



Paraprofesyoneller İçin Küçük Adımlar Erken Eğitim Programı Kursu: Kursiyerler Ne Söylüyor?*

NimetBülbin SUCUOĞLU** Ayşe Dolunay SARICA***
Hatice BAKKALOĞLU**** Bahar KEÇELİ-KAYSILI*****

ÖZ. Erken çocukluk özel eğitimi (EÇÖE), artan sayıda özel gereksinimli çocuklarla birlikte ülkemizde gelişmekte olan bir alandır. Bu gelişmelerin yanında, alanda çalışan nitelikli personel sayısının yetersizliği, bu gruptaki çocuklar ve ailelerinin hizmetlerden yeterince yararlanamamalarına neden olmaktadır. 2010 yılında Sabancı Vakfı, iki sivil toplum örgütü ve bir üniversitenin işbirliği çerçevesinde Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesi'nde yer alan 3 ilde başlatılan bir projede, kız meslek lisesi mezunlarına Küçük Adımlar Erken Eğitim Programı kursu düzenlenmiştir. Bu araştırmanın amacı, kursa katılan kız meslek lisesi mezunlarının 60 saatlik kurs ile ilgili görüş ve önerilerini belirlemektir. 25 kursiyerle yürütülen üç odak grup görüşmesinden elde edilen sonuçlar, kursun katılımcılar için yararlı olduğunu, aynı zamanda kursiyerlerin sonraki kurslar için önerilerde bulduklarını göstermiştir. Araştırmacılar, bulguların Türkiye'deki EÇÖE alanında çalışacak personelin yetiştirilmesi için önemli ipuçları barındırdığı sonucuna varmışlardır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Erken çocukluk özel eğitimi, Küçük Adımlar Erken Eğitim Programı, paraprofesyonel, odak grup görüşmesi.

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**Prof. Dr., Ankara Üniversitesi, Eğitim Bilimleri Fakültesi, Ankara, Türkiye.

E-posta: nimetbulbin@gmail.com

***Yrd.Doç. Dr., Çukurova Üniversitesi, Eğitim Fakültesi, Adana, Türkiye.

E-posta: dolunaysarica@gmail.com

****Yrd.Doç. Dr., Ankara Üniversitesi, Eğitim Bilimleri Fakültesi, Ankara, Türkiye.

E-posta: haticebakkaloglu@gmail.com

*****Dr., Ankara Üniversitesi, Eğitim Bilimleri Fakültesi, Ankara, Türkiye.

E-posta: baharkk@gmail.com

ÖZET

Amaç ve Önem: Erken çocukluk özel eğitimi (EÇÖE), artan sayıda özel gereksinimli çocuklarla birlikte ülkemizde gelişmekte olan bir alandır. Bu gelişmelerin yanında, alanda çalışan nitelikli personel sayısının yetersizliği, bu çocukların ve ailelerinin hizmetlerden yeterince yararlanamamalarına neden olmaktadır. Gelişmiş ülkelerde bu sorunu gidermek amacıyla paraprofesyoneller yetiştirilmekte ve onların uzman denetiminde çocuklara ve ailelerine hizmet vermeleri sağlanmaktadır. Ülkemizde de, benzer bir amaca yönelik olarak 2010 yılında Sabancı Vakfı, iki sivil toplum örgütü ve bir üniversitenin işbirliği çerçevesinde Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesi'nde yer alan 3 ilde başlatılan bir projede, kız meslek lisesi mezunlarına Küçük Adımlar Erken Eğitim Programı (KAEEP) kursu düzenlenmiştir. Projede kurs bitiminde kursiyerlerin en az %40'ının bölgedeki özel özel eğitim ve rehabilitasyon merkezlerinde istihdam edilmeleri amaçlanmıştır. Bu araştırmanın amacı, kursa katılan kız meslek lisesi mezunlarının kurs ile ilgili görüş ve önerilerini belirlemektir.

Yöntem: Araştırma grubunu, KAEEP kursuna katılan 25 kız meslek lisesi mezunu (19-35 yaş) oluşturmuştur. Katılımcıların kurs ile ilgili görüş ve önerilerini belirlemek amacıyla 3 ilde 3 odak grup görüşmesi gerçekleştirilmiştir. Video ve ses kaydının alındığı görüşmelerin dökümleri yapılmış ve elde edilen verilerin tümevarımsal analizi yapılmıştır.

