

Worksheets in Early Childhood Education: A Dilemma for Teachers and Pre-Service Teachers

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The study aimed to determine the opinions of preschool teachers and preservice teachers on the use of worksheets within the scope of literacy preparation practices. It was conducted with 30 preschool teachers and 30 preservice preschool teachers. Under the guidance of the research questions, it has been determined that there are differences in the purposes, reasons, and ways of using the worksheets of the teachers and preservice teachers. According to this, teachers used writing sheets more, while preservice teachers avoided book studies and worksheets. As a result of the content analysis, 4 themes emerged to discuss the rationales prompting the use of worksheets by the participants and rationales preventing the use of the worksheets. These themes are conceptualized as effects on academic skills, effects on social life skills, effects on motor skills, and effects on parents.

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INTRODUCTION

Neuroscience, psychology and cognitive studies have shown that learning occurs more quickly and permanently in early childhood and that early experiences gained in this period are critical for the skills acquired in the future (Berlinski et al., 2009). The positive effects of quality pre-school education offered in early childhood on a child's future academic and social life are frequently reported research findings today (Ishimine & Tayler, 2014; Rudasill et al., 2017). Barnett et al. (2013) recommended the need to broaden access to effective pre-school programs for two main reasons. First, almost all pre-school education programs enhance a child's readiness for academic success in school. Second, when these programs prioritize long-term outcomes, pre-school education has a lasting impact on a person's success throughout their life, extending beyond their initial school years. Pre-school education curriculums and the development of various skills should therefore also seek to prepare children for social and academic life. All this has led us to evaluate the concept of school readiness from a broader perspective.

References to children's readiness in the literature imply that they are becoming ready for academic skills, but few sources can confirm precisely what 'readiness' looks like (Kinkead-Clark, 2021). Today's widely accepted view emphasizes the importance of personal and social life skills and the roles of family and community, conceptualizing that school readiness is an holistic, multi-dimensional concept (Pelletier & Brent 2002). This conceptualization of early experiences for the child's development at home, in the community and in early education settings is consistent with the current understanding of the importance of early relationships. Katz (1991) stated that school readiness should be evaluated from two aspects: "children's readiness for school" and "school's readiness for children". Katz stated that the mental and social preparation offered to the child by the family, the teacher and the environment in the child's preparation for school is crucial for him/her to cope with the tasks of primary education. In the school's preparation for the child, she spoke of the necessity of implementing programs which take into account the past experiences and needs of the child and provide opportunities for activities in which the child can directly connect with his/her life. From this perspective, children need to be ready for school, but schools and communities also need to be prepared to support children's future success in multiple developmental areas (Pretti-Frontczak, 2014). However, about school readiness, it would be correct to say that the common misconceptions such as learning taking place only at school and that children are ready to learn when they can sit quietly at a table and listen, are still valid. Therefore, that leads institutions and teachers away from play-based education and academic activities (National Research Council, 2000). In addition, the knowledge that one of the most important goals of pre-school education is to support early literacy skills and prepare the child for the further steps of formal education prompts teachers to do more practice and desk activities in this regard (Willer & Bredekamp, 1990).

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Early Literacy Skills

Early literacy skills are the acquisition of phonological awareness, print awareness, alphabet and vocabulary knowledge, environmental reading and comprehension skills with the help of the stimuli in the environment before the child starts formal education (Sulzby & Teale, 1991; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Many different views on acquiring these skills still maintain their validity and shape early childhood programs. Although it has long been an accepted assumption that literacy comes with maturation and that it is necessary to be biologically ready (Barratt, Pugh & Rohl, 2000), this assumption has recently changed how we construct knowledge. The concept of early childhood has deepened. Despite the undeniable effect of maturation, the knowledge that the environment is also effective, along with pre-reading experiences, is gaining importance (Clark, 2016; Su et al., 2017). This has led to the development of education programs which provide experiences and environments that will nurture the maturation of children instead of waiting for them to mature for literacy development.

Early literacy studies are becoming more critical in early childhood education programs. Studies pointing to the longitudinal link between early literacy skills and reading skills to be acquired in later years have paved the way for programs to focus more on these skills (Lonigan et al., 2013; Manolitsis et al., 2017). Studies have suggested that reading success in primary school is closely related to pre-school vocabulary (Hart & Risley, 2003), phonological awareness (Yopp & Yopp, 2009), print awareness (Pullen & Justice, 2003) and letter knowledge (Riedel, 2007). At the same time, many studies have found that early literacy skills strongly predict academic achievement throughout school life (Neuman & Dickinson, 2018; Spira et al., 2005). It is known that the experiences which children gain by becoming acquainted with writing equipment from an early age and pre-school education activities which provide an environment for these experiences contribute significantly to their writing skills (Strickland & Schickedanz, 2009). This has given educational institutions a strong urge to support early literacy development and make early childhood classrooms academic.

The blurring of the roles and functions of kindergarten and primary school, and the seemingly vague distinctions between the two areas, create an increasingly accepted understanding of the kindergarten child as the 'new freshman' (Bassok et al., 2016; Katz, 2015). This understanding leads to greater use of standardized assessments which measure academic skills, to less focus on learning through play and to increased amounts of worksheets involving writing exercises. This also causes a change in teachers' perceptions about their professional roles in education and the pedagogical approaches which they should use in their first-year classrooms. Thus early childhood classrooms are increasingly becoming more structured, less accessible and higher-pressure learning environments (Gunnarsdottir 2014; Marxen et al., 2008).

