

PRESERVICE TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS OF SUPPORTING EARLY LITERACY

Abstract: This study aims to investigate preschool and primary school preservice teachers' knowledge and awareness of early literacy skills. Basic qualitative research approach was applied and data were collected through interview forms. A total of 158 preservice teachers (78 preschool preservice teachers and 80 primary school preservice teachers) attending the faculty of education at a state university in Turkey participated in the study. Data obtained from the participants were content analyzed. The results revealed that preservice teachers studying at both departments are familiar with early literacy skills while they have limited knowledge of its content and sub-skills. It is also found that most of the preschool preservice teachers define early literacy as letter recognition and pronunciation, school readiness and learning how to read and write at an early age; and primary school preservice teachers as learning how to read and write at an early age. Since preservice teachers representing both groups have misconceptions about the concept of early literacy, it would be appropriate to organize courses that offer examples of classroom practices concerning early literacy skills for preservice teachers attending the undergraduate program.

Keywords: Early literacy, preschool preservice teacher, primary school preservice teacher, teacher education

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INTRODUCTION

Acquiring reading and writing skills can be defined as an exciting journey for all children. In Turkey, formal literacy teaching starts as of the first grade of primary school while skills that prepare children for the formal reading-writing process begin to develop in the preschool period in informal environments and in line with children's own hobbies and interests. Although some suggestions have been made regarding how literacy is acquired and developed; there is an ongoing debate about what early literacy is. Opinions about the early literacy approach based on the argument that literacy development begins far before children start formal education are commonly accepted nowadays (Neuman & Dickinson, 2001).

The number of studies looking into the development of early literacy in the early period is increasing day by day. Recent studies show that children fulfill critical cognitive tasks in literacy development during the period from birth to age six and that quality education given in the early period makes significant contributions to children's achievement as good readers and writers (Neuman & Dickinson, 2001). Research reveals that practices and interactions of early literacy affect reading achievement at primary school (Cabell, Justice, Konold & McGinity, 2011; Güldenoğlu, Kargin & Ergül, 2016; Kendeou, Broek, White & Lynch, 2009; Missall et al., 2007; Spira, Bracken & Fischel, 2005; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). Similarly, some studies report that early literacy has an effect on reading achievement in later grades as well (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Juel, 1988, Scarborough, 2001; Storch, & Whitehurst, 2002).

EARLY LITERACY AND TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

“Early literacy is a term which refers to children's literacy knowledge and skills before they become actual literates.” The sounds children make, their interest in writing around them, their interactions with technology are important in terms of literacy development. The main point here is that literacy is developmental (Makin & Whitehead, 2004,10). Literacy development starts at the early stages of life and continues lifelong. A dynamic relationship exists among reading, writing, speaking and listening skills and each of them affects the other (Morrow, 2012). Early literacy can be defined as children acquiring literacy skills in such areas as reading and writing in the early years of their lives (Makin & Speeding, 2003). Some theories include different viewpoints and opinions about the development of literacy. It is appropriate to mention the “emergent literacy” theory that came out in the early 1980s (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). The term emergent literacy was first introduced by Marie Clay in 1966. The theory stands against the other views accepted about the acquisition of literacy. It is completely different from the Maturation Theory, which argues that literacy education should be delayed until children are 6.5 years old. Emergent literacy refers to a functional level of performance rather than the child's chronological age (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). Emergent literacy explains the formation of literacy without drawing clear borders between pre-reading and actual reading (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

Information concerning the elements of the terms emergent literacy and early literacy was generated based on quantitative studies examining the relationships between pre-literacy and actual literacy states and qualitative studies looking into preschool children's behaviors towards materials and activities that support reading and writing (Neuman & Dickinson, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Based on research, it was found that early literacy skills of preschool children predicted their later literacy achievement. These skills were classified as *alphabet knowledge* (knowledge of names and sounds associated with printed letters), *phonological awareness* (perception of the phonetic characteristics of the spoken language independent of meaning), *automatized naming of letters or numbers* (rapidly naming a series of random letters and numbers), *automatized naming of objects or colors* (rapidly naming objects or color e.g., “car”, “sun”, “house”, “person”), *print awareness* (ability to write letters,