Bulgular: Analizler, katılımcıların görüş ve önerilerine ilişkin üç tema ortaya koymuştur: “Kurs sürecine ilişkin görüşler”, “kurstan elde edilen kazanımlar”, “ileriye yönelik öneriler”. İlk temada kursiyerlerin kursun genel organizasyonu, kursta kullanılan materyaller ve eğitimcilere ilişkin olumlu geribildirim sağladıkları görülmüştür. Bu temaya paralel olarak üçüncü temada kursiyerlerin kurs süresi, uygulamalara daha fazla zaman ayrılması, video örneklerinin artırılması ve kursun yaygınlaştırılması gibi önerileri olmuştur. Kursiyerler ikinci temada kurs sayesinde alanda çalışmaya güdülendiklerini, özel gereksinimli çocukların gelişimi, çocukla iletişim kurma gibi konularda bilgilerinin arttığını ve KAEEP’ni bağımsız uygulamada belirli bir yeterliğe eriştiklerini ifade etmişlerdir.

Tartışma ve Sonuçlar: Kursiyerlerden odak grup görüşmeleri yoluyla alınan geribildirimler, KAEEP kursunun EÇÖE’de paraprofesyonel yetiştirmede ümit vaat eden bir kurs olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Bununla birlikte, bir uygulamanın etkililiğine karar vermede, uygulamaya katılanların görüşlerinin yol gösterici ancak tek başına yeterli olamayacağı yadsınamaz. Bu noktada, bu araştırmadan elde edilen sonuçların, alanda çalışan paraprofesyonellerin iş başında performansları ve KAEEP uygulanan çocukların gelişimsel ilerlemeleri gibi bulgular ile desteklenmesi önerilmektedir.



The Small Steps Early Intervention Program Course for Paraprofessionals: What Paraprofessionals Have to Say*

NimetBülbin SUCUOĞLU** Ayşe Dolunay SARICA***
Hatice BAKKALOĞLU**** Bahar KEÇELİ-KAYSILI*****

ABSTRACT. Early childhood special education (ECSE) is a growing field in Turkey with increasing numbers of children with special needs and families served throughout the nation. Despite this trend, personnel shortage is still a problem, with especially a lack of paraprofessionals who can be considered an important work force in the field. In 2010, the Sabanci Foundation, together with two NGOs and a university, began a project in Southeastern Turkey, consisting of raising paraprofessionals to serve as personnel in implementing the Small Steps Early Intervention Program (SSEIP). This study aimed at investigating the views of trainees who participated in the 60-hour SSEIP course. Results from 3 focus group discussions with a total of 25 trainees revealed the benefits of the course for the participants as well as their recommendations for future courses. The authors concluded that the findings carried important implications for raising ECSE personnel in Turkey.

Keywords: Early childhood special education, Small Steps Early Intervention Program, paraprofessional, focus group discussion.

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** Prof., Ankara University, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Ankara, Turkey.

E-mail: nimetbulbin@gmail.com

*** Assis., Prof., Çukurova University, Faculty of Education, Adana, Turkey.

E-mail: dolunaysarica@gmail.com

**** Assis., Prof., Ankara University, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Ankara, Turkey.

E-mail: haticebakkaloglu@gmail.com

***** PhD., Ankara University, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Ankara, Turkey.

E-mail: baharkk@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Effective early childhood special education (ECSE) services can be provided only through the collaborative works of a team consisting of professionals including early childhood specialists, psychologists, physiotherapists, preschool teachers and speech and language therapists (Bowe, 2007; Dunlop, 2009; Dunst & Bruder, 2006; Turnbull, Summers, et al., 2007). However, literature emphasizes that there is a shortage of qualified personnel in the field and the services mandated by laws and regulations cannot be provided as expected (Gallagher, Malone, Cleghorne, & Helms, 1997; Malone, Straka, & Logan, 2000; Wischnowski, Yates, & McCollum, 1996). Thus, many researchers propose that paraprofessionals can and should work as service providers in order to support young children with special needs (CSN) and their parents. For example, in the United States (based on Part B and C of IDEA), paraprofessionals are being employed by many states to work in special education and ECSE (Billingsley, 2004; McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). In addition, researchers state that raising paraprofessionals who are able to work with families and children under the supervision of licensed personnel could increase the number of children who are provided services (Davis, 1995; Killoran, Templeman, Peters & Udell, 2001).

