



Children at Risk in the Preschool Period: Preschool Teachers' Opinions *

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Abstract

This research was planned to analyze preschool teachers' opinions about children at risk and to identify their experiences with children in different risk groups in their classes. A basic qualitative research design was utilized for an in-depth examination of how preschool teachers defined the concept of children at risk, their opinions on children at risk belonging to different categories, the most frequently encountered risk groups in classrooms, and the difficulties they experience with these children in the classroom. The data of the study were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 preschool teachers selected by criterion sampling method. The obtained data were coded, categorized into themes, and evaluated with content analysis. The participating preschool teachers defined children at risk as children whose development is adversely affected, whose needs are not met, and who are growing up in insecure environments. They are children who are subjected to neglect and abuse, grow up in broken homes or in unfavorable conditions, are delinquents or drug addicts, are refugees, are Internet addicts, grow up in families with many children, live on the street, or are exploited for labor. The participating preschool teachers stated that they mostly encountered children living in broken families due to divorce/death in their professional experience. The problems encountered by these preschool teachers while working with children at risk in their classrooms were listed as difficulties in classroom management, undesirable behaviors, and problems caused by lack of self-care skills.

Keywords

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Introduction

Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states that children should be protected from all kinds of adverse conditions and their development should be supported. The states that signed the convention have pledged to legally protect children. Nevertheless, the number of children at risk, who are in danger in terms of their developmental areas and individual safety, is increasing day by day (Adelman, Middleton, & Ashworth, 2003; Akpınar, 2017; Çobaner, 2015; Kahraman & Kahraman, 2017; UNICEF, 2005; Yüksel, Adıgüzel, & Yüksel, 2015). According to the 2018 report of the Save the Children (2018) Fund, which conducts important work on a global scale, 1 billion children worldwide are facing poverty, 240 million are facing war, and 575 million girls are facing gender discrimination. Living under risk, which creates both short-term and long-term effects, can make children more vulnerable to neglect and abuse, increase their tendency toward delinquency, and even cause the death of the child (Güngör, 2013; Koçtürk & Yılmaz, 2018). According to a report by the Child Abuse Prevention Research Commission, which focuses only on child abuse, 1064 children lost their lives to abuse in 2016 in Turkey (TBMM, 2017).

Being a child means not having the capacity to decide what is "best" for oneself, being externally dependent and thus intrinsically at risk (Goldstein, 1977). In particular, the age range of 0-6 years is defined as the period when children are most open and vulnerable to influences from their environments and dependent on adults because they cannot change their current conditions (Bilir, Arı, Dönmez, & Güneysu, 1991; Kars, 1996; Koç et al., 2012). The existence and quality of the environmental conditions provided to children in this period are the determining factors in ensuring that children reach their true potential. Factors such as inequality in society, poverty, and the inability to benefit from basic services put children at risk and cause individual and social consequences not only in childhood but also in adulthood (Pehlivan Baykara & Acar Baykara, 2009). Studies indicate that 250 million children (43%) under the age of five in underdeveloped and developing countries are at risk of not reaching their potential (Black et al., 2017). While 41% of children under the age of 6 are exposed to one or two risk factors, 20% are subjected to three or more risk factors (Robbins, Stagman, & Smith, 2012). In light of these data, it can be argued that children aged 0-6 face the highest risk, and preschool education has a critical role in recognizing and eliminating social inequalities.

Preschool education, which covers the early childhood period, is an important first step for the planning and implementation of early intervention studies (Kaytaz, 2005) that will contribute positively to the mental and physical health of children (Schulman & Barnett, 2005) and reduce risky behaviors (smoking, substance use, early pregnancy, etc.) in the future (Cunningham, Cohan, Naudeau, & McGinnis, 2008). In addition, preschool education has an important place in helping children get a head start and in recognizing and eliminating social inequalities (TEDMEM, 2017). Kaytaz (2005) stated that an investment of 1 unit yields a return of 6.37-8.14 units at this age, while Carneiro and Heckman (2003) stated that an investment of 1 dollar in the preschool period provides a return of 5.70 dollars. In summary, research shows that work carried out in this period makes significant contributions to the individual and therefore to the society in the long run.

Specialists working with children (doctors, teachers, etc.) have an active role in determining the needs of children and preventing them from experiencing negative conditions. The collaboration of public institutions and organizations, non-governmental organizations, and schools ensures that children at risk are less affected and participate in social life more easily (Dubowitz, 2002; Dubowitz et al., 2011; Taşdelen, Turhan, Erikçi, & Özkan, 2014; Türkoğlu & Gültekin Akduman, 2013). While the issue of children living lives unsuitable for their developmental levels with danger and risk is now often discussed in medicine, social services, psychology, law, and forensic medicine, it was first discussed in the field of education by Capuzzi and Gross, who expressed the need to inform teachers about this subject (Capuzzi & Gross, 1996; Seçer, 2018). Teachers' awareness of the risks that children face will ensure that the children receive help, which is their most basic right, quickly and in a coordinated manner. Considering that children spend about six hours a day with their teachers during the preschool period, awareness about children in risk groups is clearly important among these teachers.