his/her name) and *phonological memory* (ability to recall speech-based information) (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Early literacy development is the shortest but one of the most vital stages of literacy development. Primary school teachers know that young children who make a good start at school experience much less difficulty in their later academic life. On the other hand, those who cannot make a good start may have to struggle frequently during their school life (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Teachers play a pivotal role in creating early language and literacy environments for children (Hindman & Wasik, 2008). The power of preschool teachers to develop early literacy skills has a considerably big effect on children's future academic achievement (Dennis & Horn, 2011). In their study, Çakmak and Yılmaz (2009) found that activities offered by preschool education institutions are effective on children's development of reading habits. Deford (1985) reported that the teacher has a critical importance in children's overall success in learning to read. She aimed at revealing teachers' beliefs about reading using the instrument the Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (TORP) and observed 14 teachers as well. As a result, she found a strong correlation between the teachers' beliefs about reading and their self-reports concerning the practices. However, related studies have not always given such results. The study conducted by Ergül et al. (2014) showed that approximately half the preschool teachers defined the term early literacy as the child's learning to read and write in the preschool period. The authors associated this finding with the fact that the teachers explained the phenomenon with its literal meaning and stated that teachers failed to follow the developments in the field properly. As a result of the study they conducted in kindergartens through observation and questionnaires, Bryant, Clifford and Peisner (1991) found that only 20% of the kindergartens focused on developmental practices. They once again found that teachers' beliefs and knowledge about developmental practices were inadequate. Hindman and Wasik (2008) aimed to determine the nature of teachers' literacy beliefs and the background factors relating to these beliefs using the instrument Teacher Literacy Beliefs Questionnaire-TBQ. They concluded that teachers lack certain knowledge about literacy. They determined that the teachers' beliefs about oral language and vocabulary knowledge varied by the years of experience in teaching profession, which revealed professional experience as an important variable. In the study carried out by Kerem and Cömert (2005), preschool teachers ranked the activities for preparation for reading and writing in the last place among the in-service training topics they wanted to participate.

Teachers' level of knowledge about literacy is considered critical in shaping classroom practices and planning the right learning experiences; thereby promoting children's early language and literacy development. Levels of knowledge included both content knowledge (how written and spoken language is structured, the functioning of developmental processes) and practical knowledge (knowledge of effective strategies and practices to enhance early language and literacy) (Piasta, Park, Farley, Justice & O'Connell, 2020). Studies show that teachers' high quality language and literacy practices enhance children's early literacy learning (Piasta, 2016) and many studies emphasize the role of teacher-child interaction in promoting this learning (e.g. Byrne et. al., 2010; Hill, 2019; Maureen, van der Meij & de Jong, 2020; Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts & Morrison, 2008). These studies reveal the critical role of educators in selecting and implementing the practices that would facilitate children's early literacy development. Theoretically, planning the practices to develop these skills depends on the teachers' level of related knowledge (Schachter, 2017). Preschool and primary school teachers' education and experiences of preservice professional development have critical importance in creating developmentally appropriate learning environments and sustaining high quality early literacy experiences for young children (NAEYC, 2009). It is significant to know more about teachers' pedagogical experiences during their professional training process in order to obtain the best results in young children's development. In previous studies have not

found a study that together addresses the early literacy skills of preschool and primary school preservice teachers who acquire or improve their literacy skills to children. However, it is needed to determine the awareness of teacher candidates who will work at both levels in the formal literacy process of children. With this study, the knowledge and awareness of early literacy skills of preschool and primary teacher preservices were revealed. The research questions created within this scope are as follows:

1. What is the knowledge of preschool and primary school preservice teachers' regarding early literacy in children?
2. How is the awareness of preschool and primary school preservice teachers' regarding early literacy in children?

