

European Journal of Education Studies

ISSN: 2501 - 1111 ISSN-L: 2501 - 1111

Available online at: www.oapub.org/edu

DOI: 10.46827/ejes.v12i11.6285

Volume 12 | Issue 11 | 2025

ALTERNATIVE APPROACH IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION: AN EXAMINATION OF TEACHER, PARENT, AND ADMINISTRATOR OPINIONS IN FOREST SCHOOLS¹

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Abstract:

The forest school philosophy is based on a nature-based approach and includes activities centered on active learning in a natural environment within forest schools. Unlike the traditional education system, forest schools are an alternative educational approach that supports holistic development, allows for flexible learning, and provides opportunities for children to learn outdoors using nature. This study aimed to examine the opinions of administrators and teachers working in schools that implement forest school practices in Turkey, as well as the parents of children attending these schools. To achieve this purpose, answers were sought to questions concerning the following: the differences between classroom and outdoor activities in forest school practices and preschool education practices conducted in compliance with the Ministry of National Education (MEB) curriculum; the importance and necessity of forest schools; the need to increase sample practices; the qualifications required to become a forest school educator; and what kind of efforts can be made to raise awareness about the development of forest schools. The phenomenological design, a qualitative research method, was used in this study. The research population consisted of schools in Turkey that implement forest-preschool practices. Of these, seven administrators and 30 teachers working in two public and three private forest preschools that could be reached, as well as 83 parents whose children attended these schools, formed the sample group. The results of the study determined that parents, administrators, and teachers prefer forest schools because they differ from

^I OKUL ÖNCESİ EĞİTİMDE ALTERNATİF BİR YAKLAŞIM: ORMAN OKULLARINDA ÖĞRETMEN, VELİ VE YÖNETİCİ GÖRÜŞLERİNİN İNCELENMESİ

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other educational institutions by implementing a student-centered learning approach. While these participants, who consider holistic development important for children, represent a group with high awareness of forest schools, they also drew attention to the difficulties experienced in finding qualified staff.

Keywords: alternative education, forest preschool, forest pedagogy

Öz:

Orman okulu felsefesi, doğa temelli bir yaklaşıma dayanmaktadır ve orman okulları kapsamında doğal bir ortamda aktif öğrenmeye odaklanan etkinlikleri içermektedir. Geleneksel eğitim sisteminden farklı olarak orman okulları, bütüncül gelişimi destekleyen, esnek öğrenmeye olanak tanıyan ve çocuklara doğayı kullanarak açık havada öğrenme fırsatları sunan alternatif bir eğitim yaklaşımıdır. Bu çalışmada, Türkiye'de orman okulu uygulamalarını hayata geçiren okullarda görev yapan yönetici ve öğretmenlerin, ayrıca bu okullara devam eden çocukların ebeveynlerinin görüşlerinin incelenmesi amaçlanmıştır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda; orman okulu uygulamaları ile Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı (MEB) müfredatına uygun olarak yürütülen okul öncesi eğitim uygulamalarında sınıf içi ve açık hava etkinlikleri arasındaki farklar, orman okullarının önemi ve gerekliliği, örnek uygulamaların artırılma ihtiyacı, orman okulu öğretmeni olabilmek için gerekli nitelikler ve orman okullarının gelişimine yönelik farkındalığın artırılması için yapılabilecek çalışmalar gibi sorulara cevap aranmıştır. Çalışmada nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden olgubilim (fenomenoloji) deseni kullanılmıştır. Araştırmanın çalışma grubunu, Türkiye'de orman-okulu uygulamalarını hayata geçiren okullar oluşturmuştur. Bu kapsamda ulaşılan iki devlet ve üç özel orman anaokulunda görev yapan yedi yönetici ile 30 öğretmen ve bu okullara devam eden çocukların 83 velisi araştırmanın örneklemini oluşturmuştur. Araştırma sonuçlarına göre; ebeveynler, yöneticiler ve öğretmenler, öğrenci merkezli öğrenme yaklaşımını benimsemeleri nedeniyle orman okullarını diğer eğitim kurumlarından farklı bulmaktadır. Çocuklar için bütüncül gelişimi önemli gören bu katılımcıların, orman okullarına ilişkin yüksek farkındalığa sahip oldukları ancak nitelikli personel bulma konusunda yaşanan zorluklara da dikkat çektikleri belirlenmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: alternatif eğitim, orman anaokulu, orman pedagojisi

1. Introduction

Forest schools have aimed to foster self-confidence in children by providing education without walls in nature since the 18th century (Cree & McCree, 2012, pp. 32-34). These schools, which became widespread in Scandinavia in the 1950s, offer education through exploration and sensory learning in nature. This study aimed to evaluate forest schools in Turkey. This research will examine (1) the differences between forest schools and traditional preschool education programs, (2) the need for mainstreaming, and (3)

instructor qualifications. Alternative education has been defined as "non-traditional" or "progressive" (Korkmaz, Sancak, & Sütlaş, 2007; Neves, 2009).

