



PRESCHOOL TEACHER CANDIDATES' OPINIONS ON THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract:

Problem Statement: Teachers could make important contributions to achieve educational goals throughout whole schooling experience of children especially in preschool. At this point, it is seen that the number of studies revealing the effect of teachers' relationships between their students on children's all areas of development and school achievements has been increasing recently.

Purpose of the Study: Current studies have been conducted with teachers and in the quantitative research design in general. Hence, the purpose of this study is to examine preschool teacher candidates' opinions on the teacher-student relationship.

Method: The single-case design, which is a qualitative research method, was used in the research. The research sample was determined using the purposive sampling method to be 10 teacher candidates who were attending at the preschool teaching program of Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University in the final year. The interviews performed with the students were recorded via semi-structured interview sheets prepared by the researchers. The research data were analyzed with the content analysis.

Findings: According to the data obtained in the research, the teacher candidates reported that they regard the teacher-student relationship as an element that facilitates the process of adaptation to school. The factors obstructing the teacher-student relationship included that children do not obey the classroom rules as emphasized by the teacher candidates the most. The most emphasized factor among the factors supporting the teacher-student relationship was teachers' temperaments.

Conclusion and Recommendations: Our study revealed that teacher-student relationship has been seen not only individual relationships but also group based

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relationship by the preschool teacher candidates. For this reason, it was suggested that teacher candidates need to take an elective course aiming to enhance the positive teacher-student relationship can be included in the preschool teacher training program. Conducting research on the relationship between students and teachers relationships may be essential in improving the outcomes of children in early childhood educational settings.

Keywords: preschool teacher candidates, teacher-child relationship, early childhood education

1. Introduction

It is widely agreed that preschool education has long-term academic and social effects on children's lives (e.g. Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Research studies revealing the critic role of the positive and supportive teacher-student relationship in putting these effects forth have been attracting attention in recent years (e.g. Burchinal et al., 2011). In this context, it is thought that preschool students play an important role. Emotion-oriented, supportive behaviors have a positive impact on children's attention and participation in the school environment as teacher's supportive approach increases children's positive behaviors in the classroom (Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox,& Bradley, 2002).

It is argued that the communication between students and teacher affects their academic achievement and social skills in a positive way in the preschool classroom environment (örn: Hamre & Pianta, 2001). These positive and supportive teacher-child interaction helps children exhibit many harmony-based behaviors that involve high-level social skills and academic skills in preschool and primary school periods (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002) and enhance better social and emotional skills to help mitigate behavioral problems (O'Connor, Dearing & Collins, 2011). It can be also said that conflicts in the teacher-student relationship cause children to assume a negative attitude towards school, experience certain academic difficulties and exhibit behavioral problems (Pianta, Hamre & Allen, 2012). Teacher sensitivity refers to being aware of and meeting children's academic and emotional needs (Wentzel, 2002).

It has been seen in the studies on the subject that the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) is used in general (Pianta, 2001; Şahin, 2014). When examining the previous studies in this context, it has been revealed that the close relationship between teacher and student facilitates children to exhibit exploratory behaviors and make use of the learning opportunities (Hamre & Pianta, 2004). It is also

stated that students who conflict with their teachers or establish dependent relationships with their teachers in preschool education environments are less likely to have academic achievement and good social skills (Birch and Ladd, 1998). It has been shown that children who are in conflict with their teachers in preschool educational environments tend to participate in the course and succeed on a low level (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Ladd et al., 1999). Hamre and Pianta (2001) stated that the conflict in the teacher-student relationship predicts that students face problems such as being unsuccessful, committing a disciplinary action and being suspended from the school. It is known that especially children under risk (who experience certain physical, emotional and social difficulties) benefit from the relationship with their teachers more in preschool educational environments (e.g. Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson, 1999).

According to the literature, attachment theory is generally the most important theoretical framework used for defining the teacher-student relationship (Howes, 1999; Davis, 2003). Attachment theory emphasizes the emotional support and the secure environment offered to children during early childhood. It has been shown by the findings of studies based on the attachment theory that children who are in a healthy relationship with their parents during infancy may regard their teachers as bases of trust and consequently exhibit exploratory behaviors in the school setting (Howes, Phillipsen and Peisner-Feinberg, 2000; Hughes, Cavell and Wilson, 2001).

When the teacher-student relationship is addressed within the framework of attachment, it is based on the assumption of the attachment theory that the children will have a relationship with many different attachment figures which continues from the cradle to the grave. A teacher is considered an alternative attachment figure which creates a trusted and caring environment (Cassidy, 2008; Howes, 1999). Positive relationships with teachers support students' exploratory behaviors in educational environments (Belsky & Fearon, 2002). As stated in the attachment theory, early secure relationships help children feel more supported and have stronger bonds to school (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). In summary, a strong teacher-student relationship can be defined as the most important environmental factor in children's educational lives (Baker, 2006).

