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A Review of Master and Doctoral Dissertations in the Field of Early Childhood Special Education in Turkey

“Structured Abstract”

Introduction

The period between birth and the age of 6 to 8 called the early childhood period is the time when development of children is rapid. Heward (1996), Kroth and Edge (1997) emphasize that learning experiences during this period are as crucial for normally developing children as those with development delays/disabilities (As cited in Birkan, 2001). The changes that took place in Turkish legislation regarding individuals with special needs from the past to the present day place a great importance on special education services in early childhood.

Early childhood special education (ECSE) is an umbrella concept covering early intervention for young children from birth to 36 months as well as preschool special education for those aged between 36 and 72 months. In this context; ECSE, in general terms, can be defined as the process of providing services which might include different support systems both for children with developmental delays or at risk of developmental delays during the early childhood period and their parents (such as educational, developmental, social, health and nutrition support).

The ECSE process and main considerations within this process are addressed in a number of postgraduate studies (master and doctoral dissertations) carried out in Turkey about individuals with development delays/disabilities during the early childhood period (Diken, Ünlü ve Karaaslan, 2008). However, no study reviewing these works in detail has so far been found. Synthesing and reviewing research

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(such as examining the sample covered, characteristics of the sample, method used in the study, data collection means used, implementation process) about ECSE carried out in Turkey seems to be important since it will not only help individuals caring for children with development delays/disabilities in early childhood to access necessary data but also provide researchers with leading information about aspects which have not yet been discovered or sufficiently addressed in relation to the issues in the ECSE. In addition; disclosing similar and different aspects of the studies with common dimensions will introduce a new perspective regarding the studies so that light can be shed on future research. Thus, the aim of the present study is to review postgraduate studies (master and doctoral dissertations) within scope of the ECSE carried out in Turkey.

At first, postgraduate studies (master and doctoral dissertations) within scope of the ECSE carried out in Turkey were identified and accessed through the web site of the Higher Education Council of Turkey. Moreover, studies regarding children from birth to age 6 to 8 with development delays/disabilities in the early childhood period and their parents were identified in the book titled *Postgraduate Studies Bibliography on Mental Retardation and Pervasive Developmental Disorders in Turkey* (Diken, Ünlü ve Karaaslan, 2008), which includes summaries of the studies concerned with Mental Retardation and Pervasive Developmental Disorders. Following criteria were respected in identifying the studies to select: (1) Relevance to the children from birth to age 6 to 8 or their parents, (2) Existence of development delays/disabilities in children and (3) the studies being a postgraduate master or doctoral dissertation.

Findings

As of 2008, 24 studies were found in Turkey concerning children with development delays/disabilities during early childhood, their parents and the services provided for them; 14 were master, 7 were PhD dissertations whereas 2 were for a specialization in Medicine. During the analysis, the studies were classified by subject and categorized. All studies were divided into 7 categories according to the subject covered. These included skill instruction (Akköse, 2008; Altunel, 2007; Ardiç, 2008; Bakkaloğlu, 2004; Canay, 2003; Çetin, 1995; Çuhadar, 2008; Erbaş, 2001; Odluyurt, 2007), preschool inclusion (Baysal-Metin, 1989; Odluyurt, 2007; Özbaba, 2000; Varlier, 2004), helping parents acquire skill of instructing their children (Birkan, 2001; Özcan, 2004; Tuş-Gümüşçü, 1996), examining mothers' emotional status (Görgü, 2005; Richter-Kanık, 1998; Tezel, 2003), comparing children with development delays/disabilities and without disabilities (Bilgiç, 2007; Özenmiş, 2000; Zeteroğlu, 2006), describing situation regarding children (Çağlar, 2006), and services provided for children (Özdemir, 2005; Yalçıntaş, 2006). All studies was carried out on 597 children in total; 65 of whom were identified in these studies as children with mental retardation, 2 had cerebral palsy, 41 had Down Syndrome, 90 had developmental delays/disabilities, 258 had autism, 3 were diagnosed with language and/or speech disabilities and 125 were considered to be children with normal development.

In the category of skill instruction; it was observed that Bakkaloğlu (2004) and Odluyurt (2007) addressed the teaching of the preparatory skills for inclusion,

Akköse (2008) dealt with teaching the skill of naming kitchen appliances, Altunel (2007) dealt with teaching the skill of answering questions, Ardiç (2008) researched teaching of toilet skills, Canay (2003) focused on teaching the skill of fulfilling the order given, Çetin (1995) studied teaching large muscle skills and finally Çuhadar (2008) covered teaching free-time skills. In the category of teaching skills, only one study was found which dealt with sustaining behavioral problems and the acquisition of positive behaviors (Erbaş, 2001). As for the category of preschool inclusion; Odluyurt (2007) investigated the views of preschool teachers in relation to preparation skills that are effective for children with development delays/disabilities to be successful in preschool integration practices while Özbaba (2000) tried to discover the attitudes of the teachers and the parents regarding integration. Varlier (2004) examined the views and recommendations of the preschool teachers about integration. In connection with all the research; an attempt was made to identify views, recommendations and attitudes using the assessment methods developed by researchers. Finally Baysal-Metin (1989) compared development recorded by children with Down syndrome between the experimental group (those who attended the integration program during the preschool period) and control group in their thesis.