METHOD

RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study, which aimed to examine preservice teachers' knowledge and awareness of early literacy skills, used the basic qualitative research approach. Qualitative research deal with how individuals construct reality as a result of their interactions with their social world. Therefore, basic qualitative research underlines how people make sense of their lives and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

PARTICIPANTS

Data were collected from senior preschool and primary education preservice teachers attending the faculty of education at a state university in Turkey. In order to select the participants, the study employed criterion sampling among the sampling strategies used in qualitative research. In criterion sampling, cases or events meet some predetermined criteria (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this respect, the criteria were set as being a senior student and being about to complete teacher education in the present study. In addition, another criterion was established as the preservice teachers' taking theoretical courses on "first reading writing instruction and preparation for primary school and primacy school curricula".

The study was participated by a total of 158 participants - 78 preschool and 80 primary school preservice teachers. As for the demographical characteristics, 71 of the preschool preservice teachers were females and 7 were males while 56 of the primary school preservice teachers were females and 24 of them were males.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected using "The Interview Form on Preschool Preservice Teachers' Early Literacy Skills" and "The Interview Form on Primary School Preservice Teachers' Early Literacy Skills" developed by the researchers. The interview forms designed for preschool preservice teachers and primary school preservice teachers consist of five and six open-ended questions respectively. These questions were asked to preservice teachers' in the form of open-ended questionnaire questions and the participants were asked to write their responses in the blanks provided. The preservice teachers were given enough time to write down their opinions. Data were collected in May 2019. The participants were asked the following questions:

Table 1. Interview Questions

Questions for Preschool Preservice Teachers	Questions for Primary School Preservice Teachers
1. What is “early literacy”? What is your opinion about the terms?	1. What is “early literacy”? What is your opinion about the terms?
2. What are early literacy skills?	2. What are early literacy skills?
3. Are early literacy skills important in the preschool period? Why?	3. Are early literacy skills important? Why?
4. What reading-writing skills should a child who completed preschool education and ready to start the 1 st grade have acquired?	4. As a primary school preservice teacher, what reading-writing skills do you expect a child who starts the 1 st grade to have?
5. As a preschool preservice teacher, what are your expectations from parents in teaching early literacy skills?	5. As a primary school preservice teacher, what are your expectations from parents in teaching early literacy skills?
	6. As a primary school preservice teacher, what are your expectations from preschool education about early literacy skills?

As seen in Table 1, preschool and primary school preservice teachers were asked questions that were similar in content. All qualitative research processes focus on the meaning attributed to the question or problem by the participants rather than the meaning the researchers attribute to the study (Creswell, 2017). To this end, no explanation or information was provided on what the term “early literacy” is for the participating preservice teachers, but the study aimed to understand the meaning attributed to the term by the preservice teachers.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data obtained from preservice teachers were analyzed by content analysis method. Content analysis is a technique based on analyzing all kinds of written or oral communication content that allows to study human behavior (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012). The aim of content analysis is to reach the concepts and relationships that could interpret the data obtained. In this context, the data is first conceptualized and then collected under themes by organizing according to the concepts that come out (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008).

In the analysis of qualitative data, two approaches are used, hand and computer usage. In computer-aided qualitative data analysis methods, researchers use qualitative data analysis programs in the stages of storing, sorting, representing or visualizing data (Creswell, 2012). This study used Nvivo 12, one of the computer-aided qualitative data analysis programs. Firstly, all of the handwritten raw data were transferred to the computer environment by the researchers. Then, the answers given by each participant to the questions were examined one by one and "nodes" (code) were created. Based on the codes generated from the preservice teachers' opinions, relationships were specified and themes was created accordingly.

In order to increase the validity of the study, opinions were taken from field experts while developing the interview forms. Moreover, verbatim quotations from the participants are presented in the findings section of the study. Participants' identities were kept secret for confidentiality in the verbatim quotes and pseudonyms were used instead of real names. Preschool preservice teachers were coded as PPT1, PPT2, ...etc. and primary school preservice teachers as PsPT1, Ps PT2, ...etc. For increased reliability, both researchers conducted coding separately during data analysis. They later came together to revise the similarities-differences among the codes-themes and reach a consensus.

RESULTS

In order to determine preservice teachers' knowledge and awareness of early literacy, senior students' opinions were taken and the responses given to questions were coded under themes and sub-themes. Findings are presented in the following tables and some direct quotations of the participants are listed below.