An examination of the studies covering the preschool period for children at risk in Turkey shows that studies have focused on neglect and abuse regarding risk groups and other risk groups were not fully addressed (Acehan et al., 2013; Aslan & Çelik, 2020; Dereobalı, Karadağ, & Sönmez, 2013; Dilsiz & Mağden, 2015; Doğan & Bayar, 2018; Kürklü, 2012; Tıraşçı & Gören, 2007; Tugay, 2008; Yaşar & Şenol, 2015; Zoroğlu et al., 2001). However, the concept of children at risk is not limited to abuse and neglect; it also includes those who are in danger regarding developmental areas and individual safety, victimization, delinquency, living and/or working on the street, drug addiction, disability, early marriage, poverty, and lack of education. It further includes children who experience armed conflict or are affected by natural disasters (Baydar, Küntay, Gökşen Yağmurlu, & Cemalçılar, 2010; Baykara Acar & Gökçearslan Çiftçi, 2011; Karabağ Köse, 2019; Polat, 2001). In addition, there is no study in the literature determining the awareness and/or competence of preschool teachers in classifying risk categories in Turkey. Therefore, it is expected that this study will help bridge this gap in the field while presenting the opinions of preschool teachers who have active roles in this area.

This study aimed to analyze the knowledge of risk categories among preschool teachers working in early childhood education and to determine their opinions regarding children at risk in their classes. Answers to the following questions were sought for this purpose:

- What is the definition of “risk” in early childhood according to preschool teachers?
- Who are the children at risk as identified by preschool teachers?
- Which risks groups are encountered more frequently by preschool teachers in their classrooms?
- What kinds of problems do preschool teachers experience the most with at-risk children in their classrooms?

Method

This research was carried out to investigate preschool teachers’ opinions about children at risk in early childhood. A phenomenological design, as a qualitative research method, was used in this research for an in-depth examination of preschool teachers’ knowledge regarding the definition of “risk,” their views on the classification of children at risk, the risk groups encountered most in classrooms, and the difficulties experienced with these children in classrooms. Since qualitative research studies focus on the process, the resulting meanings are of great importance (Merriam, 2013). Qualitative research is a method that deals with how people interpret their own experiences, how they structure their worlds, and how they give meaning to their own experiences (Merriam, 2013). For this reason, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participating teachers to acquire their opinions about risk groups and to learn about their experiences. The preschool teachers’ opinions were then presented in categories. The semi-structured interview technique used in this study avoided the limitations of methods such as questionnaires or tests, providing a flexible interview environment and allowing the obtained information to be examined in depth.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

Based on the fact that the 10 preschool teachers constituting the study group were all graduates of 4-year undergraduate programs, it was assumed that they all had very similar content knowledge about the preschool period.

This study was limited to the interview questions prepared by the researchers and the responses of the 10 preschool teachers who participated in the study. The generalizability of the study is limited as information was obtained from only 10 teachers due to data saturation.

Study Group

Data sources in qualitative research consist of individuals with experience about the subject of the research (Merriam, 2013). For this reason, the criterion sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used while selecting the participants of the study. The criterion sampling method is preferred when the group to be included in the research has sufficient experience and knowledge about the research problem and when the conditions to represent the universe of the study

are met (Büyüköztürk, Kılıç Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2014; Patton, 2014). Since this research aimed to determine the experiences, awareness, and opinions of preschool teachers about children at risk in their classrooms, the main criteria for the selection of participants were as follows: working as a preschool teacher with work experience in at least two different schools with low socioeconomic levels under the Ministry of National Education for at least 5 years, and voluntary participation. Children at risk are usually found in families with low socioeconomic status. As the income level of the family decreases, the development of the child is more at risk, especially due to potential exposure to abuse, violence, and neglect (Eryurt & Koç, 2009; Hatun, 2002; Özenoğlu & Ünal, 2015). According to UNICEF (2011), children in the socioeconomically poor category are less likely to receive quality care in the family or any kind of preschool education. In this context, it was assumed that it would be more likely to encounter at-risk children in the public schools affiliated with the Ministry of National Education since these schools receive students from all socioeconomic levels, while private preschools require payment, which makes it more difficult for children from the general population to attend those schools. To ensure the selection of teachers with sufficient experience with children, work experience of at least 5 years was identified as an inclusion criterion. Since the families of children at risk are more likely to be socioeconomically disadvantaged (Lamy, 2013), the participating teachers were selected based on their experience working in schools with low socioeconomic levels. Since working in different schools and in different regions provides a wide range of experiences for teachers, the other criterion was to have worked in at least two different schools. The answers provided by the participants to the semi-structured interview questions used for data collection were found to be repetitive or redundant after the seventh teacher. The remaining three teachers were nevertheless interviewed, but no novel information was encountered. At this point, the opinions of two independent researchers, both experts in the qualitative field, were obtained and an assessment was conducted on the basis of codes and categories. Based on the researchers' opinions, the research was limited to 10 preschool teachers since data saturation had been reached based on the codes and categories becoming repetitive. For the purpose of confidentiality, interviews were coded as T1 (teacher 1), T2 (teacher 2), etc. Table 1 presents information about the preschool teachers participating in the study.

