Lifelong learning perceptions of pre-school pre-service teachers

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The purpose of this study is to determine the perception level of pre-school pre-service teachers concerning lifelong learning and to verify if there is a meaningful relationship between lifelong learning perception and gender/grade levels of students. The study group of the research designed by scanning model is made up of Abant İzzet Baysal University Bolu Preschool Education Teaching program students (N= 217). The research data were obtained from the application of "Lifelong Learning Perception Scale". Mean, standard deviation and t-tests were used in data analysis. As a result of the research, it was concluded that pre-school pre-service teachers do believe in the necessity and importance of life-long learning, but show no interest concerning lifelong learning activities in cultural terms aside of their profession. On the other hand, no significant correlation was found between the students' perceptions of lifelong learning and the gender variable. In terms of grade variable, final grade students have presented more favorable opinion compared to lower grades.

Key words: Life long learning, adult education, pre-school education, pre-service teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Mankind starts learning while still in the womb and this adventure continues till the end of his life. Learning process is a set of lifelong activity that is spread to the human’s entire life and that can not be limited with school education. Basic concept of lifelong learning has first been launched by a group of UNESCO experts, used and strongly emphasized in the mid 90s and modified as learning “from cradle to grave” (EC, 2003). According to Ulutasdemir et al. (2011, 2226), learning can spread to every single stage of life as from pre-school to post-retirement, from formal education in schools and/or universities to vocational training at work or from the usage of various technologies that families grasp from their children to learning during TV watching or even museum visits.

People -at all stages of their lives- feel the necessity to learn something due to the changing lifestyles or their increased responsibilities. It is not possible for school education -covering the early stages of life- to serve for the training needs all life long. Moreover, as a result of rapid developments in science and technology today, information is outdated very quickly. According to Yilmaz (2000,34) the information taught in formal education institutions can be outdated as soon as formal education
ends or even merely before it ends. In such a case, person needs continually to educate, change, renew himself.

On the other hand, European Union has built up its the education strategies on three main issues: shortage of skilled labor, global competition and increasingly aging society. According to data on hand, within the next thirty years, one-third of European Union citizens will be aged 60 and over. This situation highlights the importance of the required new educational policies in order to let the elder people be present in economic and social lives for many years. In other words, this has surfaced the need for starting seminars, courses, hobby shops, cinema/theater clubs, holidays and sightseeing tours or creative, educational and social activities like computer and language courses in order to meet the educational needs of elder people while appealing the training for life (Orlanova, 2012, 3-4). Currently, in Turkey, aging population together with its inevitable economic and social problems is not a big issue when compared with EU countries, but still is a pending item to be solved considering the improved quality of life not only in Turkey but also in many other countries of the world.

Life-long learning basically has three main functions: (i) lifelong learning for economic development; (ii) lifelong learning for personal development and self-realization; (iii) lifelong learning for social inclusion and democratic understanding (Commission of the European Communities, 2006). Within the context of lifelong learning serving for the realization of these three main functions, there are other variations like formal learning, non-formal learning, vocational training, technical training, on-the-job and off-the-job trainings. Therefore, lifelong learning can be expressed to be realized anywhere…at home, at work, at school or anywhere the individual is present. According to Dinevski and Dinevski (2004), lifelong learning offers equal opportunities to individuals while removing the restrictions on concepts like place, time, age, socio-economic level, educational level (Gunuc et al., 2012, 310).

It will be more accurate to rephrase the lifelong learning as modern way of contemporary learning instead of substituting lifelong learning alternatively with contemporary learning which inevitably is differentiated by the political and economic development of the people (Toprak and Erdogan, 2012, 73). In this context, four features of lifelong learning are coming forward when compared with contemporary learning: providing a systemic learning view (covering whole learning styles from structured to unstructured associated with life cycle and taking into account demand and supply in terms of learning opportunities); putting the learner in the center (the diversity of the learner’s needs); motivation of the learning (pointing at one’s own tempo and learning based on self-motivation); emphasis on multiple objectives of the education policy (economic, social and cultural achievements, personal development and citizenship) (CERI, 2001; OECD Observer, 2004).