Table 2. Preservice teachers’ conceptual definitions concerning early literacy

Participating Groups	Theme	Total content
Preschool Preservice Teachers	Letter recognition and pronunciation	43
	Readiness	33
	Learning to read and write at an early age	14
	Interest in reading-writing	4
	Total	122
Primary School Preservice Teachers	Learning to read and write at an early age	50
	Readiness	28
	Letter recognition and pronunciation	14
	Total	92

As seen in Table 2, preschool preservice teachers provided 122 responses under 4 themes and primary school preservice teachers gave 92 responses under 3 themes concerning the early literacy concept. Examining the responses of preschool preservice teachers about early literacy, it is seen that they frequently defined the term as “letter recognition and pronunciation” and “readiness”. Primary school preservice teachers, on the other hand, defined early literacy as “learning to read and write at an early age”. The participants’ examples for their conceptual definitions are presented below:

“Learning the alphabet and to read before starting primary education. Acquiring the skill before their peers.” (PPT72)

“Learning to read and write with their own means through the non-professional education taken from their families and being able to read as an adult before starting education at school.” (PPT12)

“Early literacy is children’s recognition of letters and being familiar with them before primary school. Early literacy makes things easier for teachers and students at primary school.” (PsPT5)

“Acquisition of reading-writing skills of children in the early childhood period.” (PsPT8)

Table 3. Preservice teachers’ definitions concerning early literacy skills

Participating Groups	Theme	Total content
Preschool Preservice Teachers	Pre-writing skills-activities	46
	Letter recognition	45
	Phonetic/phonological awareness	32
	Reading/Writing awareness	30
	Number recognition	17
	Oral language skills	15
	Ability to read stories	4
	Total	183
Primary School Preservice Teachers	Letter-alphabet knowledge	47
	Pre-writing skills-activities	24
	Number recognition	13
	Oral language skills	12
	Reading/Writing awareness	9
	Phonetic/phonological awareness	5
Total	109	

As seen in Table3, preschool preservice teachers made 183 responses under 7 different themes and primary school preservice teachers provided 109 responses under 6 different themes concerning early literacy skills. Preschool preservice teachers frequently defined early literacy skills as “pre-writing skills-activities”, “letter recognition” and “phonetic awareness”, “reading/writing awareness”. Primary school preservice teachers, on the other hand, defined early literacy skills as “letter-alphabet knowledge” and “pre-writing activities- skills”, “number

recognition”, “oral language skills”, “reading/writing awareness” and “phonetic/phonological awareness”. The participants’ related examples are presented below:

- “Letter knowledge, recognition of sounds, ability to produce letter sounds, number recognition” (PPT22)
- “Activities that the child can do especially in terms of cognitive development within the scope of reading writing activities. Depending on the child’s age, activities on pencil grasp, counting objects, matching, criticizing etc. promote literacy skills.”(PPT 48)
- “The ability to recognize the letters and numbers he/she sees and to produce the sounds.” (PsPT 20)
- “Early literacy does not only mean the child’s ability to recognize letters. Early literacy also enables the child to develop language, speaking, learning skills and easy communicate easily. ” (PsPT 68)

Table 4. The importance of early literacy for preservice teachers

Participating Groups	Theme	Total content
Preschool Preservice Teachers	Important	63
	Contribution to Readiness	36
	Learning to read-write easily	24
	Facilitating adaptation to primary school	14
	Developing oral language skills	14
	Positive contribution to academic achievement	10
	Developing mental skills	5
	Developing fine motor skills	4
	Establishing a reading culture	3
	Developing social skills	3
	Not important	2
	Total	65
Primary School Preservice Teachers	Important	69
	Learning to read-write easily	16
	Contribution to Readiness	14
	Being more successful than other peers	11
	Positive contribution to academic achievement	10
	Being ready to read and write	8
	Helping the primary school teacher	5
	Preparing the child for primary school	4
	Creating interest in reading	1
	Not important	16
	Total	85