Table 1. Information on the Participants in the Study Group

	Frequency (f)
Gender	
Female	8
Male	2
Level of Education	
Undergraduate	10
Age	
25-30 years	3
31-35 years	4
36-40 years	3
Seniority	
5-10 years	7
11-15 years	3

Table 1 shows that the majority of the participants in the study were women (8 of 10 participants) with 5-10 years of professional experience (7 people), and all participants were younger than 40 years old and had 4-year undergraduate degrees.

Data Collection Tool

Data for this study were collected with a semi-structured interview form. Patton (2002) emphasized the importance of asking good questions in order to conduct effective interviews. The interview questions were accordingly developed by the researchers based on a detailed literature review (Creena-Jennings, 2018; Cunningham et al., 2008; Dönmez, 2007; Erdil, 2010; Hindley,

Ramchandani, & Jones, 2006) to best serve the purpose of the study. Expert opinions were obtained from two researchers working with children at risk and two independent researchers working in the field of qualitative design. After the development of four interview questions, which were shaped by expert opinions, the opinions of two academics who were experts in the field of qualitative study were sought to increase the internal validity of the questions and to understand whether they possessed appropriate scope, intelligibility, and clarity. In light of the feedback provided by the experts, the interview questions were adjusted and finalized. In this manner, the semi-structured interview form with four open-ended questions was created. Before the study, a pilot application was conducted with two preschool teachers to test the intelligibility of the questions. It was concluded that the questions were clear and understandable and the study was therefore begun.

Data Collection

This study and the methods used in it were deemed ethically appropriate in accordance with the Uşak University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee's decision dated 19.08.2020 (nr. 2020/10). Data were collected August 22-30, 2020. The second researcher conducted preliminary telephone interviews with the teachers to determine the times of the interviews and provided information about the purpose of the research, ethical standards, and confidentiality. Suitable times for the teachers were identified and permission was obtained to record the interviews. The interviews were conducted separately for each participant online via the Zoom program due to the COVID-19 pandemic on the days and times specified by the teachers. The participating teachers did not give approval for video calls to be recorded. For this reason, with their permission, only audio recordings of the interviews were made. When the interviews began, the second researcher reiterated the purpose of the research and the number of interview questions. The four interview questions were asked to each preschool teacher in the same order. Teachers were given the opportunity to talk about their experiences and thoughts in addition to answering the specific questions, and it was ensured that the teachers were comfortable during the interviews. Interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes.

Data Analysis

Three-step content analysis was applied in this study as developed by Miles and Huberman (1994).

1. The recorded answers provided by the participants during the online interviews conducted by the second researcher were transcribed and diligently read by the researchers. In qualitative studies, participants can confirm whether their opinions are sufficiently presented (Ersoy, 2016). For that reason, the resulting transcripts were shared with each participant and their opinions were confirmed to increase the reliability of the study.
2. Data were coded during content analysis and categories were designed with the help of those codes (Corbin & Strauss; 2007; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). In this phase, the researchers arrived at more general concepts and relations by analyzing the similarities and differences of the concepts present in participants' answers to interview questions. Codes were created from the answers and categories were created from the codes. The resulting codes and categories were shared with two independent researchers who conduct qualitative studies, and it was observed that consistency was achieved between independent researchers. While presenting the findings, the "word cloud" technique was used to visualize data and make them more understandable. This technique helps visualize content analysis and provides quick information to the reader (Fronza, Janes, Sillitti, Succi, & Trebeschi, 2013).
3. Next, the researchers conducted content analysis to reveal the themes that would enable them to reach connections and concepts by which they could explain the data. Direct quotations were provided to fully reflect the preschool teachers' opinions. The researchers then discussed the findings in line with the relevant literature.

Results

This section discusses the research findings according to the themes created in light of the purpose of the research and the research questions.

Findings Regarding the Definition of “Child at Risk” According to Preschool Teachers

Regarding the research subproblem of preschool teachers’ definitions of “risk” in early childhood, the teachers were asked the following question: “What would you say if you were to define risk in early childhood in a few sentences?” Figure 1 presents the responses provided by the participants as a word cloud.