Turkey's National Preschool Education Program (MoNE, 2013) emphasizes the importance of providing a literacy-rich environment, making classroom arrangements to make literacy meaningful for children, and underlining that worksheets should be avoided. However, it is seen that early literacy activities in pre-school education institutions are mainly carried out using worksheets downloaded from the internet by teachers and activity magazines and books offered by publishers (Altun et al., 2014; Dönmezler, 2016; Korkmazhan, 2019). This could be due primarily to the overcrowded classroom. According to the National Education Statistics report (2021/2022) the number of students per teacher in pre-school education institutions is 29 in Turkey. Research has demonstrated the impact of class size on pre-school education activities. For instance, Altun (2016) found that in places where class sizes are large, games and physical activities are either not carried out at all or are ineffective. Similarly, Toprak and Güneş (2019) reported that according to teachers, having a high number of children in the classroom prolongs the duration of activities and leads them to prefer desk-based activities more often. Yalçın and Yalçın (2018) found that pre-school teachers find the class size too crowded and stated that this prevents them from organizing activities as they wish, because as the number of children in the class increases, it becomes more difficult to plan activities suitable for individual characteristics. In addition, crowded classrooms are closely related to the teacher's constant planning of activities, playing games, being active and therefore feeling more tired and experiencing burnout (Clipa & Boghean, 2015; Sezer, 2012). In this case, teachers can turn to worksheets to keep the class quiet and disciplined.

Another reason is teachers' perceptions of early literacy. Pre-school teachers believe in the necessity of working with paper and pencil to support school readiness (Altun et al., 2018; Yılmaz Bolat, 2019). However, studies have shown that worksheets have adverse effects on young children. Using only paper and pencil instead of manipulative materials (ranging from cubes and blocks to beads and strings) can cause a child to experience school failure (Grossman, 1996; Kinkead-Clark, 2021). For this reason, the relevant courses of

undergraduate teacher education programs and the national pre-school education program emphasize that worksheets/books should not be used within early literacy activities.

Background to the current study

I have taught in the pre-school teacher education program for about five years. I teach courses such as 'early literacy,' 'language development' and 'teaching methods'. In addition, I supervise final-year students in the intern-teacher schemes. As a requirement of their undergraduate education, pre-service teachers in Turkey work as trainee teachers in an official kindergarten one full day a week in their final year. In this way, pre-service teachers have to prepare activity plans and spend time with the children. In addition, they take an undergraduate course called 'School adjustment and early literacy' in their final year. This course teaches the theory and practical knowledge to support early literacy in early childhood classrooms. Despite all this, I realized that pre-service teachers needed help in applying their theoretical knowledge about early literacy skills. When we discussed the reasons for this situation, the pre-service teachers pointed out that they observed that kindergarten teachers did not translate theoretical knowledge about early literacy practices into practical applications. According to them, kindergarten teachers apply limited activities to develop children's early literacy skills in school practices and design early literacy practices mostly as worksheets. The reasons for this may be that pre-school teachers in the field have not taken direct lessons on early literacy during their undergraduate education, and the in-service training provided by the MoNE is also limited. However, although early childhood education teachers are not directly trained in early literacy, they are trained to prepare developmentally appropriate activities during their undergraduate education. Moreover, the national program which they are implementing contains clear directives on what to do and what not to do for early literacy development. Despite this, pre-school teachers want to plan activities with this method and argue that this is the best way to prepare pupils for primary school. Hence this situation contradicts the theoretical knowledge and also confuses pre-service teachers.

Based on all these experiences, this current study was designed to seek to answer the following questions to understand whether there are basic differences of opinion between teachers and pre-service teachers regarding implementing early literacy practices based on paper and pencil.

- a. What do teachers and pre-service teachers think about using worksheets in pre-school education?
- b. Why do or do not teachers and pre-service teachers prefer worksheets?
- c. What are the reasons behind the differences of opinion on whether or not to use a worksheet?

This study of the use of worksheets in early childhood education holds significant potential for facilitating evidence-based decision-making across various educational levels. By systematically gathering and analysing perspectives from multiple stakeholders, including experienced teachers and prospective teachers, this study seeks to fully comprehend the benefits, challenges and potential drawbacks of incorporating worksheets into teaching. The findings are expected to provide valuable guidance to educators, enabling them to make informed decisions regarding integrating worksheets into early childhood education. Obtaining opinions from experienced teachers with practical classroom experience and prospective teachers undergoing training for future roles is essential for shaping educational approaches which will effectively cater to the evolving needs of children. Consequently, the outcomes of this research are expected to serve as a solid foundation for policy development, curriculum design and teaching practices, thereby ensuring that educational decisions are grounded in empirical evidence and pedagogical expertise.

METHOD

Research Model: The basic qualitative research model was used in this study, which was structured to identify the opinions of teachers and pre-service teachers about the use of worksheets within the scope of literacy preparation practices in pre-school education institutions. The basic qualitative research model, which seeks answers to the questions of how and why by examining a problem in its natural environment, is used to provide a detailed analysis of the current process and situation (Creswell, 2002). This study, which examines the opinions of teachers and pre-service teachers, is limited to the participants' opinions about the current situation and its reasons.

Participants: Early childhood teachers working in independent pre-schools located in a city center in the Western Aegean region of Turkey, recruited through convenience sampling and senior students studying in the pre-school teaching department of the university located in the same city participated in the research. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the Pamukkale University (Protocol No: E-93803232-622.02-298115, Date: 6.12.2022). The total number of participants was 60, comprising 30 pre-school teachers and 30

teacher candidates. All the teachers and pre-service teachers were working or training in independent pre-schools. Of the participants, 67% (n=20) were female and 33% (n=10) were male. Twenty-two teachers (73%) had an undergraduate degree and the others (n=8, 27%) were postgraduates. Seven teachers (23%) had between one and five years experience, 47% (n=14) had six to ten years and 30% (n=9) had ten years or more. Twelve (40%) worked with four-year-olds and eighteen of them (60%) worked with five-year-olds. Eighteen (60%) of the pre-service teachers were female and 40% (n=12) were male, aged between 21 and 25 years.