The US Department of Education sees alternative education as a model for students for whom the traditional system is inadequate (Aron, 2010). Education is defined as an individual's adaptation to and transformation of the environment (Hern, 2008). 99). According to Dewey (1997), education is life itself (Meaning, Aims, and Process of Education, 2018). Alternative schools exhibit different philosophical orientations; some embrace learning freedom while others prefer structured education (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Miller, 2007). Outdoor education is an interdisciplinary approach that occurs in a natural environment (Priest, 1990). This model, based on experiential learning theory (Lay, 2014; Kolb & Kolb, 2008), was institutionalized in the United States in 1955 (Borland, 2015). Forest schools are an alternative model that supports the holistic development of children (Close, 2015; Tantekin & Yalçın, 2017). These schools offer flexible learning environments and are implemented outdoors (Nixon 2015). The program begins with the establishment of behavioral boundaries and deepening the relationship with nature. Risk management, fire-making, and tool use were evaluated. The modern forest school began in Scandinavia in the 1950s and was formalized in Denmark in the 1980s (Griffiths, Larsen, and Jones, 2010).

The Scandinavian model centers on free play and harmony with nature (Close, 2015). Currently, there are more than 1,000 forest schools (Koyuer, 2017). Their aim is to support children's development and instill environmental awareness. Research supports the contributions of forest school programs to children's development. These programs foster improvements in children, ranging from muscle skills to physical endurance, concentration, and self-confidence (Maplewood Forest School, n.d.). Activities designed using a hands-on learning model support the holistic development of children (Kent County Council, n.d.). The success of these programs relies on the minimal intervention approach of qualified leaders (Lawson, 2018). Children develop self-confidence and risktaking skills in natural environments (Lawson, 2018; O'Brien & Murray, 2018). Outdoor activities provide decision-making autonomy (Salmon, 2018). Sharing materials with peers strengthens communication and teamwork (Muddy Puddles, 2018). Regular nature experiences impact cognitive-emotional maturity and environmental awareness (O'Brien & Murray, 2007; Salmon, 2018). Contact with the natural environment supports curiosity and the sharing of observations and ideas (Kent County Council, 2018). Forest school education enhances cognitive abilities and curiosity about learning (O'Brien & Murray, 2007; O'Brien, 2009). The natural environment lengthens attention spans and develops inquiry skills (Kent County Council, 2018). Forest schools enable children to manage their learning processes (O'Brien, 2009). They offer freedom of movement and motor skills for physical development (St. Helens Preschool, 2018). Challenging terrain increases physical endurance (O'Brien & Murray, 2010). Forest schools help children who experience physical insecurity recognize their boundaries (O'Brien, 2009). It strengthens thinking and coping skills in the face of stress (Michek, Nováková & Menclová, 1971). The program supports self-esteem and social and emotional development. Forest schools are

a pedagogical approach that offers opportunities for outdoor learning (Archimedes Earth, 2018).

Teachers ensure integration with nature and safety (Massey, 2018). The sustainability of forest school programs depends on experienced instructors (Bowdridge, pp. 157-158). Worldwide, the training of forest school educators occurs in five stages (How To Become a Forest Schools Practitioner, 2018; Forest School Training [FSTC], 2018). The program, which started in Vermont, USA, became widespread in Scandinavian countries, Germany, England, Russia, and Japan (224, 225). In Turkey, while Istanbul Bilgi Kozası Kindergarten implements a High/Scope-based program (234-237), Yönder Forest Kindergarten adopts project-based learning, and İzmir Renkli Orman Kindergarten embraces exploration-based learning with an ecological approach (238-242, 244, 245).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Population and Sample of the Study

The study was conducted during the 2017–2018 academic year in forest kindergartens in Turkey. Data were collected through interviews with 30 teachers, 7 administrators, and 83 parents in forest schools located in Istanbul, Izmir, and Mersin. The study examined the perspectives of teachers, parents, and administrators within the alternative early childhood education approach of forest schools. A qualitative research method using the **phenomenological design** was adopted. Phenomenology focuses on phenomena that individuals are aware of but do not have in-depth knowledge about.

The **semi-structured interview technique** was used as the data collection method (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). Data were collected between January 1 and March 1, 2018, at times and locations determined by the institutions. Interviews were conducted in quiet settings and lasted between 20 and 35 minutes. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to participants and recorded their responses. Phenomenological research emphasizes the conceptualization of data and the emergence of themes, which guided the methodological approach. Data were conceptualized, organized, and analyzed through a four-step thematic process, categorized, and interpreted (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 1999).

The interview forms were reviewed for content validity by five experts. Items 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, and 19 in the teacher interview form, items 1, 6, 8, 13, 15, 16, 17, and 21 in the administrator form, and items 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, and 10 in the parent form were found to be statistically significant in terms of content validity. Statistical significance and reliability analyses were conducted for all three interview forms. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated as 0.61 for teachers, 0.81 for administrators, and 0.65 for parents, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

2.2 Data Analysis

The interview forms were pilot-tested, and responses from teachers, administrators, and parents were used to identify forest school practices. Data were analyzed through conceptualization and theme identification. Findings were grouped under themes and analyzed in four stages (Coşkun, Bayraktaroğlu, Yıldırım, & Altunışık, 2012; Karasar, 2007; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). The open-ended interview forms were finalized after contributions from five experts, ensuring content validity. Data were collected using forms containing demographic information and open-ended questions. An **inductive analysis** approach was applied, with data categorized, themes identified, and findings interpreted. This analysis aimed to uncover underlying concepts and relationships within the data (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013).