Under the category regarding parents' acquisition of the skill of instructing their children; Birkan (2001) targeted helping parents implement the Small Steps Program and Baysal-Metin (1989) focused on the Portage Early Childhood Period Education Program whereas Özcan (2004) concentrated on implementing the Family Education Program for Toilet Skills Teaching which he developed. In the category regarding the comparison of children with development delays/disabilities without disabilities, Özenmiş (2000) compared behaviors about playing with objects displayed by children with and without diagnosis of mental delays/disabilities while Zeteroğlu (2006) compared normal children and those diagnosed with autism in terms of their development in language, cognitive, psycho-motor and socio-emotional development areas along with influence of the parents' education level on development of the children. Bilgiç (2007) compared children with developmental delays/disabilities and pervasive developmental disorders in socio-demographic, clinical aspects and the characteristics of their parents.

In the category of describing a situation regarding children; Çağlar (2006) aimed to define strategies adopted by mother of a 5-year old autistic child during kitchen interactions with her child. In the category of services provided for children, Özdemir (2005) studied on the factors affecting access to and sustaining access of children aged 0-3 years to special education and rehabilitation as well as the extent at which services provided represent parent-centered support programs. Yalçıntaş (2006) dealt with adaptation, validity and reliability of the Self-Control and Atypical Behaviors Scale, which is expected to assist in obtaining early and appropriate diagnosis for autistic children of 24-72 months. Under the category related to mothers' emotional status; while Görgü (2005) examined the relationship between the extent of social support perceived by mothers of autistic children aged 3-7 years and depression they go through, Tezel (2003) addressed the influence of a psychological support program that he developed on mothers'

emotional status. Also, Richter-Kanik (1998), evaluate the effect of early intervention on stress level of mothers, with developmentally delayed young children (with down syndrome) and on mother-infant interaction.

Discussion and Conclusion

Nine of the postgraduate studies (master and doctoral dissertations) focused on teaching children a certain skill; as a part of these studies, instruction is provided regarding language, self-rating, social and motor development skills, but no study regarding the instruction of cognitive development skills was found. Although the period between 3 and 6/8 years covers the preparation for elementary education, there was no study focusing on the teaching of preparation skills regarding reading and writing. As a part of future research; it might be helpful to focus on teaching different skills that are considered to be important during early childhood for specialists in this area as well as parents.

As a result of the 3 studies, parents could acquire skill of instructing their children, and those parents were expected to teach their children accordingly. The Portage Early Childhood Period Program was used in one of the studies; Small Steps Program in another and the parents' education program developed by the researcher was used in the other. Within scope of the future research, focus might be placed on developing and expanding such education programs as well as harmonizing foreign programs with the situation in Turkey so that new programs that parents and educators can easily use might be developed.

Some of the postgraduate studies address both the categories of the skills teaching of the children and helping careers to acquire teaching skill. As the early childhood period is the time when children are most open to learning and are rapidly developing, it is expected normal that majority of the studies focusing on that period addressed teaching of skills; however, teaching of skills is not sufficient on its own in development of the children. Dealing with the development process as a multidimensional concept and emphasizing cultural variables that might be influential in development of the children in future studies might indicate importance of the cultural and social context in explaining the development process.

Another remarkable finding in the studies about the teaching of skills and helping parents to acquire the skill of instructing their children is the fact that majority of the studies were carried out on children aged 3 to 6 years. Investigating the instruction activities for children aged 0 to 3 years might contribute to the understanding of the effect of the implemented program and instruction on younger children's development.

In the category of the services provided for children there were 2 studies; one concerning advice services and post-advice services and the other is about the assessment process. To conduct proper assessment regarding development of the children from birth to 6/8 years and the early diagnosis of the developmental delays/disabilities would assist in ensuring action was taken in terms of access to the appropriate education and support services, and help parents and specialists

take decisions that could positively impact on the child's development. Therefore, scientific studies are needed to develop a means of assessment which will allow an early diagnosis of the children with development delays/disabilities and the establishment of a system which would help in ensure that these children received education and support appropriate to their assessed needs. Studies regarding preschool inclusion focused on identifying attitudes and perspectives regarding inclusion in the preschool period. One study compared the development of two groups of children those who were and those who were not involved in inclusion practices. The attitudes, opinions and approaches of teachers, peers and parents towards inclusion are important for success of the preschool inclusion practices, however, they are not effective on their own. Media adaptations and instructional adaptations play a significant role in the success of the inclusion practices. In the future, time and energy can be investigated in potential implementations in this area.

In the research concerning helping parents to acquire the skill of teaching their children and emotional status of the parents of the children with developmental delays/disabilities, it was observed that either the entire or the majority of the sample group was composed of mothers. The existence of an individual with development delays/disabilities within the family affects not only mothers but also the other family members such as the father and the siblings. Future studies should be carried out on the impact of the active participation of the father, siblings and grandparents in the teaching process on development of the children with development delays/disabilities. Furthermore, emotional and psychological effects on the other members of the family should be studied in the future, since this might contribute to appropriate continuation of communication in the family and the developing of a wider relationship network.

In conclusion it is necessary to continue the research that has been carried out in the postgraduate studies during early childhood period. Addressing various issues and aspects regarding ECSE, conducting investigations with varying sample groups and approaching the process of special education from an integrative perspective will make significant contributions to the knowledge and understanding of those involved in the development of children with development delays/disabilities, which is the specialists, carers and parents. Most importantly, this research will benefit the children who need effective and appropriate early childhood special education.