Data Collection

Instruments: The research questions were compiled by the researcher and were sent to three faculty members who were experts in early childhood education in order to hear their opinions, and the questions were then revised in terms of relevance and scope. Examples of the questions asked to participants are as follows: 1) 'What are your opinions on the use of worksheets in pre-school education?'; 2) 'Do you incorporate worksheets into your classroom activities?'; 3) 'What situations do you observe when using worksheets with pre-schoolers? Are there any benefits, drawbacks or limitations you have noticed?'; 4) 'Have you noticed any changes in student engagement or motivation when using worksheets?'; and 5) 'Have you encountered any challenges or concerns regarding the use of worksheets in preschool education?' The answers were recorded with a voice recorder with the participants' permission. The recorded audio files were then transcribed into written text by the researcher.

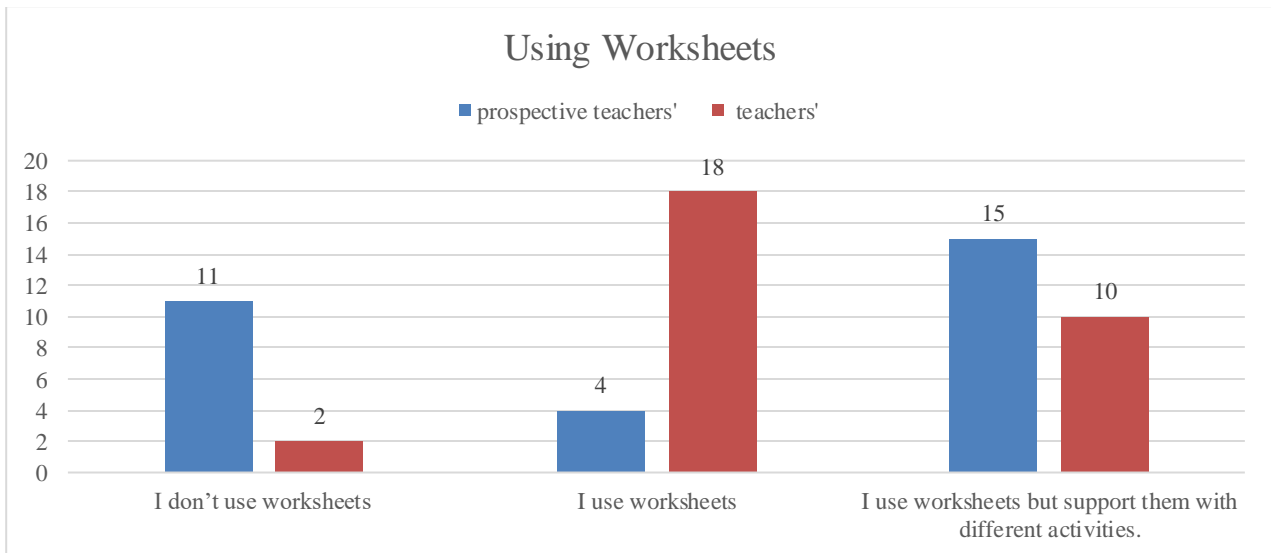
Data Analysis: The data were analysed with the content analysis method. Content analysis is a research method used to systematically analyse and interpret the content of various forms of communication, such as texts, images, audio, video or any other form of recorded information. It involves the objective and systematic categorization, coding and analysis of data to identify patterns, themes and relationships within the content (Creswell, 2003). The views of the teachers and pre-service teachers on the usage of worksheets and their reasons were analysed together. First, each teacher participant was given a code name, T, and participant order (for example, T1, T5 etc.) and PT and participant order (PT3, PT14 etc.) was used for each pre-service teacher. Later, by examining the written text line by line, the codes, the sub-themes and the main themes emerged. Second, the use of worksheets during the educational activities of the participants was determined. Third, the reasons for the participants to use worksheets were analysed, and finally the participants' opinions on the use of worksheets were examined. The analysis yielded divergent perspectives among the participants regarding the employment of worksheets in early childhood education, delineated into two overarching thematic categories: reasons why participants used worksheets and reasons why they did not. Each theme was divided into four sub-themes: Effect on Academic Skills, Effect on Motor Skills, Effect on Social Life Skills and Effect on Parents.

Credibility and Transferability: Various techniques, such as depth-oriented data collection, diversification and expert review, are used for credibility and transferability in qualitative research (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). This study obtained depth-oriented data by quoting open-ended questions and direct participant statements. In order to ensure the validity of the research, transparency, openness to communication and internal consistency were taken into account. First, general information about the study was given by communicating with the participants, stating that participation was voluntary. They were informed that if they agreed to participate in the study, in line with the appropriate ethical principles, their personal information would not be included in the research or the findings. Interviews were conducted with the participants who were accepted. Then, 20% of the data analysed by the researcher was also analysed by two academics who were experts in the field of early childhood education, and this provided researcher diversity. The codes identified by the researchers were compared and it was seen that they were similar. The teachers and pre-service teachers were chosen from different schools so that they were not affected by each other's views. In this way, teacher candidates and teachers were not aware of each other's practices or opinions.

FINDINGS

Using worksheets

Graph 1 shows the findings from the teachers' and preservice teachers' answers on whether they used worksheets in their daily schedule.



Graph 1. The inclusion by teachers and pre-service teachers of worksheets in their daily schedule
As can be seen in Graph 1, the number of teachers (n=18) who included worksheets in their daily schedule was considerably higher than that of pre-service teachers (n=4). Regarding the number of teachers and pre-service teachers not using worksheets, the opposite situation emerged; it is striking that the number of teachers (n=2) who did not use worksheets was considerably smaller than the number of pre-service teachers (n=11). However, the number of teachers (n=10) and pre-service teachers (n=15) who said that they used the worksheets in different ways (such as in plays, together with manipulative materials, and in books) were closer to each other. When asked to clarify the use of 'different activities', the participants stated that sometimes they included writing activities in their plays ('Let's draw the shape on the page with our hands in the air, walk over the lines and draw the same line on the page', and so on). Similarly, the participants stated that they sometimes prepared worksheets (complete the picture, find the different one, draw the character in their imagination, and so on) about the picture books, or they created letters on worksheets using manipulative materials such as blocks, cubes or Lego bricks.