2.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University on October 25, 2017, and permission was granted by the Ministry of National Education on December 22, 2017. Data were collected through interviews, and participants were informed about the purpose of the study prior to participation.

3. Findings

The data obtained from the open-ended interview questions prepared for teachers, administrators, and parents were analyzed using an **inductive analysis** approach. The data were categorized, themes were identified, and the findings were interpreted. This analysis aimed to reveal the underlying concepts within the data and the relationships among them. The findings of this study are presented below under the headings of administrators, parents, and teachers.

Table 1: Personal Information of Participating Teachers and Administrators

	Telesonal miorination of Landerpathing Teachers		acher		istrator
Variables		N	%	N	%
Gender	Female	30	100	6	85.7
	Male	_	-	1	14.3
Age	20-25	2	6.7	-	_
8	26-30	10	33.3	1	14.3
	31-35	11	36.7	1	14.3
	36-40	2	6.7	1	14.3
	41 +	5	16.7	4	57.1
Marital	Married	18	60.0	6	85.7
Status	Single	12	40.0	1	14.3
Number of	One	6	20.0	4	66.7
Children	Two	6	20.0	2	33.3
Cilitaren	None	18	60.0	1	14.3
Educational	High School	5	16.7	_	-
Level	Associate degree	11	36.7	_	_
Level	Bachelor's Degree	10	33.3	3	42.9
	Master's Degree	4	13.3	2	28.6
	Doctorate	-	-	2	28.6
Graduated		5	16.7		20.0
Department 1	Non-university graduate	8		2	20.6
Department	Faculty of Education – Preschool Teaching	1	26.7	2	28.6
	Vocational Faculty Preschool Teaching		3.2	-	-
	Open Education Faculty Preschool Teaching	2	6.7	-	-
	University Child Development associate degree	11	36.7	-	-
	Other Faculty of Education – Classroom Teaching	3	10.0	-	- 110
	University Child Development & Education Department	-	-	1	14.3
	Other Faculty	-	-	4	57.1
Years of	1-5 years	9	30.0	-	-
Service	6-10 years	10	33.3	1	14.2
	11-15 years	5	16.7	3	42.9
	Over 16 years	6	20.0	3	42.9
Type of	Public Kindergarten	12	40.0	4	57.1
School	Private Kindergarten	18	60.0	3	42.9
Class	Less than 11	-	-	2	28.6
Size	11-15	14	46.7	3	42.8
	16-20	6	20.0	-	-
	21-25	7	23.3	2	28.6
	26-30	2	6.7	-	-
	30+	1	3.3	-	-
Participation	Yes	26	86.7	7	100
in Trainings	No	1	3.3	-	-
Frequency of	Rarely	6	20.0	-	-
Participation	Usually	15	50.0	4	57.1
	Frequently	3	10.0	3	42.9
	Never	6	20.0	-	-
Type of	In-field trainings	13	43.3	3	42.9
Training	In-field & out-of-field trainings	11	36.7	4	57.1
Attended	No training	6	20.0	-	_
	Total	30	100	7	100

 Table 2: Personal Information of Parents Participating in the Study

		P	arent
Variables		N	%
Gender	Female	68	81.9
	Male	15	18.1
Age	20-25 years	1	1.2
	26-30 years	3	3.6
	31-35 years	33	39.8
	36-40 years	30	36.1
	41 years and above	16	19.3
Marital	Married	78	94.0
Status	Single	5	6.0
Number of	One	48	57.8
Children	Two	31	37.4
	Three	4	4.8
Educational	High School	13	15.7
Status	Associate's degree	7	8.4
	Bachelor's Degree	38	45.8
	Master's Degree	20	24.1
	Doctorate	5	6.0
Type of Child's	Public Preschool	37	44.6
School	Private Preschool	46	55.4
Years of	Less than 1 year	4	4.8
Child's	1 year	50	60.3
Schooling	2 years	23	27.7
	3 years	3	3.6
	4 years	3	3.6
	Total	83	100

3.1 Findings Related to Administrators

In this study, 12 different open-ended interview questions were asked in order to identify the findings related to administrators. As seen in Table 1, participants were asked about their institutional philosophy and practices to determine the philosophical foundations of forest schools in Turkey and how they implement or intend to implement these practices in line with that philosophy.

Table 1: Administrators' Views on the Institution's Philosophy and Practices

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
	Outdoor education and experiential learning	6	40.0	The positive effects of outdoor activities and education on experiential learning	"We are a school where students learn by doing and experiencing, and most of the lessons are conducted outdoors."
Institution's	Alternative educational approach	5	33,4	Adopting an alternative educational approach	"We are trying to implement alternative educational practices."
Philosophy	Student-centered, unstructured education	2	13,3	An institution adopting student-centered, unstructured education	"It is an institution where educators should act as guides rather than instructors."
	Supporting all developmental stages	2	13,3	Supporting and fostering all developmental stages	"We prepare programs suitable for all developmental stages of preschool children, considering their individual differences."
	Total	15	100		

As shown in Table 2, when the participants' views regarding the common network they use together with the representatives of institutions implementing forest school practices in Turkey and around the world were examined, the categories of *Forest schools in Turkey*, *Forest schools in the world*, and *The absence of a common network* emerged.