There are no studies concluding that there is a negative relationship between how teachers exhibit depressive symptoms and negative teacher-student relationship (Hamre and Pianta 2004; Pianta et al., 2005). For example, Kim and Kim (2010) stated in their research conducted with Korean preschool students that there is a negative relationship between students' depressive characteristics and characteristics such as cooperating with parents and creating positive social environments. In addition, Geber et al. (2007) concluded that teachers who show high level of depression symptoms are in the risk group in terms of whether they can be sensitive. It has been also revealed by

previous research that high-level emotional stress may cause burnout (Tsouloupas et al., 2009). In the study conducted by La Paro et al. (2009) with 739 preschool classrooms, it was found that teachers' educational experiences are rather affected by teachers' psychological state than the quality of the class. It was found in the research performed by De Schipper, Riksen-Walraven, Geurts and Derksen (2008) with 238 preschool students that there is a relationship between teachers' positive attitudes and high-level caregiving behavior. It has been seen that problematic behaviors decreased and desired behaviors increased when teachers assume a positive attitude towards their students and create a strong group consciousness among them (Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000).

In this context, it is thought that the most important adult figure is the teacher in the preschool educational settings. It is also assumed that the experience which teacher candidates acquire along their education will have an impact on their professional life. It was aimed with this research to identify preschool teacher candidates' opinions on the teacher-student relationship. It is thought that the research will contribute to the determination of how the teacher-student relationship with an increasing importance today is perceived by preschool teacher candidates and the supportive and obstructive practical factors in the teacher-student relationship and it will help making recommendations in accordance with the findings obtained. Furthermore, it is expected that research studies using the qualitative research design to examine the teacher-student relationship will contribute to the field as studies on the teacher-student relationship have used rather the quantitative research method in the related literature (e.g. Pianta et al., 2002) and the number of studies examining the teacher candidate opinions (e.g. Bauml, 2009) is limited. It was aimed with this research to identify preschool teacher candidates' opinions on the teacher-student relationship. In this scope, the following open-ended questions were asked:

1. How do preschool teacher candidates define the teacher-student relationship?
2. What are the factors that support and obstruct the positive teacher-student relationship according to preschool teacher candidates?

2. Method

The single-case design, which is a qualitative research method and in which a single subject is examined within its own social context without any comparison (Yin, 2009) was used in the research.

2.1 Study Group

The participants were selected with the purposive sampling method. The research was conducted with 2 male and 8 female volunteered teacher candidates who were attending at the final year of Preschool Teaching Department in Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University in the academic year of 2015-2016.

2.2 Data Collection Instrument

The research was conducted with the semi-structured interview technique which is a qualitative research method. The teacher candidates were asked about their opinions on the teacher-student relationship in the semi-structured interview sheets. A qualitative research underlines the approaches emerging by sharing the common characteristics (Büyüköztürk, Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz and Demirel, 2009). Standardized, open-ended interview questions were benefited from to collect data in the research. "Exact order and style of standardized, open-ended interview questions are specified in advance, the same basic questions are asked to all interviewees in the same order, and the questions are expressed literally in an open-ended format" (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2006, 457 in Büyüköztürk et al., 2009, 161).

The related literature was reviewed by the researchers to examine the present studies addressing the teacher-student relationship. In the light of related research results, a template interview sheet with 5 questions was prepared. Three field experts were asked for opinions on this template interview sheet. The questions were asked to learn about the preschool teacher candidates' opinions on the teacher-student relationship with the interview forms restructured in accordance with the expert opinions. In this scope, the following open-ended questions were asked to the teacher candidates:

- 1) How do you define the teacher-student relationship?
- 2) What are the factors supporting the positive teacher-student relationship in your opinion?
- 3) What are the factors obstructing the positive teacher-student relationship in your opinion?

2.3 Data Collection Process

The research data were collected in January 2016. A briefing was given to the final-year student of the preschool teaching program before the data collection process started. This briefing covered the purpose of the research in general. Interviews were performed with the students volunteered at the end of the briefing in empty classrooms in the faculty building.

2.4 Data Analysis

The written statements received from the teacher candidates were analyzed with the content analysis in the research. Content analysis is one of the most used methods among types of qualitative data analysis. The main purpose of the content analysis is to reach concepts and relationships that can explain the collected data. The data obtained in the study were analyzed with the categorical analysis technique, which is a type of content analysis. In the categorical analysis process, the steps of (1) encoding the data, (2) creating the categories, (3) organizing the categories, and (4) defining and interpreting the findings were followed (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). First, the data were written out, processed in accordance with the specified themes and the findings were interpreted with direct citations. To achieve the data reliability, the records and the written versions were examined by another researcher and the examination was compared with the written versions in the hands of the researchers (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). As a result of the data analysis, the following three were determined to be main themes: (1) definitions of the teacher-student relationship, (2) factors supporting the teacher-student relationship, and (3) factors obstructing the teacher-student relationship.