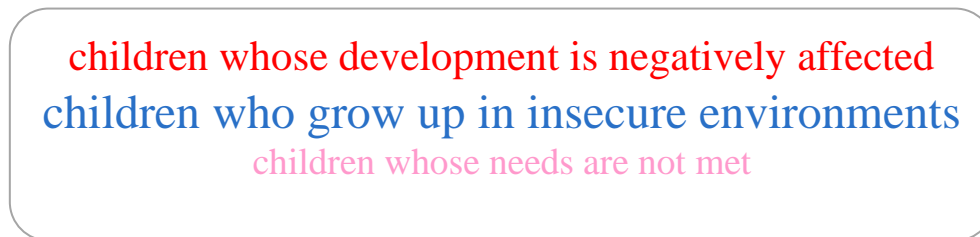


Figure 1. Definitions of Children at Risk

As Figure 1 depicts, three subthemes emerged in line with the answers received from the participants of this study: children whose developmental areas are negatively affected (T2, T5, T10), children whose needs are not met (T1, T3, T9), and children who grow up in insecure environments (T4, T6, T7, T8).

Children growing up in insecure environments

Four of the participants defined risk in early childhood as cases in which the environment in which the child grows up is not safe enough or cases of growing up in insecure environments. Some specific opinions on this subtheme were as follows:

T7: It is the case where the environment in which the children live and grow up is not safe in any sense.

T8: Any situation, behavior, and way of understanding with which the child may be harmed defines risk.

Thus, according to the answers of four of the preschool teachers, insecurity in the child’s environment is defined as risk.

Children whose development is adversely affected

Three of the preschool teachers included in this study defined risk as negative effects on developmental areas and disruption in these areas due to different reasons. Some specific opinions on this subtheme were as follows:

T2: Any situation that may adversely affect or hinder the development of children in early childhood (including all developmental areas) is related to the definition of risk.

T10: In my opinion, risk is defined as any situation in which the child may be adversely affected in terms of physical, mental, or emotional development.

Thus, according to the answers of three of the preschool teachers, situations that negatively affect or have the potential to negatively affect the development of children are defined as risk and such negative impact in developmental areas presents risk factors for the children.

Children whose needs are not met

Three of the participants defined risk as the needs of children not being met. Some specific opinions on this subtheme were as follows:

T1: Any situation that arises when the needs of the child in the preschool period are not fully met by the parents or other adults around the child can be included in the definition of risk.

T9: Each of the children whose general needs for survival are not met can be defined as a child at risk.

According to the answers provided by these three preschool teachers, risk is defined as the inability to meet the needs of a child among the people responsible for that child. A child whose needs are not met is included in the group of “children at risk” according to the answers of these participants.

In summary, these preschool teachers generated three subthemes while defining children at risk: children in unsafe environments, children whose needs are not met, and children whose developmental areas are negatively affected.

Findings Related to Groups of Children at Risk Defined by Preschool Teachers

Regarding the research subproblem of which children are identified as being at risk by preschool teachers, the teachers were asked the following questions: “We are exploring different risk situations in early childhood regarding various risk groups. If you were to limit these risk groups, how would you create categories? Can you share the risk groups that come to mind?” A total of 10 subthemes or categories were formed from the analyses conducted according to the answers received from the participants, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Risk Groups

According to Figure 2, preschool teachers cited risk groups as children subjected to neglect or abuse (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9, T10), children growing up in broken families due to divorce or death (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T7, T9, T10), children growing up in unfavorable conditions (T3, T4, T5, T8, T9, T10), delinquents (T3, T4, T6, T7, T10), children with substance abuse problems (T1, T6, T7, T8, T9), refugee children (T1, T2, T3, T6, T10), children growing up in families with many children (T2, T4, T8, T10), child laborers, children living on the street (T1, T3, T7, T10), and children addicted to the internet (T6, T7, T9).

Some participants expressed unique opinions. Some examples are as follows:

T1: *Actually, there are many answers to this question because I think there are too many serious risk groups. As an example, I can cite children whose parents have died, children whose parents are divorced, children subjected to neglect or abuse, child laborers, refugee children, children with substance abuse.*

T2: *I think the definition of risk has many aspects, but in general, I think they are gathered under certain themes. For example, we can examine it based on the degree of the effect it has on children and the development area that it affects. Child abuse, multi-child family structures or the children of divorced parents, and refugee children can be given as examples of this.*

T3: *The first ones that come to my mind are the refugee and asylum-seeker children I see in my own school and in the classrooms of my colleagues. In addition to these, I think that children who are subjected to neglect and abuse in any respect, street children, child laborers, and juvenile delinquents are also in the risk group.*

T9: *I think there is more than one risk group in early childhood. Frankly, it is a little difficult to categorize this situation, but in general, children who grow up in poor families, children who are neglected or abused, children whose parents died or divorced, and children with substance abuse can be considered. But there is another category that I think is at least as important as these categories. Those are the children who are addicted to the internet, which, I think, is quite common nowadays.*

In summary, preschool teachers stated that there were many groups of children at risk, emphasizing the neglect and abuse of children, children growing up in broken families, children growing up in unfavorable environments, delinquent children, and children with substance abuse problems.