Table 2: Administrators' Views on the Common Network Used with Representatives of Institutions Implementing Forest School Practices in Turkey and Worldwide

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
	Those with a common network with forest schools worldwide	6	60.0	Having a common network with forest schools around the world	"The Cambium training institution located in the Wales region."
Common Network	Those with a common network with forest schools in Turkey	3	30.0	Having a common network with forest schools in Turkey	"Forest schools in Turkey follow each other on social media."
	Those without any common network	1	10.0	Not being part of any common network related to forest schools in Turkey or worldwide	"Unfortunately, there is none. We are planning to collaborate with schools abroad this year."
	Total	10	100		

According to the analysis, participants' views regarding the practices they aimed for but could not implement in forest school activities revealed the categories of not being a fully established forest school, financial constraints, and the physical spaces they used.

Table 3: Administrators' Views on Practices Aimed but Not Implemented in Their Schools

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
	Not being a fully established forest school	4	40.0	The institution does not fully embrace the forest school approach and still incorporates elements of traditional education	"We are not entirely a forest school; we are influenced by various approaches (such as democratic schools and Reggio)."
Barriers to Intended Practices	Physical space	4 The 40.0 scho		The suitability of the schoolyard and distance from the forest	"We tried to adapt our schoolyard to the forest school concept, and the adjustments are ongoing. However, the forest is 20 km away from the school, which prevents us from going every day as it is not within walking distance."
	Financial constraints	2	20.0	Inability to address shortcomings due to financial difficulties	"Because we are a cooperative school, financial limitations prevent us from realizing our plans."
	Total	10	100		

As a result of the analysis, participants' views on the problems they encountered as administrators in forest schools and the solutions they produced revealed the categories of weather conditions, risks in the forest, lack of sufficient equipment and trained teachers, and common solutions.

Table 4: Opinions of Administrators on the Problems Encountered in Forest Schools

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
	Common solutions	7	38.8	Finding common solutions together with teachers, parents, and administrators when problems arise	"Finding a common solution to a problem by discussing it together"
Problems and Solution	Parents' perceptions of weather conditions	5	27.8	Implementation of forest schools under outdoor weather conditions	"Parents believe that being outdoors in bad weather will make children sick"
Suggestions	Risks in the forest	3	16.7	Existing and potential risks in the forest	"When going to the forest, there are many risks waiting for students"
	Lack of sufficient equipment and trained teachers	3	16.7	Difficulty in accessing forest school equipment and the need for qualified teachers	"Necessary equipment must be supplied from abroad, and there is a lack of teacher training programs for this model"
	Total	18	100		

As a result of the analysis, participants' views regarding the forest school's leadership in ideas and practices in its field revealed the categories of learning by doing and experiencing, holistic development, and education in a natural environment.

Table 5: Opinions on the Forest School's Leadership in Ideas and Practices in Its Field

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
	Learning by doing and experiencing	5	35.7	Leadership in implementing experiential and hands-on learning	"Children engage in activities by exploring with natural materials on their own"
Leadership in Ideas and Practices	Education in a natural environment	5	35.7	Conducting education outdoors, using natural materials, in all weather conditions	"Children go outside for learning in all kinds of weather"
	Holistic development	4	28.6	Providing opportunities for development across multiple domains	"Helping children gain different perspectives, push their boundaries, and assess risk"
	Total	14	100		

Based on the analyses, when examining participants' views regarding the forest schools taking risks to implement different practices and innovations, three categories emerged: the adoption of a new educational model, conducting education in outdoor settings, and the distance to the forest.

Table 6: Opinions on Forest Schools Taking Risks to Implement Different Practices and Innovations

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
Risk-	Outdoor education	6	54.5	Presence or absence of risk factors in outdoor education	"I think the risk factor in outdoor education is high."
Taking in Forest	Being a new model	4	36.4	Lack of exam- centered education	"It is difficult to explain this model to parents in a country where success is evaluated based on exam grades."
Schools	Distance to the forest	1	9.1	Forest not within walking distance	"The forest is not within walking distance, and transportation is required for students."
	Total	11	100		

As a result of the analysis, when examining participants' views regarding innovations considered on behalf of their institutions, three categories emerged: developing a school-specific curriculum, fully implementing the forest school projects established at their schools, and increasing the time spent in the forest.

Table 7: Participants' Views on Proposed Institutional Innovations

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
				Feasibility of	"We are considering how to
	Alternative	3	50	implementing an	implement the alternative
	education model	3	30	alternative education	education model in our school
Innovations				model	and advance the projects."
for the	Spending more	٠	33.3	Increasing the time	"Increasing the duration of forest
Institution	time in the forest		33.3	spent in the forest	days in our school."
	Developing a			Creating a curriculum	"Adapting the existing classical
	school-specific	1	16.7	adapted to the forest	education to fit the forest school
	curriculum	m		school approach	model."
	Total	6	100		

The analysis of participants' views on the advantages of forest schools over other institutions in the educational process revealed several prominent categories: non-examoriented approach, the physical characteristics of the school, the educational philosophy, and the awareness of parents and teachers.