As understood from Table 4, concerning the importance of acquiring early literacy skills at an early age, preschool preservice teachers and primary school preservice teachers provided 65 (under 2 themes and 9 sub-themes) and 85 (under 2 themes and 8 sub-themes) responses respectively. Almost all preschool preservice teachers consider early literacy “important”. They expressed that they found early literacy skills important since these skills contribute to readiness, facilitate learning to read and write and make primary school adaptation easier. Likewise, most of the primary school preservice teachers stated that they saw early literacy “important” in terms of learning to read and write easily and contributing to readiness. Some of the related quotations of the participants are presented below:

- “They are important at the primary school preparation stage. The child will adapt himself to the environment better.” (PPT39)
- “It is important. Meaningful learning requires preparation/ pre-knowledge. Acquiring this pre-knowledge makes things easier for children at school. It provides meaningful transitions for the things to be learnt.” (PPT 26)
- “I see it important because that education given to the child at an early age is considered to make the child more successful in their future academic life. It provides a more successful education environment in education.” (PsPT 3)
- “Early literacy skill is important. The child learns to read more quickly than other peers.” (PsPT 14)

Table 5. Early literacy skills in transition to primary school

Participating Groups	Theme	Total content
Preschool Preservice Teacher	Letter-alphabet knowledge	44
	Pencil grasp	33
	Ability to make sound-symbol connections	35
	Number recognition	27
	Writing awareness	22
	Ability to do pre-writing activities	18
	Having acquired hand-eye coordination	18
	Knowing the direction of reading-writing	18
	Ability to read visual materials	8
	Ability to understand what s/he listens to	4
	Ability to write his/her name	4
	Willingness to read and write	4
	Total	216
Primary School Preservice Teachers	Letter-alphabet knowledge	45
	Pencil grasp	18
	Number recognition	11
	Developed fine motor skills	11
	Ability to make sound-symbol connections	10
	Ability to do pre-writing activities	8
	Having acquired hand-eye coordination	8
	Willingness to read and write	4
	Developed oral language skills	4
	Ability to write his/her name	2
	Ability to conduct visual reading	2
	Total	125

Table 5 shows that preschool preservice teachers and primary school preservice teachers provided 216 (under 12 themes) and 125 (under 11 themes) responses respectively concerning the reading-writing skills a child is supposed to have when starting primary school. Preschool preservice teachers frequently emphasized that children starting primary school must have certain skills like “letter-alphabet knowledge”, “pencil grasp”, “making sound-symbol connections” and “number recognition”. Primary school preservice teachers, on the other hand, often stated that children are supposed to have such skills as “letter-alphabet knowledge”, “pencil grasp”, “developed fine motor skills”, “making sound-symbol connections”. Some participant verbatim quotes are presented below:

“Must pretend to read, know the left-right direction of writing, know numbers, have at least little familiarization with letters, be able to grasp a pencil, maintain hand-eye coordination” (PPT1)

“Must be able to hold the pencil properly. Must be able to draw lines correctly. Must be able to maintain hand-eye coordination. Must have developed a positive attitude towards reading and writing.” (PPT 5)

“He/she can write his/her own name. he/she can tell a tale about a picture. He/she may know numbers.” (PsPT 47)

“Skills like holding books correctly or the reading direction of a book are enough for reading. For writing, pencil grasp is important.” (PsPT 65)

Table 6. Preservice teachers' expectations from families

Participating Groups	Theme	Total content
Preschool Preservice Teachers	Buying and reading books	28
	Having children do reading writing activities	23
	Practicing and supporting at home	21
	Care and communicate with the child	17
	Designing manipulative play and materials	11
	Communication with the teachers	9
	Total	109
Primary School Preservice Teachers	Having children do reading writing activities	38
	Care and communicate with the child	29
	Buying and reading books	27
	Designing manipulative play and materials	10
	Sending children to preschool institutions	5
	Not teaching them to read and write	3
	Total	112

As seen in Table 6, preschool preservice teachers provided 109 responses under 6 themes and primary school preservice teachers gave 112 responses under 6 themes concerning their expectations from families in children's acquisition of early literacy skills. Preschool preservice teachers explained their expectations from families by highlighting the necessities of "buying and reading books", "having children do reading and writing activities" "practicing and supporting at home". Primary school preservice teachers, on the other hand, expressed their opinions as "having children do reading and writing activities", "caring and communicating with children" and "buying and reading books". Responses of some participants are presented below:

"They must provide a convenient environment at home. Materials related with reading and writing must be various and interesting. There must be writing and letters in the child's room. An environment must be provided which is rich in stimuli like calendars, recipes and alphabet toys. Books, magazines, newspapers, maps, chalks, pencils, brushes, paint are required materials for writing and painting on paper."(PPT51)
 "I expect them to revise all the activities done at school when they come home and support them with examples from daily life."(PPT17)
 "Some painting activities, nursery rhymes, lullabies and riddles may help setting the ground for the acquisition of the skills."(PsPT9)
 "For teaching early literacy skills, families should play games that can attract children's attention. They can buy colorful letter books to increase children's interest in letters." (PsP19)

Table 7. Primary school preservice teachers' expectations from preschool education

Theme	Total content
Introducing the letter	31
Teaching numbers	15
Designing activities that can develop hand-eye coordination	15
Designing manipulative play and materials	12
Stimulating an interest and curiosity for reading	10
Having children do pre-writing activities	9
Teaching proper pencil grasp	5
Designing visual reading activities	5
Designing activities that can improve listening skills	5
Making children love school	4
Total	111

Table 7 shows that primary school preservice teachers gave 111 responses under 10 themes concerning their expectation from preschool education in teaching early literacy skills. Primary school preservice teachers expressed their opinions about their expectations from preschool

education mostly under the themes “introducing the letter”, “teaching numbers”, “Designing activities that can develop hand-eye coordination”. Some participant quotations are given below:

“Having children draw pictures, do pre-writing activities, play games and listen to songs to feel sounds etc..” (PsPT6)

“[I expect them] to have done pre-writing activities. To have learnt pencil grasp and to use scissors. To have taught letters at least as shapes.” (PsPT 25)

“[Children] should be made aware of numbers and letters.” (PsPT 42)

DISCUSSION

The results indicated that preschool preservice teachers defined the term early literacy as letter recognition and pronunciation, school readiness and learning to read and write at an early age. More than half of the primary school preservice teachers were seen to define early literacy as learning to read and write at an early age and few primary school preservice teachers defined it as recognizing and pronouncing letters. Based on this finding, it can be said that preschool preservice teachers defined the term early literacy better while primary school preservice teachers are mistaken in defining the term. In addition, preservice teachers were asked to explain what early literacy skills are. It was seen that preschool and primary school preservice teachers explained early literacy skills with only a few skills, failed to go beyond the limits of these skills and focused mostly on the sub-contents of school readiness (pencil grasp, motor development, pre-writing activities etc.).

It was observed that preservice teachers had difficulty classifying early literacy skills using their existing knowledge, and they used only presumptive expressions about the concepts when responding to questions (e.g. *child's recognition of the letters and numbers he/she sees, child's reaching maturity to be able to hold a pencil*) although they seemed to be more knowledge of certain skills (letter recognition, alphabet knowledge etc.). Studying preschool preservice teachers' opinions about early literacy, Altun and Tantekin Erden (2016) reported similar results to the present study and emphasized that a great majority of the participants did not know about the theoretical background and content of the term. Similarly, Ergül et al. (2014) examined preschool preservice teachers' opinions about early literacy, and stated that most of the teachers defined the term as readiness and explained it as learning to read and write at an early age. However, teachers' knowledge, beliefs and pedagogical experiences during teacher training processes are reflected on their later practices of education-teaching, and they are critical in supporting children to start primary school with ready skills. Children whose early literacy skills are enhanced have increased vocabulary, phonetic and writing awareness (Catts, Compton, Tomblin & Bridges, 2012; Grimma, Solaria, McIntyre & Denton, 2018; Scarborough, 1998; Spira, Bracken & Fischel, 2005). These skills are predictors of learning to read, future academic achievement and developing reading habits (Rohde, 2015; Schachter et al. 2016). Crone and Whitehurst (1999) found in their study that when the first grade curriculum focused on developing children's reading skills, no difference was found in reading skills compared with the second grade. This, once again, reveals the importance of developing skills in the preschool period, which has a critical process in children's development.