3. Findings

3.1 Definitions of teacher-student relationship

More than half (7/10) of the preschool teacher candidates who participated in the research emphasized the assistant role of the teacher-student relationship in student adaptation to the school. Three out of ten participants define the teacher-student relationship as an element supporting preschool students' active participation in activities. The exemplary statements of the teacher candidates on the subject are given in order respectively:

«...It is an important relationship that makes children feel comfortable in the classroom which is a strange environment for them... The attitudes of others can define even what we feel when going into a strange environment. Then again, I think this process is more critical for children (S7, Female)»

« It is a motivating relationship that enables children to participate in the activities more. I think the greatest familiarization tool of the teacher-student relationship in classroom at schools where we did internship is the interest of children in the activities. If it is a good teacher-student relationship, children's interest in starting and ending that activity becomes greater...(S3, Male)»

3.2 Factors supporting the positive teacher-student relationship

More than half (6/10) of the teacher candidates who participated in the research emphasized teacher's temperament as one of the factors supporting the positive teacher-student relationship. Regarding this topic, three teacher candidates stated that it is important that the classroom rules are embraced by students. And one of the teacher candidates regarded "a teacher loving the profession" as a supporting factor in the teacher-student relationship. The exemplary statements of the teacher candidates on the subject are given in order respectively:

«I think the teacher actually has a very important role in this. A positive teacher-student relationship can be established in the classroom of a teacher who does not easily get angry and can see things positively. If a teacher is to be defined as being a good person, children and his/her relationship with them are based on sound foundations (S8, Female)»

«The order in the classroom is highly important so that none of the kids burn the teacher out that much and the teacher is not out of patience consequently. I've had the chance to observe many teachers to date. If there is an order going on in the classroom, the classroom keeps its quiet and positive structure in general as the teacher is less tired. The more rules are constantly obeyed in a classroom the stronger the communication is with students (S1, Male)»

«Despite being considered important in every profession, ours is a profession that one can do if they love it. I've observed that it is felt in the classroom when someone does it loving it or not. If the teacher can enjoy teaching, this redounds on the communication with students in a positive way (S5, Female)»

3.3 Factors obstructing the positive teacher-student relationship

Half (5/10) of the teacher candidates who participated in the research highlighted that factors obstructing the teacher-student relationship include children with emotional and behavioral problems in the classroom. Three of the participants emphasized in relation to the topic that parents pays limited attention and give less support to the school. Two teacher candidates stated that they regard teacher's temperament as an element obstructing the teacher-student relationship. The exemplary statements of the teacher candidates on the subject are given in order respectively:

«Take the hyperactive and aggressive children. I'm really abstaining from children with behavioral problems. They can do anything and anytime. I think when I become a teacher, a kid causing problems all the time obstructs the positive relation in classroom while I

have other kids to attend to. I feel teachers don't want such children in their classrooms at the internship schools I've been to (S6, Female)»

«I think parents have very important role in the educational step in which we'll work. Some parents say that they're sending their children to school compulsorily. I feel this redounds on children directly. If a kid doesn't hear positive things about school when going home and the parents do not respond to teacher's demands, the kid will establish a negative relationship with the teacher (S10, Female)»

«Some people, let's put it this way, communicate negative messages around. Take some of my friends in the classroom setting. I wonder how they can get along with students in a classroom with the temperament of theirs. I mean it is something I've always observed in every educational stage as well as in the preschool that if an arrogant teacher is to have a problem with even one student, this will affect others, too (S9, Female)»

4. Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendation

4.1 Discussion

This research examined preschool teacher candidates' opinions on the teacher-student relationship. It was consequently seen that the preschool teacher candidates have different opinions on the teacher-student relationship. They generally explained the teacher-student relationship with the concept of harmony. It can be said that the finding shows parallelism with the research results emphasizing that the structure of teacher-student relationship supports children's process of adapting to school and their academic and social developments (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Buyse et al., 2011). In addition, few teacher candidates defined the teacher-student relationship as an element helping students being motivated in the educational-instructional activities. It is intriguing that the teacher candidates defined the teacher-student relationship only with their roles in student participation in both the adaptation process and the activities. This can be explained by the fact that the potential power of teacher-student relationship on children's all areas of development and academic lives could not be apprehended well.