Table 8: Participants' Views on Education in the Institution

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
	Physical			The physical	"The physical characteristics of our
	characteristics of	6	40	environment	institution reflect our differences
	the school			supports education	from other educational institutions."
				Adoption of project-	"A very different school, cooperative
	Educational	6	5 40	based and	and forest school; children work on
Education	approach	6		alternative	projects, teachers act as guides, using
				education	natural materials creatively."
Quality	Awareness of		10.0	Awareness of staff	
				and parents about	"Parents and teachers are competent
	parents and teachers	2	13.3	the educational	and open to innovation."
	teachers			approach	
	Non-exam-	1	6.7	School not focused	"Not being exam-oriented is
	oriented	1	0.7	on exams	beneficial for teaching and learning."
	Total	15	100		

The analysis of participants' statements regarding how they generally respond to problems encountered in education and other practices at their institutions revealed three main categories: addressing problems, collaborating, and generating solutions.

Table 9: Participants' Views on Problems Experienced in Educational Practices at the Institution

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
Problems in	Solving problems	7	50.0	Resolving problems using available resources	"We solve problems with our own means; there is no institution to support us."
Education	Collaboration and generating solutions	7	50.0	Collaborating to develop solutions when issues arise	"Being in mutual communication helps generate multiple solutions."
	Total	14	100		

The analysis of participants' views on the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the approaches implemented at the forest schools revealed two main categories: voluntary acceptance and reluctant acceptance.

Table 10: Stakeholders' Perspectives on the Approaches Implemented at the Forest School

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
Stakeholders' Perspectives on	Voluntary acceptance	7	87.5	Participation is voluntary and positively received	"They respond positively and participate voluntarily."
Approaches at Forest Schools	Reluctant acceptance	1	12.5	Participation is reluctant and negatively received	"Some teachers are not happy going to the forest in bad weather."
	Total	8	100		

Analysis results indicate that participants' views regarding the general characteristics of students and parents in the forest school revealed two main categories: compliance with the Ministry of National Education criteria and conscious parents.

Table 11: Participants' Views on the General Characteristics of Students and Parents in Forest Schools

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
General Characteristics of	Compliance with the Ministry of National Education criteria	5	62.5	Students and parents meet the criteria set by the Ministry of National Education	"Children meet the age and readiness criteria determined by the Ministry of National Education."
Students and Parents in Forest Schools	Conscious parents	3	37.5	Parents who are aware of alternative education and supportive of the forest school approach	"Parents actively participate and support the forest school activities."
	Total	8	100	**	

Analysis results indicate that participants' views regarding the general characteristics of teachers in the forest school revealed two main categories: selection through the public personnel selection examination and the institution's own teacher selection process.

Table 12: Participants' Views on the General Characteristics of Teachers in Forest Schools

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Example Statements
General Characteristics of Teachers in Forest	Teacher selection by the institution	4	57.2	Selection of teachers according to the institution's own criteria and preferences	"Teachers who are open to development, reflective, and close to alternative school practices."
Schools	Selection based on KPSS score Total	3	42.8 100	Teachers appointed according to the score system	"The teachers in our school were appointed based on the KPSS exam results."

3.2 Findings Related to Parents

In this study, six different open-ended interview questions were asked to the parents. Analysis of the data revealed parents' reasons for sending their children to forest schools and how they, as parents, became acquainted with the forest school. The findings indicated the emergence of the following categories: rejection of the traditional education approach and adoption of a nature-based lifestyle.

Table 1: Parents' Reasons for Sending Their Children to Forest School and How They Became Acquainted with the Forest School as Parents

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
	Adoption of a nature-based lifestyle	77	43.2	Adoption of a nature-based lifestyle as part of education	"I believe that the true mathematics of life exists in nature. Education within four walls seems meaningless to me. We learned about this school through its informational sessions."
Reasons for Choosing Forest School	Rejection of the traditional education approach	60	33.8	Rejection of the traditional education approach and adoption of alternative education	"The education system being innovative and modern, strong communication with children, and the need for city-raised children to get closer to nature were our main reasons."
	Based on research	41	23.0	Positive references and research findings	"We chose it so that our child could release energy, not be confined indoors, integrate with nature and life, and get closer to animals. I learned about this school through a friend."
	Total	178	100		

As a result of the analysis, when participants' views on how the forest school differs from and excels compared to other schools were examined, the categories of physical environment and educational programs emerged.

Table 2: Participants' Views on How the Forest School Excels and Differs from Similar Institutions

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
Forest School's Strengths and Distinctive	Educational programs	68	50.7	Supporting learning through exploration	"Children go out to the garden every day and visit the forest once a week, learning through exploration without academic overload, which were the aspects we preferred."
Features	Physical environment	66	49.3	Providing a free and open space	"The most important thing for children is freedom, and this program fully meets that. Outdoor education is its main advantage, increasing environmental sensitivity and awareness."
	Total	134	100		

Based on the analysis, participants' views regarding the strengths and distinctive features of the Forest School's current practices revealed three main categories: the current status of the school, utilization of the natural environment, and outdoor activities.