Paraprofessionals in ECSE can be defined as the support personnel who work under the guidance of early interventionists and/or classroom teachers to provide services (Killoran et al., 2001; Deardorff, Glasenapp, Schlack, & Udell, 2007). They are considered as the “backbone” of ECSE (Killoran et al., 2001) their roles and responsibilities varying from participating in child assessment and Individualized Family Service Plan meetings to attending professional training programs and working directly with children and families. They can be assigned for young CSN to teach social skills, use behavioral strategies, monitor child progress and conduct administrative work in ECSE, while it should be kept in mind that all of these require the supervision of qualified personnel (State of California, Department of Developmental Services, 2012). Research indicates that paraprofessionals who are trained adequately and are supervised by professional are part of a cost-effective workforce in ECSE (Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron & Fialka, 2005). Taken that paraprofessionals are important support personnel in ECSE, their core competencies pertaining to the knowledge, skills and values needed for working with young children and their families have to be identified (Killoran et al., 2001; Deardorff et al., 2007) and supported through effective training programs.

In the last two decades, the field of ECSE has gained significant attention in Turkey. On the one hand, several programs developed for young

CSN and families have been practiced while on the other hand, an important amount of data regarding the characteristics of children and families has accumulated. Despite these advances, research continues to emphasize the shortage of personnel in the field. Therefore, although CSN are diagnosed at very early years, they cannot be provided services during the critical periods of development (Diken et al., 2012). Many families try to support the development of their children through personal efforts with limited support from educators. In addition, although preschool inclusion is mandated by law, because of the fact that preschool teachers have limited experience in inclusion and the lack of support personnel for teachers, CSN cannot benefit from early intervention or inclusion as much as expected (Altun & Gülben, 2009; Artan & Uyanık-Balat, 2003; Bozarslan-Malkoç, 2010; Gök & Erbaş, 2011; Kaya, 2005; Özbaba, 2000; Temel, 2000; Varlier, 2004).

In Turkey, there are 4 groups of professionals who work in ECSE: 1) early interventionists who have undergraduate degrees from one of the departments of special education, child development or psychology; 2) teachers who have double major undergraduate degrees in special education and preschool education; 3) a small number of teachers who have certificates in at least one ECSE program (e.g. Small Steps, Portage); 4) a small number of professionals such as psychologists, physiotherapists and social workers who mainly serve in clinical settings. Therefore, one might claim that alternatives be generated for this personnel shortage.

Parallel to international literature (Guralnick, 1997), previous ECSE studies in Turkey have indicated that both CSN (Sucuoğlu, Bakkaloğlu, Özenmiş & Kaygusuz, 2001; Gül & Diken, 2009) and their parents (Birkan, 2002; Kırcaali-İftar, 2000; Küçüker, 2001; Sucuoğlu, 2001; Sucuoğlu & Bakkaloğlu, 2001) gain substantial benefits from early intervention. Considering the positive results of ECSE research (Schonkoff & Hauser-Cram, 1987; Connolly, Morgan, & Russel, 1993; Spiker & Hopmann, 1997) and findings pertaining to the cost-effectiveness of ECSE (Carpenter, 2005; Farran, 2009), raising personnel for ECSE services seems very critical.

In Turkey, Vocational Schools for Girls (VSG) are secondary schools that provide education and training in different job areas for young girls. The Departments of Child Development in these schools offer two separate programs: early childhood education and special education (MEB, 2007). VSG graduates are defined as teacher assistants and their roles and responsibilities are explained in Supporting Vocational Training Project of Ministry of Education. According to this project report, teacher assistants are special education support personnel and are well qualified for supporting preschool teachers in classrooms (MEB, 2007). Therefore, that these young girls who have knowledge and experience in child development and

preschool education can be considered a solution for the personnel shortage in ECSE. They can be trained through short-term courses in order to work in one of the early childhood programs under supervision. Thus, it would be possible to reach and support more and more young CSN and their families.

This study was conducted as part of a project supported by the Social Development Grant Program of the Sabancı Foundation in 3 cities located in the Southeast Anatolian Region of Turkey. These cities offer very limited ECSE services for young CSN. The project aimed to train VSG graduates as paraprofessionals for Small Steps Early Intervention Program (SSEIP) in order to expand ECSE services in the region. In accordance with the project proposal, successful trainees were then to be employed by the special education centers in the region to work under the guidance of special educators.

