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A study on the achievement level of social skills objectives and outcomes in the preschool curriculum for six-year-olds

Nesrin Çimen^a, Sinan Koçyiğit^b *

^aErzurum Kayakyolu Elementary School , Turkey

^bMarmara University Atatürk Education Faculty Department of Primary Education Specialization in Preschool Education, Istanbul, Turkey

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Abstract

This study examines whether the objectives and outcomes related to the teaching of social skills in the preschool curriculum (for children aged 36–72 months) have an influence in social skill acquisition of six-year-old children. It was found that the activities based on the objectives and outcomes related to the teaching of social skills in the preschool curriculum (for children aged 36–72 months) were effective in the acquisition of social skills by preschool children. The difference between the children's pretest and posttest scores in the adaptation ($Z=-4,205$; $p<,001$), shyness ($Z=-4,200$; $p<,001$) and communication ($Z=-4,208$; $p<,001$) subdimensions of social skills was meaningful.

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1. Introduction

The importance of the ages covered by preschool education for development and learning is now well-established. Preschools are not only the first educational institutions that children are introduced to, but also the first social environment apart from the family and close acquaintances. Thus, it may be argued that, apart from the family, preschools are the places where social skills are shaped for the first time.

Children need assistance in adapting to the environment after birth. It is family members that provide this assistance and meet children's physical and psychological needs. Starting from birth, children receive the greatest help in adapting to the physical and social environment from their parents.

Children learn social rules initially in the family, by interacting with family members. On the other hand, entering a new social environment, such as a school, deeply affects children's understanding of rules (Dunn and Munn, 1985). According to Korkmazlar (1998), starting school means entering a novel and complex social environment, being an individual in a community, opening up to the world. One of the aims of education, perhaps the most significant one, is to provide social development for individuals and societies, and enable their balanced adaptation to their environment. The bases of this adaptation need to be built in the preschool period (14th National Education Summit, 1993). Games played with peers vary children's social experiences and help them get to know themselves.

* Sinan Koçyiğit. Tel.: 05067352759

E-mail address: s.kocyyigit@hotmail.com

They learn how to assert themselves, accept others, protect their own rights, and respect rules and others' rights. Such behavior is dependent on the acquisition of certain basic social skills.

Social skills are the components of the social behavior needed by individuals to obtain the outcomes they want from social interaction (Spence, 1980; cited in: Kamaraj, 2004). Libet and Lewinsohn define social skills as the complex talent of displaying both the behaviors that are reinforced positively or negatively by others, and those punished or suppressed by others (cited in: Bacanlı, 1999).

Preschool social skills, according to Gresham and Elliott (1987), are cooperation, responsibility, self control and assertion (cited in: Kamaraj, 2004). Cooperation includes behaviors such as helping others, sharing, complying with rules and regulations. Responsibility includes attitudes and behaviors such as having communication skills with adults, and claiming ownership of personal property and work. Self control covers behaviors displayed in conflict situations (i.e., responding properly to annoying behavior) and non-conflict situations (i.e., situations that require lining up or complimenting someone). Assertion involves communication starting behavior, such as asking for information or self-introduction, and reacting to other people's behaviors.

Many factors affect the development of social skills in the preschool period. These factors are children's relationships with their families, their social environment, peer relationships, schools and the media. While a positive interaction with family members is important in the first few years of life, over time peer interaction becomes more important. As a result of interacting with family members, the people around, and their peers, children observe social skills naturally through observation. However, some children cannot acquire social skills just by observation. These children need to be systematically taught social skills and offered opportunities to use these skills (Avcıoğlu, 2005). This necessitates social skill education.

The conceptual basis for social skill education is rooted in the social learning theory, and the techniques used also reflect this theoretical approach. According to the theory, most reactions that ease adaptation to the environment are learned behaviors. These behaviors are acquired by observation and maintained as long as they are reinforced by the environment (Matson and Ollendick, 1988; cited in: Çetin et al., 2003). Social skill education is a therapeutic approach which facilitates the effective coping of the during the social interaction process, and enables the teaching of communication skills (Çakıl, 1998).

Social skill education, be it planned for the preschool period or other periods, should consider children's needs, environmental conditions, physical environment, children's age and developmental features. In addition, opportunities for children to use the social skill learned would enable them to internalize these skills and transfer them to real life. Individuals who complete their social development on time will become self-sufficient, socially responsible and beneficial people.

In social skill education, various methods and techniques are used to ensure the acquisition of these skills. As social skills may vary with time and place, it is wise to develop curricula and use methods and techniques that are appropriate to the context. The instructional methods to be used primarily depend on the perception of social skills. In this respect, social skills may be divided into two: cognitive and behavioral (Bacanlı, 2004).

In the cognitive approach, a social skill is seen as a cognitive skill, and the reason behind social skill deficiency is cognitive insufficiency. In other words, it is due to not knowing how to behave in social environments. According to this approach, individuals need an education to maximize their cognitive competence. Social skill education may therefore make use of cognitive scenarios, cognitive persuasion, conferencing, discussions, cinema and novel heroes, and books and films containing social behaviors. Also, social skill education may involve asking students to dream about what they need to do in social situations (Bacanlı, 2004).