Table 3: Participants' Views on the Forest School's Current Practices and Leadership in Its Field

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
	Current status	56	65.9	Satisfaction with the existing situation	"I do not have any new idea to propose. The original initiative itself is already ambitious in its field. Integrating the forest and nature into education is quite a visionary approach."
Forest School's Current Practices and Field Leadership	Natural environment	27	31.7	Increasing the number of activities in natural settings	"I consider it an application that aims to develop exploration and learning skills in multiple ways. I also believe that parents should participate after receiving training, and that it should be included in the curriculum at all age levels."
	Outdoor activities	2	2.4	Staying indoors when weather conditions are unfavorable	"Encouraging children to play without any materials/toys and spending ample time outdoors demonstrates the school's excellence in its field."
	Total	85	100		

Table 4: Participants' Views on Challenges Encountered in the Forest School and Methods Used to Address Them

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
Challenges	No problems	51	55.4	Participants did not experience any problems	"I have never encountered any problems at the forest kindergarten."
Encountered in the Forest School	Joint solution approach	41	44.6	Finding a common solution with the school administration and teachers when problems occur	"I haven't experienced any problems, but if I do, I would communicate with the school administration and teachers."
	Total	92	100		

As a result of the data analysis, participants' views on the risks associated with forest school practices revealed that some perceived no risks, while others acknowledged their presence.

Table 5: Participants' Views on the Risks of Forest School Practices

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
Risks	No 70 87.5	No, I do not perceive any risks.	"No, if there are qualified instructors and supervisors (in sufficient number), it will be safe."		
Forest School Yes	Yes	10	12.5	Yes, I perceive risks.	"Yes, risks include long travel, illness, getting lost, ticks, and weather conditions."
	Total	80	100		

The analysis of participants' responses regarding their follow-up of developments related to the forest school revealed two categories: Yes, I follow and no, I do not follow.

Table 6: Participants' Views on Following Developments Related to the Forest School

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
F 11	No	37	53.7	Unfortunately, do not follow.	"No, I do not regularly follow. I hope the new practice continues for us."
Following Developments in the Forest School	Yes	32	46.3	Yes, I follow.	"I follow the Bahçeşehir Forest School teachers' posts, 'Learning in Nature' Instagram page, Educimpedia articles."
	Total	69	100		

3.3 Findings Related to Teachers

In this study, 11 different open-ended interview questions were posed to teachers to determine their perspectives. The analysis of the data regarding the elements that differentiate the institution revealed two main categories: physical environment and educational programs.

Table 1: Teachers' Views on the Distinctive Features of the Institution

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
The Distinctive Features of the Forest School	Educational programs	28	63,6	"Following all developments in terms of education and instruction"	"Our school follows all developments in the field of education and instruction, provides education in line with the aims of the Turkish National Education system, and serves as a learning environment for both students and teachers."
School	Physical environment	16	36,4	"The institution's necessary physical characteristics"	"Having a wide variety of materials available and possessing a garden within the school premises."
	Total	44	100		

As a result of the data analysis, categories such as project, reference, and recommendation emerged regarding how teachers were introduced to the forest school and their decision-making process to implement the practice.

Table 2: Teachers' Views on Their Introduction to the Forest School and the Decision-Making Process to Implement the Practice

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
	Project	9	16,9	"Erasmus Project three years ago"	"I became familiar with forest kindergartens three years ago while preparing an Erasmus Project. My aim was to engage children in outdoor sports activities in nature."
Introduction to the Forest School and the Implementation Process	Reference and recommendation	33	62,3	"Through a colleague who was interested in this topic"	"A colleague at our school came to us three years ago and mentioned that this system was implemented in Germany."
	Forest school practice	11	20,8	"Existence of forest school practices in Turkey"	"As far as I know, there is no school in our country that implements this education on a full-time basis."
	Total	53	100		

As a result of the data analysis, the examination of the challenges encountered in forest school practices revealed two categories: risks that may occur in the forest and risks perceived on behalf of parents.

Table 3: Views on the Challenges Encountered in Forest School Practices

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
Challenges in Forest School	Parent	24	85,7	"Risks that may arise on behalf of parents"	"In our practice, there was an issue with parents."
Practices	Forest	4	14,3	"Risks that may occur in the forest"	"Since the forest is not nearby, even though our parents were very eager, they wondered whether the children should go out today given the cold weather."
	Total	28	100		

As a result of the data analysis, categories emerged regarding best practice examples in forest school education, including all developmental areas, unstructured play and toys, and project-based school practices.

Table 4: Practices Considered as Exemplary in Education

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
	All developmental areas	49	41,5	"We need to help incoming children acquire more skills."	"We need to help incoming children acquire more skills (self-care skills) and support their development both intellectually and physically; abroad, children play in canals with water up to their knees and leave school happily."
Best Practices in Education	Unstructured play and toys	65	55,1	"Making compost from organic waste."	"Making compost from organic waste and creating learning centers within preschool classrooms in our school garden."
Education	Project-based school	4	3,4	"Comenius project on 'Me and My Europe' between 2012–2014."	"Eco-schools and small theme projects, as well as the implementation of forest programs in schools."
	Total	118	100		

In response to the question posed to teachers regarding how stakeholders (parents, colleagues) perceive the approaches and practices implemented at the institution, whether there is voluntary participation in these practices, and the challenges experienced in participation, the categories of negative reception by parents and teachers, appreciation, and voluntary participation emerged.

