

WCLTA 2010

Preschool education in Turkey in the European Union process

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Abstract

Turkey, a candidate for full membership in European Union, aims to raise standards of education system to European countries level. Turkish education system in this direction to achieve their goals in all aspects, from preschool to university education is required to make new arrangements. Collecting data related to European countries education systems to determine the status of education system in Turkey will be accurate approach for the work to be done in process of accession to European Union. In this study, it is aimed to investigate the current status of preschool education in Turkey and in European Union member countries.

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Keywords: Preschool education; Turkey; European Union Process.

1. Introduction

Pre-school education covers the period starting from the birth of a child and continuing until he/she starts elementary education; that is, from the age of 0 to 6 and it has a very important role to play in the subsequent stages of life as most of the physical, psycho-motor, social, emotional, intellectual and linguistic development is completed in this period. Hence, most of the personality is shaped in this period (Aral, Kandır, Yaşar, 2002; Oktay, 1985). The personality, psycho-social and physical development whose basis is laid during the pre-school education will go on developing in the same direction in the following years. Many of the behavioral patterns gained throughout the childhood years have been observed to play an important role in shaping the individual's personality, attitudes, habits, beliefs, and value judgments (Oğuzkan & Oral, 1992; Aral, Kandır, & Yaşar, 2002; Bütün, & Aral, 2005). Berlinski et al., (2009) carried out a study to investigate the influence of pre-school education on elementary school achievement, and found that pre-school education has positive impacts on the achievement in the courses of mathematics and Spanish; moreover, pre-school education was found to have positive effects on students' behavioral skills such as attention, effort, participation and discipline. Kağıtçıbaşı et al., (2005) carried out a longitudinal follow-up study among young people aged 25-27 in 2004, and they found that the children having pre-school education read more than those not having such education and more of them can get places at universities, they can find more prestigious jobs, and they have higher participation in modern social and economic activities.

Pre-school education makes it possible to have desired social, educational and cultural outputs at both social and individual levels. In European Union countries, there is a strong awareness that pre-school education is a necessity;

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hence, high level of pre-school education participation has been reached. In some of these countries, the enrollment rate in pre-school education has nearly become 100%, and there are activities carried out not only to improve the quantity but also quality of this type of schooling. Turkey aiming to be a member of European Union tries to improve its education system so as to reach the standards of European Union countries and for this purpose, many projects have been carried out. In this respect, efforts have been made to improve schooling ratios and educational standards throughout the country to have a performance at the level of European countries. To do so, there is a need for new arrangements to regulate the whole system of education starting from pre-school education to university education. By collecting data about the education systems of European countries, the present status of the Turkish education system should be determined and this will be a good starting point for the works to be carried out in relation to revision of the education system during the adaptation process to the European Union. In the present study, the main purpose is to investigate the current status of the pre-school education in European Union countries and in Turkey. If the current problems and shortcomings in pre-school education in Turkey can be determined, then it will be possible to suggest required regulations and problem-solving strategies. With the reforms to be carried out in pre-school education in Turkey, sound steps could be taken in education complying with the general development objectives of the country.

2. Method

In the present study, document observation method to determine the current status of pre-school education in European Union countries and in Turkey was employed. Enrollment rate, pre-school attendance age, duration of pre-school education, the number of schools, students and teachers were collected through the analysis of reports and research findings. The data obtained are presented in tables, then they are discussed and suggestions are made.

3. Results

3.1. Pre-school education in Turkey

The first legal regulation related to pre-school education was made in the Ottoman era in 1913. With the law put into force at that time, opening of the kindergartens was made compulsory and these schools were put under the control of the elementary schools. During the first years of the Republic, besides the elementary schools, some state institutions also started to provide pre-school education to help the working mothers with children. The kindergarten regulations passed in 1952, and The Law of Elementary Schooling and Education passed in 1961 were the most comprehensive regulations performed up to that time. With this regulation, institutions of pre-school education were mentioned as elective educational institutions. According to regulation of Kindergartens and Nursery Classes put into effect in 1962, pre-school institutions were divided into four groups as; Kindergartens, nursery classes, crèches and dormitories. With the enforcement of National Education Basic Law in 1973, pre-school education was included within the formal schooling structure. Pre-school education system was revised in 1981 and the number of the pre-school institutions has steadily been increasing. Due to the importance attached to pre-school education and its becoming more common, The Directorate of Pre-school Education was founded in 1992 (EACEA, 2009).