Findings Regarding the Risk Groups Commonly Encountered by Preschool Teachers in Classrooms

Regarding the research subproblem of which risks groups are encountered more frequently by preschool teachers in their classrooms, the teachers were asked the following questions: "Can you give examples of the risk groups you have mentioned from your experience in your own classes? Can you explain a little bit more about the numbers of students in each risk group?" Based on the answers provided by the participants, six different subthemes were created. Figure 3 presents these subthemes as a word cloud.

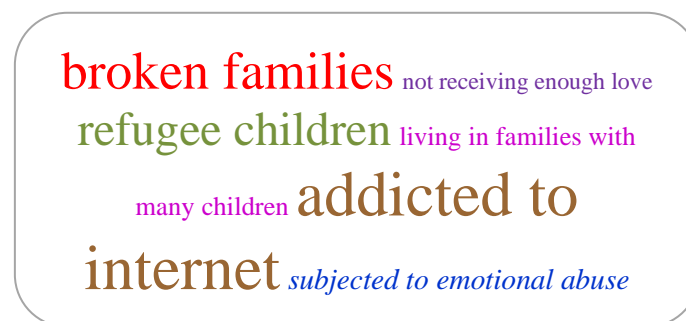


Figure 3. Risk Groups Encountered by Preschool Teachers

According to Figure 3, the teachers participating in this research mostly encountered children living in broken families due to divorce/death (T1, T2, T7, T6, T8), children who did not receive enough love (T1, T4, T5, T7), refugee children (T3, T4, T6, T8), children who grew up in families with many children (T6, T7, T10), and children addicted to the internet (T6, T7, T9).

Some of the responses from participants are as follows:

T2: *The parents of one of my students in my class got divorced. This student started to be a socially introverted child and it was affecting his situation in the classroom in general. I could observe this more in his drawings. I can say that he was not drawing all the family members in his drawings, one was always missing, and I can say that he was almost always drawing his mother. Unfortunately, another student in my class lost his mother at a young age. Unfortunately, the effects of facing a reality such as death at a young age could be observed quite a lot in this student.*

T3: *I did not explicitly come across the risk groups that I cited in my classroom for 7 years. But there are refugee children from Syria and Afghanistan in my teacher friends' classes.*

T9: *Yes, of course. I have one student whose parents are separated. This student is both a very rebellious child and someone who represses everything, and he never uses the father figure in his paintings. He draws his uncle, grandfather, aunt, and his uncle's wife, but he does not draw the father. When I watch him playing games with his friends in his free time, I see him talking with his friends about the things he wants to happen in real life as if he has experienced them, although he has not. Besides this student, one of the biggest risks for me in the classroom is internet addiction... The number of students in this risk group is also high in my class, whether they are poor or rich, whether their parents are separated or lost, or living in a very happy family. Unfortunately, the biggest risk for children is internet addiction, as the accessibility of the internet is very high and easy nowadays.*

T10: *The majority of my students grow up in a family environment with many other children. The most obvious negative effect of this is being neglected. They are growing very poorly in terms of love, and their physical needs are not fully met. As a simple example, families do not even notice the absence of the child at home during the hours when the child must be picked up from school. Unfortunately, parents are unaware of their children's individual differences and inner worlds because they have so many children.*

In summary, preschool teachers stated that they mostly encountered children from broken families or extended/large families and emotionally neglected and abused children in their classrooms.

Findings Regarding the Problems Experienced by Preschool Teachers with Children in Different Risk Groups in Their Classes

Regarding the research subproblem of which problems preschool teachers experience most with at-risk children in their classrooms, the teachers were asked the following questions: "Suppose there is a child in your class who is in one or more risk groups. In such a situation, in which areas of the classroom do you think you might experience difficulties? Can you explain with examples?" Figure 4 presents the resulting subthemes as a word cloud.

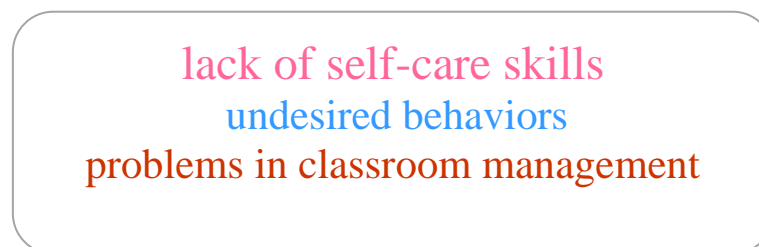


Figure 4. Problems Preschool Teachers Face with At-Risk Children in Their Classrooms

As Figure 4 depicts, the participants mostly had difficulties in the areas of classroom management (T1, T3, T5, T6, T7, T9, T10), undesired behaviors in children (T2, T3, T5, T6, T9, T10), and lack of self-care skills in children (T2, T4, T5, T10).