Another finding of the study is that preschool and primary school preservice teachers see early literacy as an important skill. They expressed that early writing skills are important in that they contribute to the child's school readiness, make it easier for the child to learn to read and write and facilitate adaptation to primary school. Moreover, concerning the reading-writing skills children are supposed to have when they start the first grade, preservice teachers frequently emphasized children starting primary school need to have certain skills like having letter-alphabet knowledge, being able to grasp a pencil, building sound-symbol relationships and

recognizing numbers. Preservice teachers' approach to early literacy in the context of school readiness is consistent with the state's curricula and the literature (Altun & Tantekin Erden, 2016; Ergül et al., 2014; MoNE, 2013). However, in the study which determined the predictors of reading skills, Scarborough (2001) reported that visual and motor skills which are considered the traditional perspective in evaluating readiness are in fact the least powerful predictors of reading difficulties; while vocabulary knowledge, sentence and story recalling, writing awareness, which facilitate understanding, are the most reliable predictors of reading achievement in the early period. Although they consider early literacy important, preservice teachers' lack of knowledge of the concept caused them to concentrate on the sub-skills of school readiness in explaining the underlying reasons.

Regarding their expectations from families in acquiring early literacy skills, preschool preservice teachers expressed their expectations as buying and reading books for children while primary school preservice teachers frequently emphasized that parents should have children do reading-writing activities, care and communicate with children, and buy and read books for them. It is a well-known fact that reading books to children in the preschool period contributes to their literacy skills and language development, which is also confirmed by the findings of several studies. For instance, Lonigan & Whitehurst (1998) examined the effects of interactive book reading intervention by parents and families on the oral language skills of 3-4 year-old children from families with low socioeconomic conditions and found a positive change. In the experimental study conducted by Rasinski & Stevenson (2005), a fluency based home reading program (Fast Start), which involved reading short texts to children with their families, was applied and it was seen to have important effects on children's letter, word and reading fluency. Likewise, Farrant & Zubrick (2013) concluded that parent-child reading in the early childhood period affected children's vocabulary knowledge. Reading books to children in the home literacy environment promotes children's early literacy. It is understood that the preservice teachers in both groups think parents' buying and reading books for their children is effective in acquiring early literacy skills. According to the Family Literacy Theory arguing that domestic experiences help children with literacy development, parents and parent participation play a crucial role (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). It has been shown by several studies that particularly home literacy environment (Burgess, Hecht & Lonigan, 2002; Weigel, Martin & Bennett, 2006) and home literacy activities (Evans, Shaw & Bell, 2000; Hood, Conlon & Andrews, 2008; Roberts, Jergens & Burchinal, 2005) contribute to children's early literacy development.

Primary school preservice teachers were asked about their expectations from preschool education. Primary school preservice teachers expressed their opinions mostly under the themes of introducing letters, teaching numbers and designing activities that can develop hand-eye coordination. As one can see, preservice teachers did not express opinions within the context of early literacy skills. Considering the skills that children are supposed to have acquired when starting primary school, primary school preservice teachers' expectations from preschool education are thought to remain weak. However, primary school teachers are expected to have more knowledge of the early skills before starting primary school. For example, Piasta, Connor, Fishman & Morrison (2009) compared first grade teachers' knowledge of early literacy and word-reading gains of the students in their classes. They found that the instruction given by teachers with more early literacy knowledge was more effective on developing students' word-reading skills compared with the instruction by less knowledgeable teachers. When planning curriculum and classroom practices for their students, teachers are expected to be good assessors in order to be able to answer the questions what do the students know? And what do they need to learn? At this very point, critical deductions can be made regarding teacher training. When the content of the undergraduate curriculum for teachers is examined, it is seen that no course is included on knowing and assessing young children or on the development of preschool

children for primary school preservice teachers. Courses on early literacy skills are not common in neither of the teacher-training curriculum, which can be thought as the reason behind preservice teachers' misconception. Clark (2020) reported that primary school preservice teachers who attend courses including reading instruction techniques, methods of reading assessment, and ways of gathering information about children and supporting children under risk have increased self-efficacy in reading instruction at primary schools. In addition, studies report that neither preservice teachers nor professional teachers see themselves competent in early literacy instruction and that they state the undergraduate education they receive is not sufficient to prepare them as teachers with early literacy awareness (Özdemir & Bayraktar, 2015; Şahiner, 2013). In this regard, it is considered important that both related undergraduate programs and the in-service training programs during the year they start profession include courses and subjects on early literacy.