The main purpose of this study was to determine the opinions of the participants regarding the SSEIP course via focus group discussions. The researchers believe that the results of this study will build awareness on behalf of the stakeholders involved in personnel preparation in the field of ECSE. In addition, the findings are expected to guide the effort of expanding early intervention services in Turkey.

METHOD

The Small Steps Early Intervention Program (SSEIP)

The SSEIP was originally developed in Australia by Pieterse, Treolar, Cairns, Uther, & Brar (1985) in order to guide parents of young children with developmental delays in supporting their children's development during the early years. The program includes an 8 book set, including assessment, instruction and evaluation in five developmental domains: communication, gross motor, fine motor, receptive language and personal/social skills. The program rests on the assumptions that all children (despite their disabilities) can learn and that parents are the first and most important teachers of their child in his/her early years. The books are designed to lead parents in assessing their child's performance in the aforementioned five domains with a developmental checklist (Book 8) in the home environment with household materials and toys. This checklist includes skills a normally developing child is expected to gain in his/her first 4 years. Assessment is followed by planning what to teach, how to teach and how to evaluate child progress. All skills are explained in detail with guiding examples.

The SSEIP was adapted for the Turkish population by Kırcaali-İftar and colleagues (1995) and began to be systematically conducted in 4 universities

around the nation since 1996. Different from other countries, SSEIP in Turkey is implemented in various educational settings with the collaboration of early childhood special educators and families. Specialists conduct assessments in collaboration with parents and families visit these specialists approximately once a month for follow-up.

The effectiveness of SSEIP on child and parental outcomes was tested in many studies and findings from these studies showed that the SSEIP was effective on on all developmental domains (Sucuoğlu, Küçüker, & Kobal, 1997; Sucuoğlu et al., 1998; Sucuoğlu, Küçüker, Kobal, & Ceber, 2000; Sucuoğlu, Büyüköztürk, & Bakkaloğlu, 2004; Sucuoğlu, Küçüker et al., 2005) as well as on parental outcomes such as meeting needs (Sucuoğlu, 2001), overall satisfaction (Sucuoğlu, 2001; Sucuoğlu, & Bakkaloğlu, 2001) and parent-child interaction (Küçüker, Bakkaloğlu, & Sucuoğlu, 2001).

The SSEIP Course for VSG Graduates

In Turkey, the SSEIP was taught to various professionals such as psychologists, special educators and preschool teachers through short-term courses and has been practiced in populated cities. However, this program has not been used for training paraprofessionals prior to the Sabancı Project. Within this project, a 60-hour course was designed to train VSG graduates as paraprofessionals in implementing the SSEIP. In the target cities, administrators of the vocational high schools, special education centers and public institutions such as hospitals, guiding centers and school districts were informed about the project and the SSEIP through pamphlets, brochures and meetings with the local authorities. In addition, information about the course was announced via visual and printed media as well as the project website.

Participation criteria included being a graduate of the Child Development or Special Education Department of a VSG with a “good degree” (having a minimum 4,00 GPA out of 5,00), being no older than 35 years and willingness to complete the course. The reason for putting an age criterion was that the researchers favored training personnel who could stay in the ECSE labor force for a long time. A total of 460 young girls (Gaziantep, 170, Şanlıurfa, 260, Mardin, 31) applied for the course through the project web page and all, most of whom were unemployed, wanted to work in the field as qualified teacher assistants and stated that the SSEIP training course would increase their opportunities. All applicants were interviewed individually by one of the partners (the volunteering NGO). Following the interviews, 39 from Gaziantep, 49 from Şanlıurfa and 31 applicants from Mardin were selected as trainees.

The SSEIP course was held in each city one week apart and the authors of this article all worked as course instructors. The 60-hour course consisted of 48 theoretical and 12 practicum hours using the program books, PowerPoint printouts, lecture notes and toys. The instructors provided information on the principles of the program, assessment, instruction, communicating with the children and their families and behavior support (Table 1). The lecture notes and PowerPoint printouts were handed out during the first day of the course and several video examples on instruction were presented throughout the week. The teaching strategies included direct instruction, question-answer and role playing and active participation was highly encouraged by the trainers. Trainee performance was tested via multiple choice test at the end of training. A score of 70 was taken as a cutoff point for a successful completion of the course. Some of the successful trainees were employed in one of the private special education centers located in their home towns.