Reasons for using worksheets

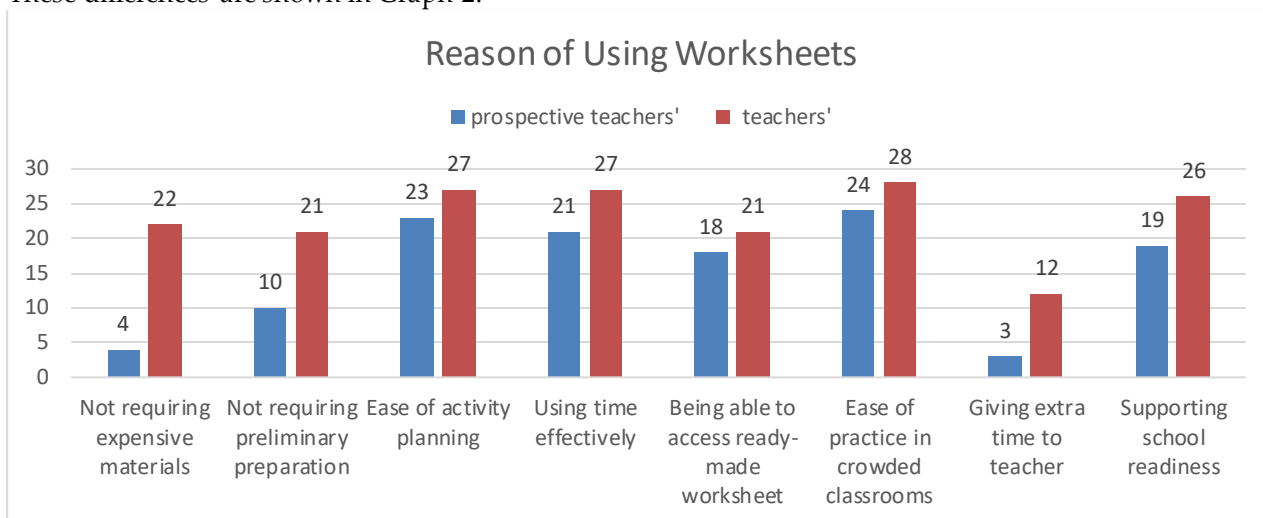
The participants' answers on the benefits of using worksheets for the teacher are set out in Table 1.

Table 1. Reasons for Using Worksheets

| | |
|--|--|
| Not requiring expensive materials | Puzzles, beads and strings, blocks and block accessories (such as cubes, Lego bricks, wooden items, brushes) |
| Not requiring preliminary preparation | Planning in line with the interests of the children, integrating the teaching with the play, and reaching the intended gains |
| Ease of activity planning | Worksheets can be integrated with any activity, for example, dramatic play, picture book and outdoor play |
| Using time effectively | Teachers can teach the child many more concepts quickly and make them work on lines. |
| Being able to access the ready-made worksheets | Teachers can easily download ready-made worksheets from the internet or buy workbooks/magazines from publishers. |
| Ease of practice in crowded classrooms | Worksheets can be used as a small group activity or individual activity in crowded classrooms so teachers can observe the children's academic skills |
| Giving extra time to the teacher | Teachers can prepare for other daily activities while children work quietly on worksheets |
| Supporting school readiness | Worksheets can be used for hand/eye coordination, line drawing, letter and writing awareness and pencil-holding exercises |

As Table 1 shows, the participants thought that adding worksheets to their daily schedules is in the interests of teachers. They stated that manipulative materials can often be expensive, blocks and block accessories are not appropriate for every activity in every classroom, and worksheets are cheaper and more accessible. In addition, the participants thought that activities such as print awareness, holding a pencil and drawing lines, which are necessary for early literacy, are much more accessible thanks to the worksheets. They also stated

that when they worked with worksheets, they dealt with children more efficiently and gained time to plan other activities. However, when the answers given by the participants were examined more closely, it was seen that there were differences in the opinions of teachers and teacher candidates regarding these items. These differences are shown in Graph 2.



Graph 2. The reasons for teachers and preservice teachers to include worksheets in their daily schedule. The reasons for teachers to use worksheets from most to least can be listed as Ease of practice in crowded classrooms (n=28), Ease of activity planning (n=27); Using time effectively (n=27), Not requiring expensive materials (n=22) or Not requiring preliminary preparation (n=21) and Being able to access ready-made pages whenever and wherever they want (n=21). The pre-service teachers' reasons, in parallel with those of the teachers, were Ease of practice in crowded classrooms (n=24) and convenience in Ease of activity planning (n=23), Using time effectively (n=21), and Accessing easily ready-made worksheets (n=18). Both sets of participants stated that the worksheets support school readiness (nT= 26, nPT=19). However, unlike the teachers, the pre-service teachers disagreed with the idea that the worksheets do not require preliminary preparation (n=10) or any material (n=4). Finally, it was determined that there was a difference in the participants' opinions on whether using a worksheet gave the teacher extra time (nT=12, nPT=3).

Reasons why participants used worksheets

According to the participants, rationales prompting the use of worksheets were divided into four sub-themes: the effect on academic skills, the effect on social life skills, the effect on motor skills, and the effect on parents, as shown in Figure 1.