Today, the structure and functioning of the pre-school education is determined by Pre-school Education Institutions Law passed in 2004 and amended in 2007. According to this regulation, the institutions of pre-schooling are classified as kindergarten, nursery class, and practical nursery class (EACEA, 2009). Nursery classes are opened at elementary schools but they are not included in the elementary schooling. Practical nursery classes, on the other hand, are opened within vocational high schools or colleges providing pre-school instruction. While full-time education is given in kindergartens and practical nursery classes, part-time education (morning and afternoon sessions) is given in nursery classes. Apart from the food and cleaning materials contribution of the families, all the state institutions of pre-schooling are free. Pre-school education given by private education institutions is not free (EURYDICE, 2010). There is an age limit for enrollment to the institutions of pre-schooling. In this respect, kindergartens and practical nursery classes accept students aged 36-72 months, and nursery classes accept children

aged 60-72 months (EACEA, 2009). Since 1991, the teachers who want to work in pre-school education have had to at least be the graduate of four-year tertiary program giving pre-school teacher education. Up to 1998, each education faculty could determine its own curriculum and this resulted in differences in the qualifications of the teachers. Since 1998-1999 academic year, all the education faculties have been following the same teacher training program (Kapci & Güler, 1999; UNESCO, 2006).

In the public or private institutions of pre-schooling connected to the Ministry of National Education, same pre-school education program is applied. Pre-school education programs are designed considering the developmental features of small children and activities are carried out in line with this. The activities included in the program are subsumed under the headings of leisure time, Turkish language, game and movement, music, science and mathematics, preparation for reading and writing, drama, field trips and artistic works (EACEA, 2009).

Pre-school education constitutes the first step of the Turkish education system and covers the education of the children aged 36-72 and it is elective. But, in 2009-2010 school year, a pilot project was initiated in 32 provinces to enroll all 5-year-old children in pre-school education. The target for 2010 year for pre-school participation is to increase the enrollment rate in 32 cities where the pilot projects were started to 100% and to 40% across the country (EURYDICE, 2010).

3.2. Pre-school education statistics

Between 1994 and 2010, the number of the pre-school institutions, the number of the students attending these institutions and the number of the teachers working here are presented in Table 1 (Taner Derman & Başal, 2010).

Table 1. Numerical developments seen in pre-school education in 1994-2010 in Turkey

Years	Number of schools	Number of children	Number of teachers	Enrollment rate
1994-1995	5169	148088	9098	7.3
1995-1996	5600	158354	9771	7.7
1996-1997	6082	174710	9971	8.9
1997-1998	6563	182533	10376	9.3
1998-1999	6868	204461	10979	10
1999-2000	7660	212603	11591	9.8
2000-2001	8996	228503	12265	10.3
2001-2002	10554	256392	14520	11
2002-2003	11314	320038	18921	11.7
2003-2004	13692	358499	19122	13.2
2004-2005	16016	434771	22030	16.1
2005-2006	18539	550146	20910	19.9
2006-2007	20675	640849	24775	22.4
2007-2008	22506	701762	25901	28.5
2008-2009	23653	804765	29342	29.1
2009-2010	26681	980654	42716	33

As can be seen in Table 1, the number of the institutions of pre-school education was 5169 in 1994-1995 school year, and it became 26681 in 2009-2010 school year. It can be also see that there are increases in the number of students, teachers and enrollment rate. The pre-school enrollment rate in 1994-1995 school year increased from 7.3% to 33% in 2009-2010 school year. Though these are important developments, still the numbers are behind those of the European Union countries. The table below presents the enrolment rates in some European Union countries and that of Turkey.

Table 2. Enrollment rate in pre-school education

Countries	Obligation		Enrollment rate
Bulgaria	-	3-6 years old	73.9%
Czech Republic	-	3-6 years old	85%
Finland	-	6 year old	99%
France	-	0-2 years old	23.3%
		3-6 years old	100%
Germany	-	3-6 years old	90.3%
Italy	-	3-5 years old	97%
Poland	For six-year-old children	3-6 years old	63.1%
Spain	-	0-2 years old	26.2%
		3-5 years old	98.7%
Turkey	-	3-6 years old	33%

In Table 2, it can be seen whether pre-school education is compulsory or elective and enrolment rates according to age groups in some European Union countries and Turkey. Only in Poland, for preparation to primary school 6-year-old children required to continue to class zero. Though pre-school education is not compulsory in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, the enrolment rates in these countries are quite high. In France, the enrollment rate of the children aged 3-6 is 100%. On the other hand, the enrolment rate of the children aged 3-6 in Turkey is 33% (EURYDICE, 2010).