Table 1. *The SSEIP Course*

Major Topic	Content
Purpose and content	The importance of paraprofessionals in ECSE, raising paraprofessionals, their roles and responsibilities, ECSE research
The SSEIP	Foundations, program content, research and practice on SSEIP, introduction to the developmental domains included in the program, teaching materials and books
Determining and defining instructional goals and developing an individualized plan for the child	Curriculum based assessment, assessing child performance Determining instructional goals for each child The individualized instructional plan
Instruction	Teaching skills in the 5 domains
Problem behaviors	Defining, preventing, and controlling problem behaviors
Case examples	Video examples for assessment, writing instructional goals, and instruction Video examples for preventing and controlling problem behaviors Case studies focusing on parents, special educators and paraprofessionals (collaboration)

Participants

During the last session of the course, the participants were informed about the purpose of the focus group discussions that were to be held after the training and 10 participants from each city were randomly selected. A total of 25 trainees (10 from Gaziantep, 10 from Şanlıurfa and 5 from Mardin) joined the focus group discussions. The participants' ages ranged between 19 and 34 and 19 were unemployed while 6 worked as caretakers in various private preschools during the time of the study. Twelve of the participants were students in a distance education program of a university and 4 were students in the various departments of one of the local universities. Fourteen trainees had up to 2 years of work experience.

Data Collection

Data were gathered via focus group discussions. The focus group is an evidence-based qualitative data collection technique which provides detailed qualitative and quantitative information that can be collected in a short period of time. A focus group discussion is also beneficial for enabling participant interaction that may yield useful data which could not have been obtained through individual interviews (Morgan & Krueger, 1998).

Three focus group discussions were held at each project city during May 2011. Discussions were carried out in the conference rooms of the hotels the trainings had taken place. All discussions were held by the second and fourth authors, the latter author serving as the co-moderator in charge of taking field notes and checking the 2 cameras (211 minutes and 26 second recordings in total).

Data Analysis

The video records and field notes were content analyzed inductively, a widely used qualitative analysis technique. Firstly, the records were transcribed verbatim and a total of 85 page and 4177 line data were obtained. Secondly, the data were placed in the Descriptive Data Index coded by the second and fourth authors independently. The major categories and themes emerging from this analysis were later compared by the same authors and any discrepancies were resolved through a 6 hour discussion. To check for reliability, the first and third authors reviewed the transcripts and themes independently and a second meeting with all 4 authors was held in order to reach full agreement on the identified themes and patterns.

RESULTS

Participants' opinions and comments such as the working conditions of special education centers and administrators' attitudes towards paraprofessionals were eliminated from the data analysis due to the fact that they were observed in only one focus group (Mardin). As a result, 3 themes concerning the views and recommendations of the participants emerged.

Theme 1. Opinions on the SSEIP course: All participants stated opinions regarding the course under four subthemes.

a. Course Materials: All participants stated that the course materials including the book set, PowerPoint printouts, case examples and CDs were appropriate and above satisfactory. Nine participants claimed that they had difficulties understanding some parts of the books such as assessment of child performance and speech and language instruction. On the other hand, three participants explained that the gross and fine motor skills books were easy to comprehend due to the books' being parallel to their high school education. Seven participants explained that the course helped them to develop materials that they could use when working with children. Finally, eight trainees said that it was very helpful and informative to watch the original videos of the SSEIP as well as real video examples.

b. Course conditions: All participants agreed that the conditions of the course were above satisfactory. However, most (n=22) said that the course should have been longer. Also, three participants mentioned that the daily schedule was overloaded, while two claimed that the recesses were very short.

c. Performance evaluation: 16 participants stated that the final exam reflected the content of the course well. Four participants stated positive opinions regarding the difficulty level of the exam while three mentioned difficulties in the fill-in-the-blank and multiple choice questions. Moreover, some participants (11) emphasized that alternative assessment methods such as oral exams or observations of trainee performance would have yielded a more objective performance.

d. The necessity of the course: The SSEIP was originally developed for parents of CSN with the assumption that parents could use the books without supervision (Pieterse et al., 1996). That is why, in this study, the participants were asked whether they could have carried out the SSEIP without any formal training. In response to this question, all participants stated that they had difficulty comprehending some parts in the books. They claimed that these challenging parts were explained in detail throughout the course by the instructors. A participant from Gaziantep said, "*If somebody had not*

explained the program, we wouldn't have understood it. Probably we would not have tried to learn what it was all about on our own." (Focus group Gaziantep, line 2860-2862, page 58). On the other hand, two participants claimed that this course was the only way to find a job since they had no college education (Focus group Mardin, line 1991-1994, page 41).