Table 5: Views on How Stakeholders Perceive the Implemented Practices

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
Reactions/ Feedback	Negative reception by parents and teachers	4	10	"Negative feedback from parents"	"While some participate in the practices very voluntarily, others do not show the same level of willingness."
on the Practices	Appreciation and voluntary participation	36	90	"Feedback from stakeholders at the institution"	"Parents consistently expressed their satisfaction with the forest school."
	Total	40	100		

As a result of the data analysis, when examining the reasons that motivated participants to work at the institution, the categories of MoNE (Ministry of National Education) and uniqueness emerged.

Table 6: Participants' Views on the Factors Motivating Them to Work at the Institution

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
Reasons for	MEB	4	18,1	"Being appointed by the MEB"	"I work at a state school affiliated with the MEB."
Choosing to Work at the Institution	Uniqueness	18	81,9	"Unique educational plan and curriculum"	"The mission and vision being different from other schools"
	Total	22	100		

As a result of the data analysis, regarding the planned innovations in the forest school, the categories of extracurricular education and learning by doing, forest school educator, and education in the forest emerged.

Table 7: Participants' Views on Planned Innovations in the Forest School

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
Planned Innovations	Extracurricular education and learning by doing	35	47,9	"In the forest school practice, children spend the entire day outdoors rather than following a set schedule."	"In the forest school practice, children should spend the entire day outdoors in nature and the forest, not in the playground. The materials used by children should be those provided by nature, not artificial ones."
	Forest school educator and education in the forest	38	52,1	"Toy-free classrooms"	"In toy-free classrooms, we aim to progress using natural materials."
	Total	73	100		

As a result of the data analysis, regarding the risks in forest school practices and the measures taken against these risks, the categories of outdoor risks and forest risks emerged.

Table 8: Participants' Views on Risks in Forest School Practices and Measures Taken

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
Risks in Practices and Precautionary Measures	Risks in outdoor areas and in the forest	43	100	"Conducting risk identification through a risk analysis."	"Taking precautions by providing children with information about potential risks before implementing the practices."
	Total	43	100		

As a result of the data analysis, when examining teaching and learning practices and student assessments in the forest school, the categories of observation records and videos, student-teacher-school-family collaboration, and continuous and planned assessments emerged.

Table 9: Participants' Views on Teaching and Learning Practices and Student Assessments

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
	Observation records	20	100	"Observation after each	"Children are observed after
	and videos			session"	each session."
Assessment and	Student-teacher, school, and family collaboration			"Evaluation conducted collaboratively"	"The evaluation process is continued in collaboration with the school and family."
Evaluation	Continuous and planned assessments			"Accurate, continuous, sufficient, and planned assessment"	"The evaluation process is sufficient as it is conducted accurately and in detail."
	Total	20	100		

As a result of the data analysis, regarding the operation and current practices of the forest school, the categories of promoting forest schools within the country and disseminating foreign forest school practices domestically emerged.

Table 10: Participants' Views on the Operation and Current Practices of the Forest School

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
	Promoting forest schools within the country	10	38,4	"Forest school approach"	"I believe that more time and efforts for dissemination are needed to adapt forest schools to our country."
Operation and Current Practices of the Forest School	Disseminating foreign forest school practices domestically	16	61,6	"Implementation of the operational practices of foreign forest schools in our country"	"It seems difficult to implement the forest school practices carried out in Germany or Scandinavian countries in our country. I do not yet believe that parents and our education system are ready for children to spend the entire day in the forest under all weather conditions."
	Total	26	100		

As a result of the data analysis, regarding the aspects that differentiate forest schools from other MEB-affiliated schools, the categories of teaching and learning practices and free, unique children emerged.

Table 11: Participants' Views on the Distinctive Features of the Forest School

Theme	Categories	f	%	Definitions	Sample Statements
Aspects That Differentiate Forest Schools from MEB-	Teaching and learning	9	27,2	"Differences in teaching and learning practices"	"I believe that learning by doing and experiencing holds a more lasting place. Since it is not confined to a limited space (like a classroom), children can exhibit freer behavior."
Affiliated Schools	Free and unique children	24	72,8	"Children producing unique outcomes in a free learning environment"	"There are many aspects that make students feel free and happy."
	Total	33	100		

4. Discussion

The findings obtained from teachers, parents, and administrators in this study indicate that the forest school model significantly contributes to the multidimensional development of children. The results are consistent with both international and local literature. Participants emphasized that forest schools support children's creativity, self-

confidence, and social skills, which is consistent with Maynard's (2007) findings highlighting the critical role of unstructured play in natural environments for problem-solving and creative thinking processes. Similarly, O'Brien and Murray (2007) reported significant improvements in self-confidence, social interactions, and motor skills among children attending forest schools. Furthermore, Knight's (2011, 2013) studies demonstrated that time spent in nature helps children manage risk-taking behaviors safely and fosters independence. Recent literature also supports these findings; for instance, Weeland *et al.* (2019) found that exposure to nature positively affects children's self-regulation skills, while Dec (2022) reported that nature-based activities in early childhood enhance children's scientific thinking and self-regulation abilities.