Difficulty in classroom management

Four of the participants stated that they may have difficulties in classroom management if there is a child in the classroom belonging to one or more of the specified risk groups. The answers given by some of these participants are as follows:

T1: For example, it may be difficult in activities that require family participation. If there is a child without a mother and father, this situation can unsettle her. If there is a child who has been neglected or abused by his family, he may behave undesirably towards his friends at school. I may have difficulty with classroom management

T3: If I assume that one of these risk groups is refugee children, I would have the most difficulty in communication because we do not know their language. I used to have a lot of trouble with families and children in this respect, and my colleagues who have refugee children in their classes are also experiencing it. I would also have trouble involving these children in activities. If there is an abused child, he or she may be introverted and asocial. As a result of all this, I think I would have problems with classroom management.

T9: Internet addiction, which is one of the risk groups, is unfortunately a problem that we encounter in many children. The students exposed to television or computer radiation have a little more difficulty in perception compared to their friends, so the teacher has to explain the topic several times during the lesson. This affects the flow of the course.

T6: The presence of students belonging to more than one risk group in the classroom setting will make it difficult to provide interaction and adaptation among children. Therefore, the attention span of the children will be shortened. In this process, it may be necessary for the teacher to work with children in risk groups one-on-one. I think that this will disrupt the normal course flow.

In summary, preschool teachers stated that the undesirable behaviors observed when working with groups of children at risk, language problems arising with refugee children, and negative interactions between children may have negative effects on classroom management.

Formation of undesired behaviors

Six of the participants stated that undesirable behaviors with the use of slang, obscenities, or aggression may occur in the classroom when students belonging to one or more risk groups are present. The answers given by some of these participants are as follows:

T9: For example, I have a student in the risk group whose parents are separated. Every time I leave the classroom, that is, every time the authority moves away, he may want to harm his friends. I think it would be very difficult for me if this behavior were to be common in my classroom.

T5: Children sometimes regard themselves as unique and unparalleled in the classroom setting. Sometimes they can engage in violent and aggressive behaviors. Of course, we adopt an understanding that the child receives support in such cases, but the family may not always accept this situation. At such times, the teacher's task becomes very difficult.

Thus, six of the preschool teachers stated that children at risk have a tendency toward violence and other undesirable behaviors in the classroom.

Lack of self-care skills

Four of the participants stated that at-risk children in their classes may demonstrate a lack of self-care skills. The answers given by some of the participants are as follows:

T10: I think such a situation affects the classroom and education negatively in every sense. It may be necessary to teach general social rules and basic self-care skills to children who come from an indifferent family environment with no awareness. Those who learned differently from their families are confused then and question what behavior is right. After the children in the risk group adapt to the classroom setting, then the need for love emerges. When they receive the love

they haven't received from their families from the teacher, they cannot share it and display jealousy. As I said for the previous question, children who are forgotten at school can become irritable and feel worthless in the presence of their friends.

T2: Having children belonging to more than one risk group in the same classroom setting will definitely affect the classroom atmosphere. It affects many developmental areas of children, but I think it will greatly affect the areas of social-emotional and self-care skills.

Preschool teachers expressed that the indifference and/or ignorance of families of children at risk prevents children from gaining adequate experience with self-care skills.

Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions

This study was conducted to analyze preschool teachers' opinions about children at risk and to explore their experiences with children in different risk groups in their classrooms. The study examined the definition of children at risk according to preschool teachers, groups of children at risk, and the specific groups of children at risk that these preschool teachers often encounter, presenting the problems experienced by preschool teachers while working with these groups in classrooms.

Early childhood education is a very important step in education, especially for disadvantaged/at-risk children (Heckman, 2017), because preschool education creates an environment that detects, balances, and eliminates problems during a period when children are most vulnerable to risks regarding problems with nutrition (Shor, 2011), school readiness (Bell, Bayliss, Glauert, & Ohan, 2018), and other similar issues (Gilligan, 2000). Since maltreatment in the first years of life has worse consequences compared to experiences in later years (Ayoub et al., 2006; Dunn, McLaughlin, Slopen, Rosand, & Smoller, 2013; Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001), it is important to detect these problems in the preschool period. In addition, problems not detected during the preschool period such as adaptation to school, socialization problems, and negative peer communication can become more complex later coupled with the ongoing difficulties of the school environment (Bell et al., 2018). According to research results, preschool teachers define children at risk as children whose developmental areas are adversely affected, whose needs are not met, and who grow up in an insecure environment. The concept of risk is similarly defined in the literature as the possibility of the emergence of harmful situations for the person and his/her environment within a certain period of time (Ögel, 2007, 2014), factors that prevent the child's social and psychological development and lead to a life that is not suitable for his/her age (Seçer, 2018), and biological, psychosocial, and psychological dangers and threats to the well-being of the child (Walker et al., 2007). The preschool teachers who participated in this research were able to define the concept of a child at risk.