The other approach that may be used in social skill education is the behaviorist approach. According to this approach, social skill deficiency means that the behavior was not acquired. In other words, appropriate behavior was not displayed, or if it was, it failed to be reinforced. Thus, the appropriate social behavior does not exist in the individual's current repertoire. When this approach is adopted, individuals should be encouraged to display behaviors and these behaviors should be reinforced. The methods to be used may include imitation, role playing or peer instruction (Bacanlı, 2004).

In light of this information, this study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the objectives and outcomes related to the teaching of social skills in the preschool curriculum (for children aged 36–72 months) on the social skill acquisition of six-year-old children.

In relation to the main aim mentioned above, the following questions were studied:

1. Do the adaptation scores of 6-year-old preschoolers vary from the pretest to posttest?

2. Do their shyness scores vary from the pretest to posttest?
3. Do their communication scores vary from the pretest to posttest?
4. Do their total social skills scores vary from the pretest to posttest?
5. Do their social skill scores vary by gender?

2. Method

2.1. Study design

The study adopted the pretest-posttest model without a control group. Before and after the implementation, the experimental group was given the “Social Skills Scale”, and the data obtained were compared.

2.2. Study group

The study group included 23 children who were attending the preschool year of Merkez Kayakyolu Çimento Müstahsilleri İşverenler Sendikası primary school in Erzurum during the 2007-2008 academic year. Subjects were observed in their natural environment.

2.3. Implementation process

The activities used with the study group attempted to equip children with group awareness, develop their communication and adaptation skills, and offer a learning environment where peer interaction is used effectively. The social skill activities were implemented with the study group three days weekly, in the form of 44 activities. The activities were planned and implemented as part of the daily lesson plan, without disrupting daily instruction. They were designed and implemented as part of daily Turkish, Games and Movement, Music, Literacy Preparation, Drama courses, or integrated into other activities proposed by the curriculum. They used materials that express different emotions such as pictures, photographs of places, storybooks, and puppets. Children were asked open-ended questions about the objectives and outcomes for each activity, the responses were recorded and evaluated. Also, video recording was used while implementing the activities to be later examined by the researcher. At the end of some activities, children were asked to take to their families family involvement work in line with the aims of the activity.

2.4. Data collection instrument

Data were gathered by using Kapıkıran, İvrendi and Adak’s (2006) Social Skill Scale, a 5-point Likert type scale with 57 items. According to the results of the factor analysis conducted by Kapıkıran et al., the factor loadings of the items varied between .436 and .755. Scores from each item and the total scores ranged between .111 and .793. Of the total scale variance, 47.27% was seen to have three factors. Internal consistency alpha coefficient of the scale was α : .93.6, therefore rendering validity and reliability levels acceptable. In the present study, the alpha coefficient was calculated as α : .88. Social skills were gathered under the subdimensions of communication, adaptation and shyness.

2.5. Data collection process

The study used one single group, the study group. In order to compare the pretest-posttest scores of the children in the study group, the “Social Skills Scale” was utilized. The social skills activities designed in accordance with the objectives and outcomes were launched on 25 February 2008, three days weekly. The implementation was completed on 30 May 2008. Following the completion of the activities, the “Social Skill Scale” was used as posttest. Also, in order to establish whether the objectives and outcomes were met or not, questions were asked to the children at the end of each activity, their responses were recorded and then evaluated.

2.6. Analysis of data

Data were analyzed in the SPSS 15.00 package program. As the study had only one group with a limited number of subjects, data were analyzed by using the Wilcoxon signed rank test for paired samples. In order to establish whether the children's social skills varied by gender, the Mann Whitney-U test was utilized.

3. Results (Findings)

3.1. Findings about the first research question

In order to investigate whether a statistically meaningful difference existed between children's pretest and posttest adaptation scores, the Wilcoxon signed rank test for paired samples was conducted, and the findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of the Wilcoxon test conducted to establish the meaningfulness of the difference between pretest and posttest mean scores of adaptation related items in the Social Skills Scale

Adaptation	N	O	S'	Z	p
Decreasing	0	0	0		
Increasing	23	2	2,5	-.205	0,000
Equal	0				
Total	23				Mean ngful

As shown in Table 1, the Wilcoxon test results established the difference between mean ranks as statistically meaningful ($Z=-4,205$; $p<,001$). The difference was in favor of the posttest. In other words, a significant increase was observed in children's adaptation skills. It can thus be stated that the adaptation work specified in the preschool curriculum was effective in improving children's adaptation skills.