As for the teacher candidate opinions, it was seen that teacher's temperament was shown among factors both supporting and obstructing the positive teacher-student relationship. Some of the research studies coinciding with this finding of the research are given below: There are no studies concluding that there is a negative relationship between how teachers exhibit depressive symptoms and negative teacher-student relationship (Hamre and Pianta 2004; Pianta et al., 2005). For example, Kim and Kim

(2010) stated in their research conducted with Korean preschool students that there is a negative relationship between students' depressive characteristics and characteristics such as cooperating with parents and creating positive social environments. In addition, Geber et al. (2007) concluded that teachers who show high level of depression symptoms are in the risk group in terms of whether they can be sensitive. It has been also revealed by previous research that high-level emotional stress may cause burnout (Tsouloupas et al., 2010). In the study conducted by La Paro et al. (2009) with 739 preschool classrooms, it was found that teachers' educational experiences are rather affected by teachers' psychological state than the quality of the class. It was found in the research performed by Schipper, Riksen-Walraven, Geurts and Derksen (2008) with 238 preschool students that there is a relationship between teachers' positive mode and high-level caregiving behavior.

It has been seen that problematic behaviors decreased and desired behaviors increased when teachers assume a positive attitude towards their students and create a strong group consciousness among them (Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) stated in their research that teachers' positive social behaviors as well as their social competencies redounded on the classroom including the teacher-student relationship in general. It is thought that the current finding is similar to research results that emphasize teacher's critical role for the preschool period (Hamre and Pianta, 2001; Pianta, 1999) and the results of studies examining certain intervention programs for teachers to enhance the teacher-student relationship (e.g. Pianta, 2001).

This finding can also be explained by the fact that teacher's importance in the classroom is known to teacher candidates. Another factor regarding the teacher-student relationship emphasized by the teacher candidates frequently was the classroom management. It can be said that this finding coincides with the research results showing teachers' concerns about the classroom management (Evertson and Weinstein, 2006). In previous research studies (e.g. Sabar, 2004), it has been found that the biggest source of concern is the classroom management for the first few years of teaching. According to the research results on the topic in Turkey, it is seen that teacher candidates and teachers who just started to work professionally assume an intervening approach which is more traditional and based on the teacher authority especially in the instructional management (e.g. Savran-Gencer and Çakıroğlu, 2007). For example, it is important for new teachers to achieve the classroom order while meeting the needs of students may be of priority for experienced teachers (Wolfgang, 2001). Savran-Gencer and Çakıroğlu (2007) state that teacher candidates take on a more intervening approach in the instructional management.

It is thought that teachers' appropriate classroom management strategies support children's relationships with both their peers and teachers (e.g. Pianta, 2001). In the light of the studies revealing that children who await adult approval all the time can focus on the exploratory behaviors less frequently (e.g. Cassidy & Shaver, 1999), it can also be said that teacher candidate's extreme attention to children's behaviors of obeying the classroom instructions may mitigate their exploratory behaviors.

How the teacher candidates regard children with emotional and behavioral problems as an element of risk for the teacher-student relationship among factors obstructing the positive teacher-student relationship coincides with the research results showing that children with behavioral problems have a conflicting relationship with their teachers (e.g. Decker, Dona and Christenson, 2007). There are studies concluding that children's coercive behaviors are defined by preschool teachers as sources of stress and burnout (e.g. Gebbie, Ceglowski, Taylor & Miels, 2012). Hemmeter, Santos, and Ostrosky (2008) concluded in a research that teacher training programs provide insufficient information on how to intervene in case of children's coercive behavior. Moreover, Wood et al. (2009) stated that preschool teachers are in need of support for intervention programs. Cassidy, Lower, Kintner-Duffy, Hegde, and Shim (2011) concluded in their research that preschool teachers struggle to create and implement an effective plan against behavioral problems.

There are research results finding a strong relationship between certain teacher characteristics and children's behaviors while some research results show that teachers have a positive and powerful impact on children's behaviors. For example, Alvarez (2007) concluded that teachers who participated in the training for intervention program gave less negative responses to and performed more positive interventions with children than those who did not. In addition, McCabe and Frede (2007) stated in their literature review that the training for behavioral management received by teachers is effective in children's unwanted behaviors.

On the other hand, there are studies showing that it can be ensured by enhancing teacher's supportive role that such children establish strong relationships with their teachers (e.g. Baker, 2006). This can be explained by the fact that teacher candidates do not feel confident when it comes to possible behavioral problems among children.

4.2 Conclusion

The preschool teacher candidates who participated in the research handled the teacher-student relationship in the context of all children in the classroom in their answers. This finding shows parallelism with the studies arguing that the teacher-student relationship is to be addressed to cover all the children in the classroom (e.g. Quan-Mc Gimsey et al., 2015).

4.3 Recommendations

1. Teachers' opinions on and practices regarding the teacher-student relationship can be examined using different research methods.
2. An elective course aiming to enhance the positive teacher-student relationship can be included in the Preschool Teacher Training Program.
3. Furthermore, vertical research studies can be conducted to examine the effects of teacher-student relationship on children's academic and social development in consideration of the dynamic structure of the classroom.

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