A further important finding from our research is that participants highlighted the positive effects of time spent in nature on children exhibiting symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). This finding aligns with Kuo and Taylor's (2004) "green therapy" approach, which suggests that nature-based activities can reduce ADHD symptoms. Faber Taylor and Kuo (2009) also found significant improvements in attention performance following activities in green spaces. Recent studies further support these outcomes: Amoly et al. (2014) reported lower levels of attention problems among children with greater access to green spaces, and McCormick (2017), in a comprehensive review, emphasized that interaction with nature improves children's attention regulation and behavioral control. In the Turkish context, Yılmaz et al. (2020) found that nature-based education increases children's attention spans and reduces hyperactive behaviors. Moreover, Polat and Demirci (2021) reported that outdoor nature-based activities improve children's cognitive skills, and Bulut Öngen and Ersay (2024) demonstrated that early childhood nature-based programs enhance children's positive attitudes toward nature. Collectively, these findings suggest that forest school applications provide similar cognitive and therapeutic benefits in Turkey as in Europe. However, it is important to note that such findings, while promising, may also reflect an advocacy-oriented perspective. Scholars emphasize that maintaining a balanced discussion by acknowledging both benefits and limitations is crucial (Lawson, 2018; Knight, 2011).

Participants' critiques of the academically pressured structure of traditional kindergartens are also reflected in contemporary studies emphasizing the importance of play in early childhood education. Specifically, Karaoğlu (2024) argued that excessive emphasis on academic skills in early childhood negatively affects children's social-emotional development and creativity. Similarly, Ginsburg (2007) underlined the neglect of play, the child's natural learning method. In this regard, forest schools, as noted by Erkan (2019), offer an ideal environment for implementing the Ministry of National Education's (MEB) "play-based" and "integrated" learning principles in preschool programs. Tovey (2010) found that play in natural environments leads to more physically active, creative, and linguistically developed children. This finding supports the contribution of nature-based early childhood education to children's development. Nevertheless, large-scale policy adoption in Turkey may be challenged by the national education system's emphasis on measurable academic outcomes and standardized

testing. As noted by Aypay (2020), systemic reforms in Turkey often prioritize academic performance indicators over holistic developmental goals.

However, this study also revealed significant barriers to the implementation of forest schools in Turkey. Beyond teacher training and cost, accessibility for children in urban areas, seasonal constraints in severe climates, and the economic feasibility of scaling forest schools nationwide pose additional challenges (Gül *et al.*, 2022). These concerns highlight the need for cautious optimism when considering the nationwide adoption of the model. One of the most critical issues is the scarcity of literature. Gül *et al.*'s (2022) systematic review confirmed that the number of peer-reviewed studies on forest schools in Turkey is limited and most existing studies are descriptive (p. 78). Similarly, Şahin and Turan (2021) highlighted the research gap in alternative education models in Turkey, underscoring the need for more experimental and quantitative studies (p. 205). Waite (2010) noted that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs regarding outdoor education play a critical role in the success of these practices (p. 55). Therefore, as recommended by Demirci and Öztürk (2022), in-service training programs are essential to enhance teachers' competence and confidence in implementing nature-based education (p. 92).

5. Conclusion

This study indicates that the forest school model is perceived as a promising and effective alternative for preschool education among stakeholders in Turkey—teachers, parents, and administrators. The findings reveal that the model's potential to support children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and motor development aligns with both national and international literature (Maynard, 2007; O'Brien & Murray, 2007; Knight, 2011; Weeland et al., 2019; Dec, 2022). However, realizing this potential fully requires addressing systemic barriers such as limited literature in Turkey, lack of qualified educators, cost issues, and curriculum integration (Gül et al., 2022; Demirci & Öztürk, 2022). Achieving a permanent and widespread place for forest schools in the Turkish education system will necessitate strong collaboration among policymakers, researchers, and practitioners. While the model has transformative potential, it should be acknowledged that stakeholder enthusiasm alone may not be sufficient to generate systemic change. Structural barriers and the need for evidence-based outcomes that align with national education policies remain critical factors (Demirci & Öztürk, 2022).

5.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to establish forest school practices as an effective alternative in early childhood education in Turkey:

1) The Ministry of National Education (MEB) should formally incorporate the forest school approach into the preschool curriculum as a supported alternative model and gradually expand pilot implementations.

- 2) Standardized, hands-on, and certified forest school teacher training programs should be implemented through collaboration between universities and MEB; these programs should aim to enhance teachers' competencies in nature-based educational approaches.
- 3) These recommendations should be approached as long-term and incremental strategies rather than immediate solutions, as systemic change requires both sustained policy support and cultural adaptation within the education system (Gül *et al.*, 2022; Şahin & Turan, 2021).
- 4) Local producers should be encouraged to manufacture climate-appropriate, ergonomic, and cost-effective outdoor clothing and educational materials to increase the sustainability and accessibility of applications.
- 5) Researchers should prioritize longitudinal and experimental studies to evaluate the impact of forest schools on children's cognitive, social, emotional, and motor development. Additionally, studies should include samples from diverse regions and socioeconomic backgrounds to increase research coverage in Turkey.
- 6) Forest school applications should not be limited to preschool education; nature-based learning modules should also be developed for primary school levels and integrated into the curriculum to enhance children's early interaction with nature and learning experiences.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the preparation, writing, or publication of this study.

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