3.2. Findings about the second research question

In order to investigate whether a statistically meaningful difference existed between children's pretest and posttest shyness subdimension scores, the Wilcoxon signed rank test for paired samples was performed, and the findings are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of the Wilcoxon test conducted to establish the meaningfulness of the difference between pretest and posttest mean scores of items about decrease in shyness in the Social Skills Scale

Shyness	N	O	S'	Z	p
Decreasing	0	0	0		
Increasing	23	2,00	2,5,00	-.200	0,000
Equal	0				
Total	23				Mean ngful

As can be seen from Table 2, the Wilcoxon test results showed that the difference between the mean ranks was statistically meaningful ($Z=-4,200$; $p<,001$), in favor of the posttest. This finding reveals that children's shyness levels decreased significantly, while their skills in expressing themselves within a group and empathizing with others increased. According to these results, the objectives in the preschool curriculum seem to be effective in decreasing children's shy behaviors and supporting skills such as self-expression. This results was also due to the establishment of child-centered environments for activities, where children could express themselves and interact more.

3.3. Findings about the third research question

In order to investigate whether a statistically meaningful difference existed between children's pretest and posttest communication skill scores, the Wilcoxon signed rank test for paired samples was conducted, and the findings are given in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of the Wilcoxon test conducted to establish the meaningfulness of the difference between pretest and posttest mean scores of communication related items in the Social Skills Scale

Communication	N	O	S'	Z	p
Decreasing	0	0	0		
Increasing	23	2,00	2' 5,00	- ,208	0,000
Equal	0				Meaningful
Total	23				

As is evident in Table 3, it was shown by the Wilcoxon test results that there was a statistically meaningful difference between mean ranks ($Z=-4,208$; $p<,001$), in favor of the posttest. In other words, there was a significant increase in children's communication levels. It may thus be asserted that the preschool curriculum is effective in developing children's communication skills.

3.4. Findings about the fourth research question

In this sub problem, students' social skills were analyzed regardless of the total score. Findings obtained are presented below.

Table 4. Results of the Wilcoxon test conducted to establish the meaningfulness of the difference between the mean pre and posttest scores of the Social Skills Scales

Social Skills	N	O	S'	Z	p
Decreasing	0	0	0		
Increasing	23	2,00	2' 5,00	- ,201	0,000
Equal	0				Meaningful
Total	23				

As can be seen from Table 4, there was a statistically meaningful difference between the mean ranks according to the Wilcoxon test ($Z=-4,201$; $p<,001$). This difference was in favor of the posttest, thus showing a significant increase in children's social skill levels. As a result, it may be argued that the preschool curriculum was effective in developing children's social skills.

3.5. Findings about the fifth research question

The results of the Mann Whitney-U test, which was conducted to find the individual differences between the pretest and posttest scores of 6-year-old children's social skill levels and whether these scores varied by gender, are given below.

Table 5. Results of the Mann Whitney-U test conducted to establish whether the Social Skills Scale pretest scores varied by gender

Gen er	N	O	S'	Mann Whitney-U	Z	p
Girls	12	2,71	1: 2,50			
Boys	11	1,23	1 3,50	57,500	-0,524	0,601
Total	23					Not meaningful

According to Table 5, the Mann Whitney-U test results revealed that the difference between the mean ranks was not statistically meaningful ($Z=-0,524$; $p>,05$). It thus follows that children's Social Skills Scale pretest scores were similar across genders.

Table 6. Results of the Mann Whitney-U test conducted to establish whether the Social Skills Scale posttest scores varied by gender

Gen er	N	Ortalama	Standart Sapma	Mann Whitney -U	Z	p
Girl:	12	3,96	1,7,50	42,500	-1,448	0,148
Boy:	11	3,86	1,3,50			
Tota	23					

As evidenced by Table 6, the Mann Whitney-U test results revealed that the difference between the mean ranks of the posttest was not statistically meaningful either ($Z=-1,448$; $p>,05$). According to posttest results, children's Social Skills Scale scores were similar across genders.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

According to the results, a meaningful difference exists between the pretest and posttest mean scores of children in the study group. This difference implies that the Preschool Education Program (for children aged 36–72 months) helped children acquire social skills.

In light of the findings of the study, the following suggestions may be made to researchers:

- Within the scope of this study, social skills activities were implemented with preschoolers for 14 weeks. In order to establish whether the program has long-term permanence and retention, follow-up studies may be needed. By observing children over a longer period of time, it may be established whether the social skills acquired at preschool extend over elementary education.
- This study was conducted to examine the effects of the preschool curriculum (for children aged 36–72 months) on the development of social skills in children. Future studies are needed to investigate the effects of the preschool curriculum (for children aged 36–72 months) on the development of the subdimensions of social skills (such as cooperation, interpersonal skills, responsibility, independence, self-control, problem solution).
- Curricula that do and do not involve parents in the teaching of social skills may be used to compare their effects. By doing so, the role of family education, which is emphasized in the preschool curriculum (for children aged 36–72 months), on children's skills outcomes may be revealed.
- In preschools, studies may be conducted to observe the effects of integrated education for 6-year-old special and normally developing children, on the former's acquisition of social skills.
- The present study was conducted with 6 year-old children. It may be replicated with 4 and 5 year-olds.
- Educational programs on adaptation and communication may be designed to help the development of social skills.
- Studies may be conducted to understand and decrease shyness in the preschool period, and social skill education programs may be designed for this purpose.

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