Taken together, the responses regarding the first theme showed that all participants expressed an overall satisfaction with the SSEIP course. Considering the unemployment ratio in the region and that VSG graduates are not appointed as teacher assistants in the preschool system due to related legislation, it is believed that the SSEIP course might increase the job opportunities for young VSG graduates.

Theme 2. Course gains: Data revealed four subthemes regarding gains from the course.

a. Knowledge: 11 participants shared their opinions on acquiring significant knowledge from the course. Five said that they had learned how to assess child performance and comprehended the importance of detailed assessment prior to instruction. This finding indicates that child performance was not being assessed comprehensively in preschools and information obtained from parents was the sole basis for selecting child objectives. An interesting point stated by four participants was that the course helped them realize that the development of CSN was similar to that of peers. As expressed by one participant, *"I was thinking about what I could do for these children. However, I realized that a child with special needs can learn many skills too...That means, it would not be too bad to have a child with [a] disability."* (Focus group Şanlıurfa, line 234-236, page 5). Three participants employed in special education centers as caretakers stated that they understood the importance of routines and play on children's learning and the activities that could support speech and language. In addition, two participants pointed out that in practice, the VSG graduates employed in private preschools are the ones mostly held responsible for group activities in classrooms. However, they claimed that through this course, they gained knowledge on one-to-one instruction and communication.

b. Change in attitudes: Five participants expressed changes in their attitudes toward CSN and their families. Two participants stated positive attitudes regarding the developmental gap between children with and without disabilities. Accordingly, they began to believe that this gap would be closed if those children were diagnosed and provided services early. In addition, two participants mentioned the importance of partnerships with parents while two others expressed their feelings related to the necessity of guiding families to related services.

c. Self-competency: Of the 19 participants who mentioned their competency to implement the SSEIP, 3 considered themselves fully competent and four competent in gross and motor skill instruction, while seven believed that they would successfully communicate and collaborate with parents. In explaining the effect of training on her professional development, one participant said, “*My husband is [a] physiotherapist who works with CSN. Whenever I pass by the therapy room, I hear children crying. I enter the room and tell him how he can use play for teaching motor skills.*” (Focus group Gaziantep, line 2819-2821 page 57). The researchers believed that the participants were very objective in explaining their level of competency for implementing the SSEIP, since despite their self-confidence, many claimed that they needed extra practice on assessment, speech and language instruction and handling problem behaviors (13).

d. Motivation for professional development: This subtheme indicated that the course motivated the participants to work in the field as paraprofessionals. Accordingly, four participants stated that they felt the need to get involved in further professional development activities. For example, one participant from Mardin expressed her feelings about professional development as: “*During the course, I was watching the instructors and thinking as to whether I could be like them in the future.*” (Focus group Mardin, line 1968-1969, page 40).

Theme 3. Recommendations for future: The final theme revealed important recommendations for future ECSE program courses. According to five VSG graduates, similar courses should include more information on families with CSN. As explaining her need to learn about families, one participant said, “*We’ll recommend many things to families, but we might ... hurt their feelings. ... we should be given more information about their characteristics... how we should interact with them...*” (Focus group Gaziantep, line 3042-3046, page 62).

The second recommendation given by the participants was related to scheduling courses for administrators and/or owners of special education centers. Six participants mentioned that administrators should participate in this kind of professional training about early intervention and the SSEIP so that they can provide the necessary conditions for carrying out the program. For example one participant from Gaziantep stated, “*I might request certain learning materials ... some bosses can tolerate these demands, some cannot... (they) should be given information about early intervention programs...*” (Focus group Gaziantep, line 4096-4099, page 83).

Thirdly, the trainees suggested an enrichment of the course materials in future training programs. 14 participants suggested more video examples