Children know many things about reading long before they start formal education, which lays the foundations of learning to read and write (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). Practices used in preschool and primary school classrooms are complementary to this pre-development. Studies show that teachers' levels of knowledge of early literacy are reflected on their classroom practices (Ergül et al., 2014; Kuzborska, 2011; Lynch & Owston, 2015; Regassa & Teshome, 2015; Schachter, 2017). Research makes emphasis on the importance of strengthening educators' knowledge and awareness levels through professional development in enhancing particularly early literacy (e.g., Cunningham, Etter, Platas, Wheeler, & Campbell, 2015; Egert, Dederer & Fukkink, 2020; Markussen-Brown et al., 2017; Piasta et al., 2017). For primary school teachers who set the educational goals and plan the practices in reading-writing instruction, it is only possible to include especially children under possible risk into interventions based on a correct causal model at very early ages through evaluating initial skills in the early process and participating in required practices before it is too late (Scarborough, 2001). Interventions based on the correct casual model have been proven to be effective in reducing future risks for reading (Bingham, Culatta & Hall-Kenyon, 2016; McBreen & Savage, 2020; Spira, Bracken, Fischel, 2015; Vaughn & Fletcher, 2012). The results of the present study revealed the important fact that pedagogical knowledge of both preschool and primary school teachers must be enhanced in the pre-service period so that they can support and develop early literacy skills of children and apply to early intervention when necessary.

CONCLUSION

Preschool and primary school teachers' awareness of such a critical skill as early literacy at the end of their undergraduate education was the starting point of this study. Results proved that preservice teachers from both departments are familiar with the concept but the lack of knowledge concerning its content and sub-skills. Although they frequently mentioned some skills like letter recognition, pronouncing the letters based on the concept early literacy, they did not often talk about such skills as understanding, which sets the basis for reading, listening, vocabulary, knowledge of story elements, writing awareness and phonological memory. This could be a little worrying since classroom practices of preschool and primary school teachers, who play a key role in the development of young children, are dependent on their knowledge and beliefs. Based on this fact, courses with a direct content of early literacy can be included in undergraduate curricula to enhance preservice teachers' knowledge level of early literacy. Moreover, early literacy knowledge can be promoted through activities like courses, seminars or conferences in the year before preservice teachers start the profession. Thus, focusing on the content of early literacy will help new teachers understand why some children cannot learn to read in the expected time in first grade.

Hence, teachers working with young children should be able to assess and practice in terms of early literacy, what children can achieve and what they need to know when they start school. Teachers also need to be competent in early literacy practices and successfully evaluate both children's prior knowledge and new skills to be learned. Accordingly, it is important to organize courses on the techniques of assessing the child, classroom assessment approaches (observations, tests etc.) that measure early literacy skills for primary school preservice teachers during teacher training. It should also be noted that this study focused on preservice teachers' awareness. So, early literacy awareness and classroom practices of teachers already working in the field can be investigated by future studies. Effects of professional experience and in-service trainings on early literacy knowledge should be examined, as well.

The study was conducted in qualitative research design with senior students at the departments of preschool education and primary school teaching at a state university. The homogeneous structure of the sample can be accepted as a limitation. However, qualitative studies enable to reach more in-depth information to explain a phenomenon. In this respect, it should be remarked that the findings of the present study are specific to our own sample. However, reviewing the related literature, it is possible to assert that the findings of the present study are similar to those of some previous studies. For more generalizable results, different data collection techniques (questionnaires, forms etc.) can be used with larger samples.

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