According to the participants, children at risk are children subjected to neglect and abuse, who grow up in broken homes and unfavorable conditions, who grow up in large/extended families with many children, or who are delinquents, drug addicts, refugees, street children, child laborers, or internet addicts. Children at risk are not a homogeneous group; they vary by many factors, including gender, language, religion, ethnicity, special educational needs and disabilities, family history of at-risk conditions, and geography (Creena-Jennings, 2018). In other words, children may be at risk for different reasons and conditions such as poverty, being a refugee, and living with a single parent due to parental separation or death can put children at risk in different ways (Richardson, Vafa, & Litton, 2017). Effective identification of the children whose basic rights such as development, life, and education are at risk is the most important step for safe and efficient implementation, even if it is complex and challenging (Hindley et al., 2006). Childhood experiences have long-term effects on adult health problems and public health. In their study, Felitti, Anda, and Nordenberg (1998) stated that physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, substance abuse, mental disorders, domestic violence, imprisonment, divorce and separation from parents, and domestic dysfunction create risks for children's development. Therefore, parents' insecure/conflicting attachment to their own parents, conflict between parents, solo parents, divorce/spousal separation, psychological problems, substance abuse, social isolation in the family or insufficient social support, age of the child, being an unwanted

child, presence of a large number of children in the family, chronic diseases, and being separated from the mother after birth are the main risk situations for children (Polat, 2001). As stated by the preschool teachers participating in this research, living and working on the street (Atauz, 1998), internet addiction (Tarı Cömert, 2007), living in a family with many children (Dönmez, 2007), immigration (İçağasıoğlu Çoban, 2011), lack of family communication (Erdil, 2010), living in broken family structures (Baykara Acar & Gökçearslan Çiftçi, 2011; Karabağ Köse, 2019), low socioeconomic levels (Baydar et al., 2010), and delinquency or victimization (Kartal, 2008) are defined as risk factors that prevent children from reaching their potential.

The World Health Organization defines health not only as the absence of disease and disability, but also as a state of complete physical, social, and spiritual well-being (Baker, 2003). Based on this definition, it is necessary to carry out studies that will enable children to experience complete well-being by determining the risk factors for children and taking the relevant protective and preventive measures. The teachers in the study group of this research stated that they most often encountered children living in broken families (divorce/death) in the course of their professional lives. Migration to the city, population growth, and income distribution inequality affect society in general in developing countries like Turkey and, in essence, the family structure. Worsening conditions and financial difficulties not only cause individual problems but also affect the relationships between spouses and create an increase in divorce rates. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, while 8.2% of the population consisted of broken families and single parents in 2013, this rate had increased to 9.2% in 2019 and recognition of the concept of "single parenting" is also steadily increasing (Anadolu Agency, 2020; Öztop et al., 2018). The disintegration of families can cause negative effects on children (Arslan, 2015). However, there are also studies reporting that although the number of broken families has increased, this situation alone does not put children at risk, and the specific ways in which the separation and divorce processes are handled are more effective (Lampel, 1996; Türkarlan, 2007). The teachers participating in this study stated that children in their classrooms came from families with many children and were emotionally abused or neglected. "Emotional abuse and neglect" is an umbrella concept including other types of abuse like humiliating, blaming, comparing, rejecting, belittling, threatening, abandoning, intimidating, exploiting, oppressing, insulting, yelling at, or mocking the child, as well as prematurely giving the child an adult role or not asking the child's opinion (Çakmak, 2018; Demirkapı, 2013; Kepenekçi, 2001; Polat, 2001; Şanyüz, 2009).

The "Research on Child Abuse and Domestic Violence in Turkey" projects jointly conducted by the Turkish Social Services and Child Protection Agency and UNICEF demonstrated that while the frequency of emotional abuse among children aged 7-18 was 49% in 2008, it had increased to 51% in 2010 (UNICEF, 2008, 2010). In other words, according to the results of these two studies, there has been an increase in the number of children subjected to emotional abuse and one out of every two children experiences it. Participants also stated that there are children addicted to the internet in their classrooms, which is an important problem today. Studies indicate that preschool children are growing more and more screen-dependent and playing online games every day (Kabali et al., 2015; Konca, 2014; Shields & Behrman, 2000; Tuğrul, Ertürk, Özen Altınkaynak, & Güneş, 2014). Another risk group that these preschool teachers frequently encountered in their classrooms was that of refugee children. There has been an increase in the number of refugee children, especially in recent years, due to the conflicts and wars experienced in several countries (Angel, Hjerm, and Ingleby, 2001). There has been a particularly intense refugee inflow to Turkey, especially from Syria and other border countries since 2012 (Şimşek, 2018). According to data of the Directorate General of Migration Management (2017), 3.5 million Syrian refugees live in Turkey. These refugees bring with them traumas, economic deprivation, health problems, and educational needs, and the events experienced by the children have serious effects on them (Mercan Uzun & Bütün, 2016). The literature reports that individuals who experience immigration face challenges such as problems with attachment and adjustment, anxiety, and substance abuse (Warfa, Bhui, Craig, Curtis, & Mohamud, 2005). In a study conducted with teachers teaching refugee children, the teachers listed the factors that hinder the children's education as language problems, lack of sufficient support afterwards, and the child's reluctance toward education. It is thought that such

reluctance toward education is due to children's inability to express themselves as a result of language barriers (Kardeş & Akman, 2018).

