. For example, one of the current topics about the teacher training programs is the practicum course, and which is primarily related to "how" it is taught, rather than "what" is taught. In his study about the issues of preschool teacher education, Ozgan (2009) states that the students have low appreciation of the practicum. Therefore, it can be concluded that new teachers experience a disparity between their gains from their pre-service years and their actual working environment (Yalcinkaya, 2002) when they began to work as professionals.

The ideal teacher education would be to prepare teachers to become competent in classroom, being aware of the reason of their actions and activities, in other words, they should know what they are doing and why they are doing it. More importantly, they should be capable of changing their planned practice if the circumstance or context needs to (Akdag & Haser, 2010). In practicum classes, they are alone with their activities and performance in problem solving. In faculties, the focus is mostly on understanding the theory rather than gaining skills in teaching. Thus, new teachers experience a difficult adjustment process when they begin their actual teaching career.

3.3. *Teacher Competencies*

Competency of the teachers graduated from the program can be investigated both under the process or output component of a teacher education system, but in this case the competency is considered not only at the professional level but also at the pre-service education years. It is important to assess competency of both teacher candidates and pre-service teachers because they may serve as a "contextual filter" through which they screen their classroom experiences, interpret them and adapt their subsequent classroom practices (Clark & Peterson, 1986).

Recent research mostly confirms that teacher qualifications and competencies significantly affect the quality of teaching provided to young children (Lazar, Darlington, Murray, Royce & Snipper, 1982; Oden, Schweinhart & Weikart, 2000), and that higher qualifications in preschool children's teachers

contribute to more positive outcomes for those children both short term and long term (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 2001). Both the generic competencies and specific content competencies of preschool teachers are under focus with the MNE's revision studies conducted after 2008. Documentation of these competency areas and standards are established precisely under three achievement levels, and also presented for each branch of teaching. Assessing the graduates of teacher education programs according to these competency standards, of course, is not an easy task; however, taking them as a guide to improve the outcomes of the programs can be one of the benefits of this documentation. Even the course outcomes can be designed with the help of the competencies in order to have a clearer view of expectations from a preschool teacher candidate.

If we look at the aim of the improvement and dissemination studies conducted about the preschool education Turkey, the first thing put on the table is to increase the number of children who attend preschool institutions. This dissemination policy is followed by the second aim that is to include the preschools in the mandatory education years. However, it is known that institutional education is expensive, especially in relation to preschool education, which is one of the most important problems that the Turkish education system has to face and solve (Tekmen, 2012).

Moreover, it should be also noted that teachers need to be kept in the workforce therefore, educational institutions have to attract teachers and need to be welcoming places in order to encourage more professionals to enter the workforce (Jalongo & Isenberg, 2000). On the other hand, there is a fact that, more than sixty programs in Turkey that train preschool teacher candidates have insufficient number of academicians (Akdag & Haser, 2010). In this respect, several academic meetings have declared that the HEC should stop assembling new universities unless they meet international quality standards. In order to meet the demand for preschool teachers, there is a need to increase the capacity of the preschool teacher education departments; however, the question of quality of the education in these departments should be a bigger concern.

4. Conclusion

In order to understand the dynamics of a healthy and working open system, continuous feedback from other external and internal systems are also necessary to make adjustments and improvements to achieve the intended outcomes. Transmitting information which is necessary for a healthy and affective relationship with environment is crucial. On the other hand, there are also some critical aspects that are important for an open system to run properly such as boundaries, environmental factors and "equifinality". Equifinality means that there is more than one way to accomplish or achieve the same result by variety of different processes. Having one right way to do something is characteristics of closed systems. Bureaucracies with hard boundaries tend to limit the stakeholders to see the whole picture in large systems. To overcome this issue it is essential to understand the value of flexibility and equifinality in an open system such as preschool teacher education.

Within this broader context summarized up to here, there are more other reasons to give special attention to improve the quality of education programs that train preschool teachers. However, although there is agreement that early childhood teachers' professional development should have high quality, the nature of that quality has not been consistently defined yet. There are recently made efforts to articulate some quality criteria for the professional development that occurs in these institutions (Hyson, Tomlinson & Morris, 2009). As an example of open systems, a teacher education system regularly exchanges feedback with its external environment. Therefore, providing positive impact on children's learning and development is the most significant feedback for preschool teacher education programs and so, high quality of a program can be described in terms of teacher attitudes or behaviors that result this impact. For this reason, the educational system needs improvements to provide the candidates with the opportunity to decide about their career more wisely and on a rational basis. Moreover, teacher education programs should place more emphasis on the activities and practices that would increase the candidates' positive attitudes towards the profession (Tekmen

& Kucukturan, 2015). It is also important to have a successful coordination among the elements of these educational systems in order to understand and analyze each component both separately and together. In educational programs such as preschool teacher education, there is an increasing tendency to identify each course with the expected outcomes, and this yields the courses to be evaluated in terms of modules and matrix pattern. It should be noted that, organizing the courses and activities in such detailed manner do not always indicate the effectiveness of the activity or the course. As mentioned before, evaluation of each course, program or the system as a whole with multiple evaluation tools and perspectives. Process component of a program includes various dimensions and affected by many external and internal factors since it is an open system. Faculty development is an example of these external components; such as the issue of implementing a variety of different courses to be covered. As mentioned before, the lack of number of academicians and different educational backgrounds of them makes the issue more complicated. In other faculties such as administrative and economic science, the number of instructor – student ratio is 88.71 to 1, and 39.8 to 1 in art and science, where in education faculties 129.4 to 1 (Kucukahmet, 2007). In addition, regarding the problems of the bridge between theory and practice, practicum courses are one of the current issues in preschool teacher education (Kucukturan & Tekmen, 2014). Therefore, pre-service preschool teacher training is criticized as being too theoretical and having little connection between theory and practice.

To sum up, the key point of having a quality preschool education, which will provide the desired social, educational and cultural outcomes at both social and individual levels, is the quality of the education that their teachers will have. In this respect, preschool teacher education programs should be under constant focus to improve their standards and effectiveness. As mentioned before, teacher quality is complex issue and it is not fair to put forward the teacher education programs alone to predict the outcomes for children development and learning. This big system has many external and internal factors interfering with each other and should be analyzed and evaluated as whole comprehensively. However, it is a good start to begin with the teacher education programs to as they are the main source for the developing the most important part of this big picture.

As discussed, preschool teacher education is an example of an open social system, which compromises the analyses of the interaction of parts and its relationships within the parts and with the environment as a whole. This is why, while reforming an education system, partial changes are to be designed keeping in mind the functioning of the entire system, taking into account requirements of internal and external, input, process and product dimensions within a context (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). Preschool teacher education programs have faced many rapid changes because of the recent developments in the preschool teacher education policy in Turkey. In order to understand the effects of these changes and improve the programs, it is vital to explore the trends and issues from time to time to inform the decision makers.

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