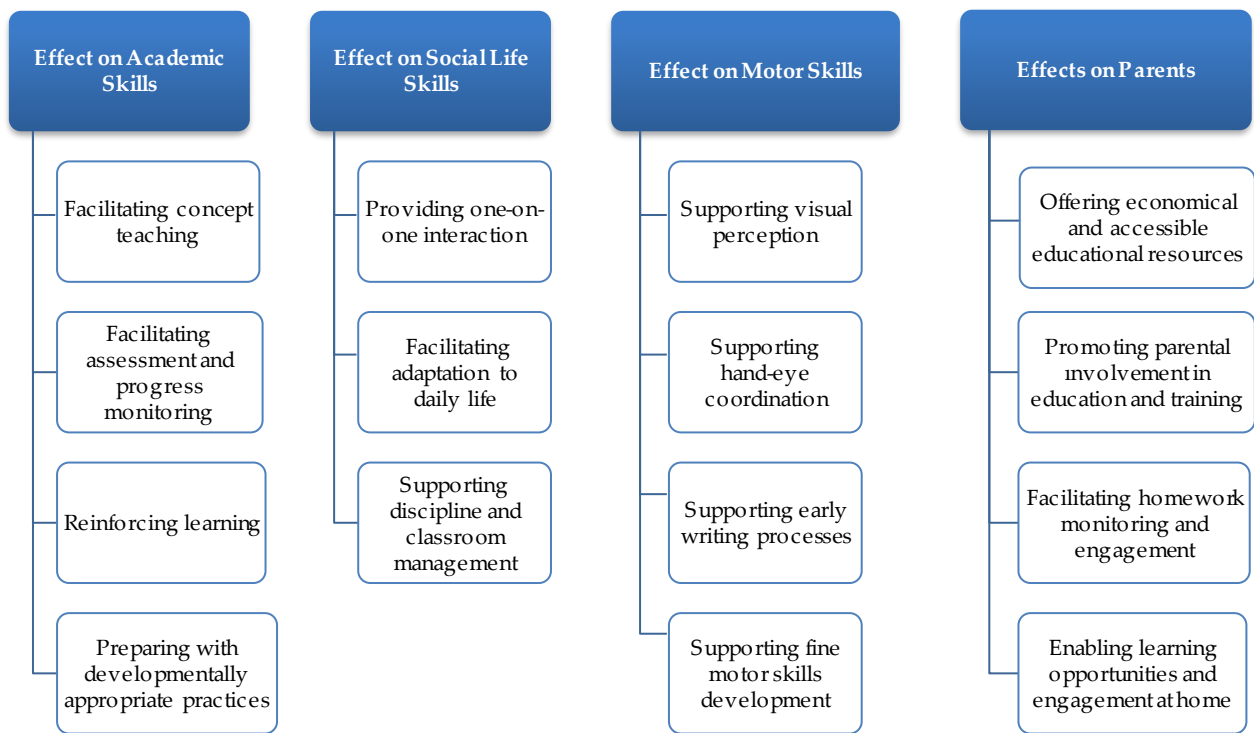


Figure 1. Reasons why participants used worksheets

The first of the themes which emerged regarding the reasons for the participants to use worksheets was the effect on their own academic skills. According to this view, the participants stated that the worksheets helped them to teach and reinforce concepts. For example, T3 expressed positive thoughts about the effect of worksheets on his/her academic skills as follows:

PT3: I can teach colors, numbers and operations more easily and permanently with worksheets. Children learn these concepts better on paper.

Participants also stated that they found most sourcebooks containing worksheets reliable because experts prepared them; as T1 said:

T1: I can find worksheets/books for teaching any concept. After all, these are also prepared by academics and give me activity ideas. In addition, the worksheets support learning concepts, numbers and colors.

Another of the effects of worksheets on academic skills was facilitating assessment and progress monitoring. The participants stated that they could see how much the children had progressed academically, especially in crowded classrooms, because of the worksheets. For example, T6 said:

T6: Children are in the concrete operational stage. Therefore, some concepts we teach need to be shown concretely on paper. The worksheets, especially in large groups, allow me to keep track of what the child is doing or learning.

Another emerging theme was the effect of worksheets on social life skills. Participants stated that using worksheets concerns each child individually, thus enabling teachers to deal with children one-on-one.

T8: I can understand from the worksheets which concept the children need support for. This way, I can deal with the child more closely and provide the support he/she needs.

PT14: I intern one day a week; I cannot be knowledgeable about each child, of course, in this case. But when I use a worksheet as an activity, there is silence in the class so I can deal with each child one-on-one and see what they cannot do.

According to the participants' responses, it is evident that they believed that worksheets enabled them to adapt to daily life more effectively and contributed to the development of various skills in children. These skills include discipline, time management, problem-solving, task completion, focus and attention to detail. In addition, they stated that the worksheets also helped to discipline the class by following the rules, with the following responses:

T26: I give children a specific time limit to complete the worksheets. In this way, I encourage them to be more attentive and enable them to develop effective time management skills while working on the tasks.

The third theme was the effect of worksheets on motor skills. All of the participants stated that children's visual perception, hand/eye coordination and fine motor skills could be supported by using worksheets, and thus emergent writing skills would be positively affected. T28 and PT17 expressed their positive thoughts about the effect of worksheets on pupils' motor skills as follows:

T28: When I give worksheets to children, I also support their writing skills, such as drawing lines and holding a pencil.

PT17: There are tasks of following the lines, connecting the dots, matching, and writing in the worksheets I use. I think that these exercises prepare children for writing tasks in primary school.

The final theme which emerged from the findings was the effects of the writing sheets on parents. First, participants stated that it is more economical to send worksheets from school to home instead of providing different materials for early literacy. The participants also stated that parents could follow their children's learning with the help of worksheets and support learning at home by participating more in the teaching process. For example, T9 and PT22 expressed their positive thoughts about the effect of worksheets on their making homework tracking easier and enabling learning at home as follows:

T19: Worksheets sent home as homework force parents to do homework with their children. It is good that they already get used to this system as they will do it for a very long time in primary school.

PT22: After all, parents will sit down and do homework together when the children go to primary school one year later. I think they should get used to some practice already.

Similarly, participant T29 stated that Ensuring Participation in Education and Training Processes was achieved as follows:

T29: I sometimes send worksheets home. Parents use it with their children so they can see what we are doing in the classroom and what their child is learning. Moreover, I can see if the parents are helping the child or not.

As can be understood from the statements above, the participants believed that using worksheets can positively support teachers, children and parents in particular aspects.

Reasons why participants did not use worksheets

The reasons which the participants gave for not using worksheets were similarly divided into four sub-themes: the effect on academic skills, the effect on social life skills, the effect on motor skills, and the effect on parents, as shown in Figure 2.