Preventing the emergence of negative experiences for children and carrying out early intervention studies for children at risk is a humane thing to do and will also decrease the need for economic investments regarding adult health and public health (Felitti et al., 1998). The participants of the present work stated that they experienced problems in classroom management with children at risk, that undesired behaviors were common in these children, and that they observed a lack of self-care skills. The negative conditions experienced by these children (Holland, Holland, & Gimpel, 2003), the low socioeconomic levels of the families (Seven, 2007), the relationships between family members, the (in)frequency of communication that family members establish during the day (Ellis, 1988), and poverty (Gülay & Akman, 2009; Hatun, Etiler, & Gönüllü, 2003) can all result in undesirable behaviors. In other words, the negative conditions of the family affect child-parent interactions such that children at risk cannot receive adequate parental support and may exhibit undesirable behaviors. In particular, miscommunication, previous reactions or unresponsiveness to repeated undesired behaviors, expectations that are not suitable for the child's developmental level, stress, and insecurity can cause unwanted behaviors (Ataman, 2003). Risk situations such as the loss of family members, divorce, neglect and abuse, not allowing the child to express feelings within the family, and lack of communication within the family also affect the child negatively and lead to unwanted behaviors (Erdoğan, 2008; Yükselen, 2013). Undesirable behaviors encountered in the classroom negatively affect the classroom atmosphere and are defined as important problems for both children and teachers (Öztürk, 2019). Self-care skills, on the other hand, reflect the ability of the child to independently meet basic needs such as eating, dressing, and personal care. Parents have important duties in helping children develop these skills and it is observed that children who are not adequately supported at home have problems with self-care skills (Dinçer, Demiriz, & Ergül, 2017). Eating alone (Bekem, Öztürk, Arslan, & Büyükgebiz, 2003), dressing and undressing (Goldstein, 2006), and toilet and hygiene habits (Oktay, 2004) can be achieved by giving the child the opportunity to do it again and again with a positive parental attitude. Children who do not receive sufficient attention and education from their families and do not develop self-care skills create difficult situations for their teachers in terms of classroom management in crowded preschool education classes without auxiliary personnel (Ekinci & Bozan, 2019).

In conclusion, this research yielded four main results. The preschool teachers participating in this study (1) were able to define the concept of "children at risk"; (2) listed the groups of children at risk as neglected and abused children, children growing up in broken families and unfavorable environments, children involved in crime, and children with substance abuse problems; (3) stated that they mostly encountered children living in broken families or extended families and children who are emotionally neglected and abused in their own classrooms; (4) and reported having difficulties with children at risk regarding classroom management.

In light of these results and considering that the number of children at risk is increasing day by day, preschool teachers should be informed about diagnosing different risk groups and referring them to the relevant social institutions. The General Directorate of Child Services of the Ministry of Family and Social Services, in close contact with preschool teachers, can provide diagnosis, guidance, and support services for children in risk groups in a faster and more effective manner. Preschool teachers can inform families about the importance of family relations, communication, children, and media use. Preschool teachers can carry out joint studies and establish support units with social workers, guidance research centers, and non-governmental organizations regarding the problems they experience with children at risk in their classrooms. Preschool teachers' encounters with children at risk can be examined with larger samples. Information seminars on risk factors and risk groups can be given to preschool teachers by the Ministry of National Education. Based on the research findings, the Ministry of National Education can create indicators that preschool teachers can use to detect the risk status of children in order to more easily identify the children in the risk groups in their classrooms. The number of children at risk per class can be calculated and managed by distributing at-risk children across classes as

determined by the indicators. Thus, a solution can be created for the classroom management problems that preschool teachers experience with children at risk in their classrooms. In addition, the results of the indicators may be requested to be shared with the Ministry of Family and Social Services. Children at risk can be reached in a systematic and rapid manner, and the current situation of the children can be improved through cooperation among institutions. Family training can be organized by assessing the feedback about the risk groups that teachers encounter in the field. Flow procedures can be created for families to refer them to the institutions they need and these procedures can be distributed to schools. The sample group can be expanded by investigating the awareness of preschool teachers with quantitative methods, overcoming the limitation about the generalizability of the present results.

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