The graph showing the number of students per-teacher in various European Union countries and in Turkey presented in Figure 1.

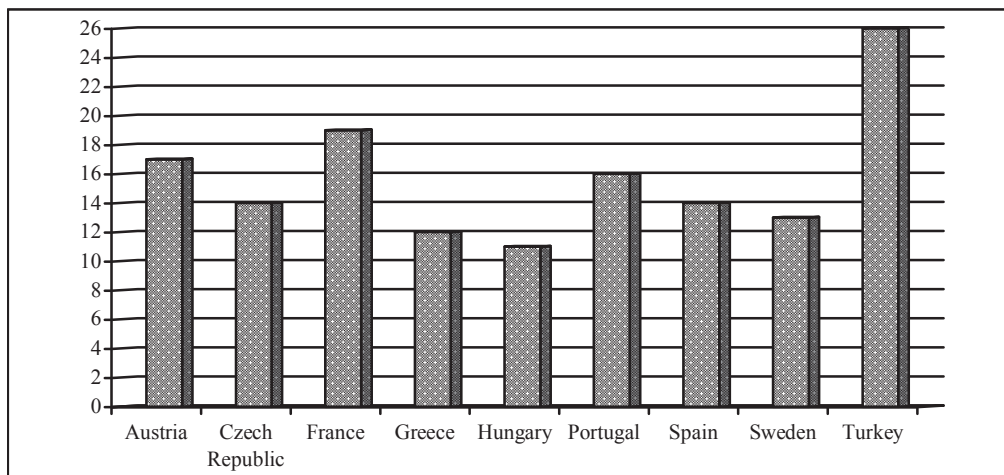


Figure 1. The number of students per-teacher in countries

Among the countries presented in Figure 1, Turkey has the greatest number of students per-teacher. In Austria, the number of students per-teacher is 17, in Czech Republic it is 14, in France 19, in Greece 12, in Hungary 11, in Portugal 16, in Spain 14, in Sweden 13, but it is 26 in Turkey (OECD, 2009).

4. Discussion and Recommendation

Since the Helsinki summit held in 1999, Turkey has been an official candidate for the European Union and intense efforts have been put forth in the country to gain full membership to the union and big strides have been made so far. Important developments have also been observed in the field of education; yet, the system is still far behind the desired level (Gedikoğlu, 2005). While the European Union countries have been trying not only to

increase the enrolment rate to 100% but also they have been striving for lowering the starting age in pre-school education, Turkey have been able to increase this rate to 33%. Nursery classes functioning under the control of elementary schools only accept children aged 60-72; hence, enrollment rate of the children remaining outside this age group is lower. There should be activities organized to raise parents' consciousness of pre-school education. For this purpose different campaigns should be organized by the Ministry of National Education, NGOs, educational institutions, and media to raise the public consciousness.

The target for 2010 year for pre-school enrollment for children over 5 is to increase the enrollment rate in 32 cities where the pilot projects were started to 100% and to 40% across the country. This target indicates that the number of students per-teacher will increase. In order to meet the increasing pre-school teacher need, there is a need to increase the capacity of the pre-school teacher education departments at education faculties and enough positions should be created by the Ministry of National Education. Moreover, there is a shortage of qualified teachers in nursery classes functioning under the control of elementary schools. For the teachers working at pre-school institutions, though they did not graduate from the pre-school teacher education departments of education faculties, the Ministry of National Education should organize in-service trainings in cooperation with universities.

Turkey formed its ninth development plan strategy covering 2007-2013 in order to reach the level of European Union countries in pre-school education. Within the framework of this strategy, strategies to be followed in pre-school education are as follows:

- Reaching to the level of developed countries, in particular European Union and OECD countries in pre-school enrolment rate.
- As social, psychological, and cognitive development is shaped at the early ages, pre-school education should be improved and made more widespread by providing equality of opportunities (EACEA, 2009).

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