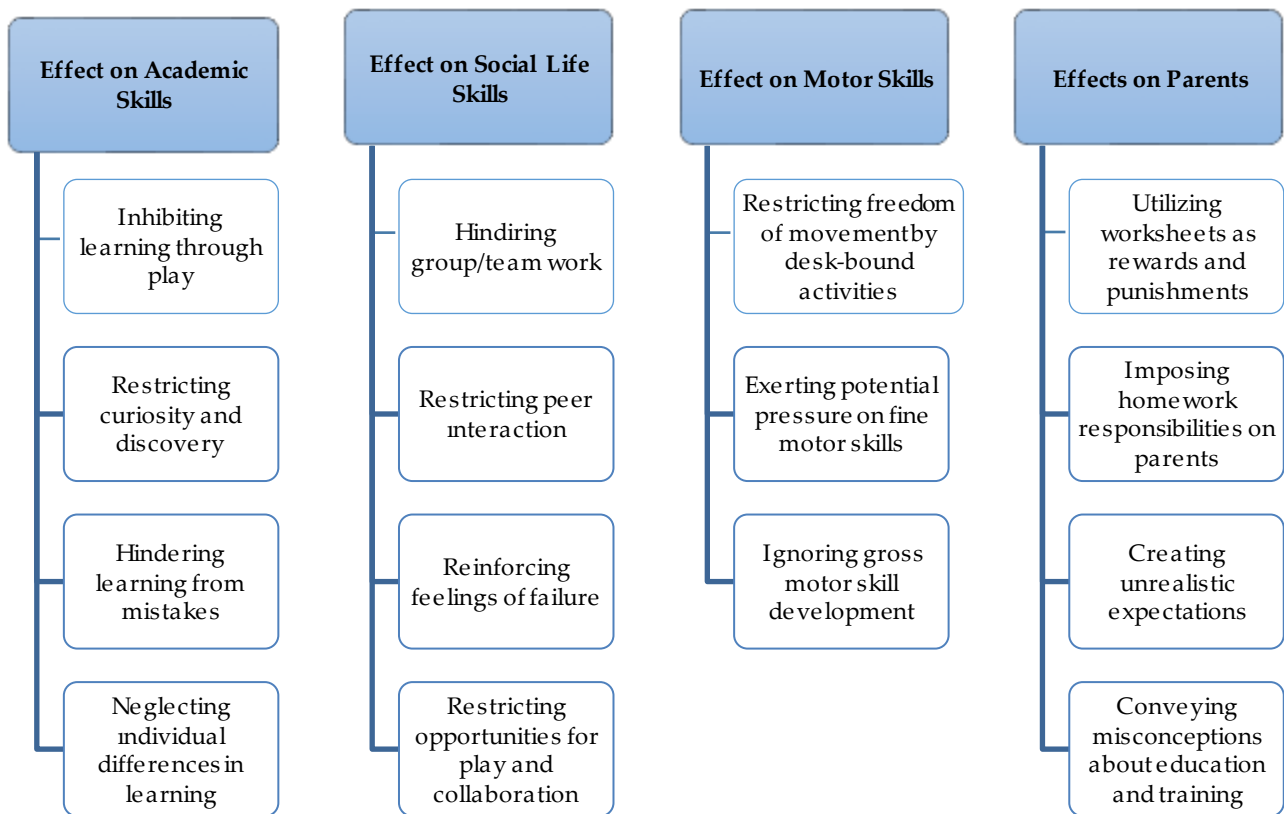


Figure 2. Reasons why participants did not use worksheets

The first of the themes which emerged regarding why the participants did not use worksheets was the effect on children's academic skills. Some participants stated that worksheets inhibit learning through play and restrict curiosity and discovery. For example, PT4 expressed these thoughts as: *Pre-school education should be play-based. However, the worksheets restrict the right to play because their primary purpose is teaching. They also negatively affect the child's innate sense of curiosity and discovery by preventing her/him from learning through play.* Another point on which the participants focused was that there is usually only one correct answer in worksheets, but the same page is given to each child regardless of individual differences. Participants expressed their views on this situation with the following responses:

T24: Worksheets do not consider individual differences; they consider every student at the same level and with equal skills.

T17: I think children learn nothing when making mistakes in the worksheets. They are marked on paper as wrong or correct and put into their file ... They focus on the result, not the process, so they do not support learning from mistakes.

One of the other emerging themes was the effects of worksheets on children's social life skills. Accordingly, participants believed that worksheets hinder group/teamwork and restrict peer interaction. Some expressed their views on this situation as follows:

T12: Worksheets are individual; they push the child not to solve the communicational problem with friends, not to cooperate with society, but to solve problems alone.

PT9: It does not allow peer interaction and communication. Each worksheet is for a single person, after all ... Children even cannot speak; there is already a noise in the classroom, and they are not allowed; how can they speak?

As can be seen from these comments, participants stated that worksheets reduce peer interaction by hindering group work. According to some participants, the worksheets negatively affect children's ability to communicate with peers and to solve problems as a group by playing together. In addition, as T8 stated, they cause a sense of failure in children who make mistakes or cannot understand the tasks:

T8: Worksheets often focus on a single truth, which creates a feeling of inadequacy in the child. It creates such prejudice that I could not do it; how well my friend did it, I cannot succeed.

The third theme was the effect of worksheets on motor skills. One participant (T21) thought that: *After all, they can learn to hold a pencil or write, but I feel like we are limiting their freedom of movement.* Related to this view, T16 also mentioned that using worksheets frequently can negatively affect motor skills development: *We use worksheets, especially at the end of the year, to prepare the children for primary school, but we still have children who cannot follow the instructions, cannot keep balance or run. I do not think we pay much attention to these skills.* As can be understood from these statements, some participants thought that the worksheets might ignore the children's gross motor development. In addition, as T13 stated in the extract below, worksheets can involve repetitive tasks that can lead to monotony and potential strain on fine motor skills. In this situation, extended periods of repetitive motions without breaks or variety might negatively impact a child's motor skills development.