whereas 10 participants stated that more of these videos should include real examples. Many trainees stated that video examples should include children with various disabilities (12), how to deal with problem behaviors (4), speech and language support (2) and group instruction (2). Finally, two participants suggested short-term internships under the supervision of SSEIP specialists.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, the SSEIP course was evaluated by analyzing the qualitative data including the participants' reflections and opinions regarding the various aspects of the course. Similar to previous research (Deardroff et al., 2007; Giangreco, Backus, Cichoski, Kelly, Sherman, & Mavropoulos, 2003), our results showed that almost all participants were satisfied with the 60 hour-course in many aspects. In addition, they commented that they gained a lot of new knowledge regarding how to carry out the program and ECSE in general, as well as the possible contributions they could bring to the field. As a result, they came to view themselves as personnel who could provide effective services to CSN and their families. It seemed that they were aware of their strengths as well as their limitations; after all, they stated that they needed more information on certain aspects of the program such as child assessment and on-the-job-experience. Moreover, the participants provided certain recommendations for future courses aimed at increasing the number of paraprofessionals in ECSE, in Turkey. They emphasized that the course should be longer than 60 hours and that it should include more instruction on how to work with parents. These findings can be interpreted as the SSEIP course having a positive effect on the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the paraprofessional candidates who might be able to work with young children and their families in private special education centers and/or inclusive settings.

The findings had important implications for career building as well. The reader may recall some of the participants' motivation for an undergraduate degree in ECSE, following the course. This may very well be interpreted as an important course gain in a country with serious personnel shortage in ECSE (Altun & Gülben, 2009; Temel, 2000; Varlier, 2004) and one could only hope that these motivated VSG graduates catch the opportunity to make their career dreams come to life.

Although the results of this study were very promising for raising support personnel in ECSE, some important limitations should be taken into account. Previous literature emphasizes that professional training programs should be evaluated by determining the impact of programs on teacher as

well as child outcomes (Guskey, 2000; 2002; Lowden, 2005). In other words, conclusions drawn solely on participant satisfaction will most probably be immature. In addition to participant reflections, participant learning, using new knowledge and skills in the field, organizational changes and impact on children should be considered for determining as to whether the course was definitely effective. This study only serves to provide the first level of information, that is, opinions of the participants regarding the course. Therefore whether the 60-hour course was effective in raising qualified SSEIP paraprofessionals should be examined in detail, including the factors tackled above. An effective method might be to monitor the participants of this study during real practice with children and families in real educational settings.

One major reason the authors could not investigate these outcomes was the location of the 3 project cities. The cities are approximately a 12 hour drive from Ankara where the authors live and work. Any follow-up (either the paraprofessional or the child) would therefore require financial sources as well as time on the part of the researchers.

Despite this limitation, the authors had an opportunity to visit the three cities six months after the course. They held informal interviews with several participants who were employed by the special education centers as paraprofessionals and also several parents of CSN who have been working with these trainees. Moreover, three administrators who employed these participants in their special education centers provided information about their new work force. Although we did not collect systematic and analyzable data from these informal interviews, we obtained important information regarding the paraprofessionals' use of their new knowledge and skills. For example, some mothers stated that they learned new skills such as supporting child development at home, praising positive behavior and teaching new skills embedded in their daily family routines from the paraprofessionals. Taken together, the mothers displayed an overall satisfaction with working with our trainees. Parallel to parents' views, the administrators reported satisfaction with these paraprofessionals' work, as well. According to the administrators, parental skills and the overall performance of the children have been developing ever since the paraprofessionals were employed. However, the paraprofessionals stated lack of experience in working with parents, assessing child performance and dealing with problem behaviors children displayed during teaching sessions. These paraprofessionals recommended more in-service training courses based on the mentioned needs.

We are very aware that these statements are not inferred from scientific data. However, keeping this limitation in mind, the reader might recognize

what the administrators, parents and the paraprofessionals claimed may include important implications for what training should include in enhancing practice in real work settings. Therefore, in future studies, we need to collect more data regarding the effectiveness of the SSEIP course in various aspects such as on-the-job performance of trainees and child outcomes.

A second limitation involves the focus group procedures. These group discussions were held by two of the course instructors. This may very well be considered a threat to validity, where blind interviewers would have minimized any misleading questions and/or comments during the discussions. However, we believe that the other two instructors' going through all records and transcripts thoroughly could be taken as a proper caution in minimizing such a threat.

This study can be considered a pilot study that values the VSG graduates as important resources of the ECSE paraprofessional work force in Turkey. According to the latest Turkish literature, the number of qualified personnel in the ECSE field is insufficient to meet the demands of providing services to young CSN and their parents (Diken et al., 2012). In addition, paraprofessionals or teacher assistants do not have a legal stand in the early intervention system and only special education or preschool teachers are given responsibilities for working with CSN. Considering these facts, this study might bring a valuable contribution to the ECSE field in terms of drawing the attention of the stakeholders who have interest in young CSN, who might be dedicated to provide better services for this population through the paraprofessional work force.

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