T13: Of course, children get bored as time goes on. Constantly writing something with paper and pen can cause tired hands and sore fingers.

Finally, some participants said that worksheets could sometimes negatively affect parents. For example T2 claimed that parents use worksheets as punishment and reward: *I sometimes hear parents talk to children saying that 'If you don't do your homework, you can't watch TV'. When I saw how this caused children's reaction to the word 'homework', I gave up sending worksheets home.* PT19 stated that the worksheets were completed by the parents rather than the children in the following words: *Sometimes we send sheets home in terms of family participation, but then when we look at the sheets back from homes, we say that it is impossible for the child to have done this.* As can be understood from these statements, the participants thought that the worksheets ignored the gross motor development of the children.

Another point underlined by the participants was that the worksheets bring parents' expectations to an unrealistic level as they create the perception that effective education is only possible with children's writing tasks. Sample statements on the subject are given below:

T20: If I send home worksheets frequently that week and don't send them the next week, Moms ask, isn't there any homework this week? They say didn't we learn anything new?

PT30: Once, at the pre-school where I interning, a boy's mother came to the teacher and said that the child's friends attending other pre-schools had started arithmetic; they had various sourcebooks, and they were ready for primary school, but the boy's classroom was far behind. The teacher tried to explain the curriculum for a long time, but the parent did not listen.

When the respondents' opinions about the use of writing sheets in pre-school education were examined, it was found that the participants believed that using worksheets in their classrooms could have both positive and negative effects on children's academic, social and motor skills. Participants welcomed the use of worksheets in concept teaching. These activities support early writing processes and hand/eye coordination, and it is beneficial for parents to get information about the activities in the institutions. In addition, the participants using worksheets emphasized that it is much more economical than acquiring manipulative materials. However, some participants stated that worksheets might negatively affect the child's development; they stated that it hinders the child's right to learn through play, discourages the sense of curiosity and discovery, and that individual differences can sometimes be overlooked.

CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION

This study was designed to explore the perspectives of teachers and prospective teachers concerning the utilization of worksheets in the context of pre-school education. First, an assessment was conducted to determine whether or not the participants integrated worksheets into their daily routines. Accordingly, both teachers and pre-service teachers acknowledged the occasional utilization of worksheets. This result shows parallelism with the literature. Within the relevant Turkish literature, numerous studies have documented the prevalent use of direct instruction, sound-based tasks, line-drawing exercises and computer printouts/worksheets as essential components of early literacy initiatives (Dönmezler, 2016; Korkmazhan, 2019; Parlakyıldız, 2014). According to this, teachers who use ready-made photocopied sheets to raise awareness of writing and support alphabet knowledge generally focus on teaching children to hold a pencil and draw lines. Therefore they give less space to activities such as physically active plays, music and communications in their schedule (Dönmezler, 2016; Taşkın, Katrancı & Uygun, 2014). Turkey's national pre-school education program supports child-centered and game-based activities. In addition, the program

recommends that teachers implement early literacy activities in different ways, such as plays, reading or picturing, and avoid ready-made activities and worksheets (MoNE, 2013). Therefore, teachers and teacher candidates need to know better and understand the national program which they have to implement.

Second, the findings of the current study have shown that pre-service teachers were less inclined to use worksheets than teachers. One key factor here is the changes implemented in the national pre-school education program and the undergraduate teaching curriculum. Despite receiving in-service training, teachers in the field might have a limited grasp of up-to-date child-centered early literacy practices compared with pre-service teachers who actively engage in such pedagogical approaches during their training. This limitation may be because teachers in the field do not have different direct exposure to lessons and teaching methods which pre-service teachers have. Another factor is the predominance of developmentally appropriate practices (NAEYC) in pre-school education in recent years and the fact that pre-service teachers are more prone to cognitive theories (Baum, 2017). Nonetheless, the fact that pre-service teachers' theoretical knowledge is newer than that of current teachers meaning that they should tend to be more modern and more aware of child-centered practices is also considered to be one of the factors affecting the result (Erbaş, 2021; Erdoğan, Özcan, Budak & Işık, 2019; Öğretir-Özçelik, 2018).

Third, although the teachers emphasized that the worksheets do not require preliminary preparation and other supporting materials, the pre-service teachers disagreed, stating that the worksheets require preparation as much as any teaching/learning activity. Preparation is defined as planning in line with the interests of the children, integrating teaching with play and reaching the intended gains. According to this view, the pre-service teachers stated that they preferred to use worksheets with manipulative materials (such as in-class labels, calendars, play-dough, plexi-letters and books) instead of using worksheets directly to support their pupils' early literacy skills. It is the desired result that teachers organize purpose-oriented activities and literacy-rich environments which enable children to explore by playing in early childhood education. The relevant literature shows that young children learn best with manipulative materials and play-based experiences (Katz, 2015; Snow & Pizzolongo, 2014). The path to literacy begins long before interacting with pencil, paper and textbooks and continues throughout the pre-school years, enriched by stories, nursery rhymes and songs. With this richness in oral language development, books, labels and environmental signs provide an introduction to the world of written language (Cunningham, Zibulsky & Callahan, 2009). Therefore, teachers should primarily change their understanding of early literacy, and instead of focusing on activities with only pen and paper, they should plan developmentally appropriate experiences for children.

Fourth, the findings describe in detail the reasons why the participants preferred and did not prefer worksheets. They expressed contrasting perspectives regarding the use of worksheets in pre-school education. On the one hand, they acknowledged the benefits of worksheets in teaching concepts, promoting fine motor skills such as pencil-holding, and assessing children's learning progress, as they felt the pressure to prepare children for primary school. On the other hand, some participants emphasized that worksheets tend to disregard children's developmental differences and restrict their freedom of movement and play-based learning due to their desk-bound nature. Consequently, despite their reservations, the primary motivation behind the use of worksheets by both teachers and pre-service teachers is the perceived impact on school readiness. This finding aligns with previous findings reported in the literature (Anning, 2010; Öğretir-Özçelik, 2018; Yılmaz Bolat, 2019). For instance, Yılmaz Bolat (2019) observed that teachers often prioritize writing activities as part of early literacy practices, considering writing skills as essential prerequisites for school readiness. Similarly, Dönmezler (2016) found that teachers, recognizing the significance of readiness for reading and writing, frequently engage children in activities such as photocopying, workbook exercises and tracing lines.

The teachers felt more pressure to teach early literacy skills seen as a prerequisite for primary school readiness than the pre-service teachers (Whitebread & Coltman, 2015). This pressure on pre-school teachers rapidly advances pre-school education institutions towards becoming mini-primary schools (Needham & Ülküer, 2020;). Some studies have shown that giving structured examples – such as worksheets – to pre-school children as part of their preparation for primary school helps them to be more successful when they start primary school and can increase their school readiness (Anning, 2010). Other studies, however, have stated that over-directed early education might reduce the school success of some children by undermining their confidence in their abilities in the skill areas required by the school (Schweinhart, 2013; Sylva et al., 2010). It is therefore necessary not to accept school readiness as the only preparation for reading and writing teaching,

but to consider the needs and rights of children when planning and performing early literacy practices. Based on all this information, the importance of play and unstructured practices in education have recently been increasingly referred to (Schweinhart, 2013). Undoubtedly, teachers are responsible in this context as they play a crucial role in designing learning environments which prioritize discovery, play-based learning and hands-on experiences. However, studies have shown that pre-school teachers lack the theoretical knowledge to support early literacy and improve print awareness (Cunningham, Zibulsky & Callahan, 2009; Lynch, 2009).

Finally, the participants underscored the impact of worksheets on parents, highlighting their substantial benefits as supplementary home activities. Some participants stated that worksheets were found to facilitate parental involvement in their children's education, reinforce the learning process, and enable the monitoring of children's developmental progress. It is crucial to support literacy skills in the home environment and raise parents' awareness. Puranik et al. (2018) showed that parent-supported activities were determinants of children's skills such as letters, writing and spelling. O'Brien, Ng and Arshad (2020) similarly found a strong positive relationship between the frequency of parents reading to their children and their children's early literacy skills. Studies have shown that children whose parents are aware of literacy make more remarkable progress in reading and writing than their peers (Peterson, Jang, Jupiter & Dunlop, 2012). Those activities with family participation in the home environment contribute to children's skills and later academic success. (Munro, Jose & Huntsinger, 2021).

Parents generally want their children to be well prepared for the transition to primary school, so they seek early literacy activities for their children to do at home (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2017). However, as emphasized by some of the participants, the worksheets sent home can sometimes create parents' unrealistic expectations, causing a great misconception that education is only done on paper. Much research has shown that homework has little impact on younger children (Facchinetti, 2016; Liang, Peters, Akaba, Lomidze & Graves, 2022; Sadlier, 2011). In addition, homework for young children is not considered an acceptable practice in the national pre-school curriculum (MoNE, 2013). Instead, schools should inform parents about the importance of being role models, using books and reading techniques, providing an enriched home literacy environment, and playing. Parents' literacy activities at home should not be seen as homework or an obligation but as a way to establish quality communication.

In conclusion, this study has delved into the perceptions of both in-post teachers and pre-service teachers regarding the utilization of worksheets in pre-school education. The findings shed light on the complex dynamics surrounding the use of worksheets, revealing contrasting viewpoints and multi-faceted considerations. Although the participants recognized the potential benefits of worksheets in teaching concepts, assessing learning outcomes and preparing children for primary school, they also expressed concerns about their limitations in addressing individual developmental differences and restricting freedom of movement and play-based learning. Furthermore, the participants emphasized the role of worksheets in fostering parental involvement in pre-school education. On the one hand, they recognized worksheets as an essential avenue to encourage parents' participation in their children's learning journey. On the other hand, they voiced apprehensions regarding the potential negative perception that worksheets might generate among parents.

The findings also highlighted the influence of contextual factors, such as changes in national education programs and the prevalence of developmentally appropriate practices. Ultimately, these insights underscore the need for a balanced approach that integrates varied instructional strategies, promotes child-centered pedagogy and fosters parental engagement in the educational process. It is imperative to continually reassess and adapt instructional practices in the light of evolving research and pedagogical advancements to create an inclusive and effective pre-school learning environment.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study primarily focused on examining the utilization of worksheets from the perspectives of teachers and pre-service teachers in early childhood education. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that early childhood education encompasses an holistic approach involving not only teachers and pre-service teachers but also school administrators, children and families. Therefore, it becomes imperative to investigate the opinions of other stakeholders and explore how early literacy can be effectively supported within this framework. Additionally, it is essential to investigate the impact of factors such as play-based learning, increased physical activities and the use of manipulative materials in education. Evaluation of children's

participation in early literacy activities should be included longitudinally in research topics. Furthermore, investigating elements such as teaching methods, family participation policies and parent collaboration, which can influence the quality of the home literacy environment, can significantly contribute to the existing literature.

It is evident that further support through in-service training programs and a shift in teachers' perceptions of early literacy are necessary to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical implementation. To address this, it is crucial to provide teachers with relevant information and practices suitable for child development through comprehensive in-service training programs. Additionally, modifying the curriculum of pre-service teacher education programs to incorporate practical content will effectively meet this requirement and ensure that theoretical knowledge is effectively applied in real-world educational settings.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed by the author(s) with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Ethics Approval

The formal ethics approval was granted by the Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Pamukkale University. We conducted the study in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration in 1975.

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Research and Publication Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the research team's university ethics committee of the Pamukkale University (Approval Number/ID: 12/2022/20-22). Hereby, we as the authors consciously assure that for the manuscript the following is fulfilled:

- This material is the authors' own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere.
- The paper reflects the authors' own research and analysis in a truthful and complete manner.
- The results are appropriately placed in the context of prior and existing research.
- All sources used are properly disclosed.

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