Strategies for lifelong learning respond to the convergence between the economic imperative dictated by the needs of the knowledge society and the societal need to promote social cohesion by providing long-term benefits for the individual, the enterprise, the economy and the society more generally. For the individual, lifelong learning emphasises creativity, initiative and responsiveness – attributes which contribute to self-fulfillment, higher earnings and employment, and to innovation and productivity. The skills and competence of the workforce are a major factor in economic performance and success at the enterprise level. For the economy, there is a positive relationship between educational attainment and economic growth (OECD, 2007, 10).

Although having many positive features, the concept of lifelong learning is seriously criticised by educators. The main criticism towards lifelong learning is raised by the question of what purposes lifelong learning is serving. According to Misz (2011, 111-112), lifelong learning is perceived as a form of social control. Initially, within the concept, the human development perspective was preponderant as being more concerned about learning for enrichment and expansion of people’s lives via cultural and recreational pursuits; however in time, since 1996, it is asserted that lifelong learning is merely relevant for learning for business life. Therefore, due to the intensity of economic stress within the concept of lifelong learning, lifelong learning should rather be restated as lifelong earning and learning for earning (Lifelong ‘L’Earning and Learning to ‘L’Earn) which is sort of a manifest to economic perspective (Toprak and Erdogan, 2012, 73; Misz, 2011, 113).

Despite the fact that a remarkable criticism is raised, because of changing socio-economic conditions, it is crucial that the individuals completing the formal education should not stay away from educational activities. Individuals should be guided to participate in lifelong learning activities starting from early ages. At this stage, the most important task relies on the teacher (Gencel, 2013, 242). Assuring that teachers and teacher candidates are qualified enough for lifelong learning, it will effectively serve for the realization of the role of "being intermediary in achieving social change" (UNESCO, 1996). In order to assure teachers are skillful enough for lifelong learning, these qualifications are required to be revealed during teacher education. Indeed, Fenwick (2001) mentions two tendencies in teacher education which are effective since the 1990s. The first one is concerned with broadening the professional development process of teachers by the concept of lifelong learning, while the second is concerned with extending the learning capabilities of teachers by actual practices in the society. Similarly, Davis and Sumara (1997) have also pointed out the importance of the fact that teachers are required to be
qualified for lifelong learning as it directly affects the society.

In Turkey, researches focusing on teachers or pre-service teachers’ lifelong learning skills are very limited in number. According to the results of studies carried out so far in Turkey, teacher candidates’ - currently studying at universities- lifelong learning tendency is low (Coşkun and Demirel, 2012). Teacher candidates take lifelong learning as necessary and important; however, they have misunderstanding of its meaning and scope (Kara and Kürüm, 2007). Additionally, teacher candidates consider supporting facilities in universities as insufficient (Koksal and Çöğmen, 2013). This study aiming to analyze lifelong learning opinions of prospective teachers studying at preschool teaching departments in Turkey, being a developing country- is assumed to contribute to international literature. While revealing the perspectives of the university students on learning, it is important to determine their perception concerning lifelong learning. Discovering the interests, attitudes, expectations and perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding lifelong learning will serve for development of useful programs accordingly.

In this context, the study was generated under three categories:

1. How is the perception of preschool pre-service teachers regarding lifelong learning?
2. Is there any relationship between the gender of preschool pre-service teachers and their perceptions regarding lifelong learning?
3. Is there any relationship between the grade levels of preschool pre-service teachers and their perceptions regarding lifelong learning?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research method

Descriptive method useful for current status screening was applied in this study. Descriptive method is a research approach aiming to picture a past/present condition or event as it is (Karasar, 2005:77).

Sample

The study group is made up of Abant Izzet Baysal University Preschool Education Program students. While determining the work group, it was intended to reach all target population. 217 participants out of 256 have answered the questionnaire. In this descriptive results, 29% of pre-service teachers who participated (n=62) is first grade; 24% (n=51) second grade, 23% (n=50); third grade, 24% (n=53); fourth grade students. 93% of respondents (n=202) were females and 7% (n=15) were males.

Data collection

The "Lifelong Learning Perception Scale" used in the study was developed by the researcher as a quinary Likert scale rating from "(5) strongly disagree" to "(1) strongly agree". Related literature and sample scales related to lifelong learning perceptions was reviewed before developing the scale, then a sample scale was given to adult education experts for having some criticisms and different point of views. Finally, it was decided that the scale may have four dimensions such as positive attitude towards lifelong learning, negative attitude towards lifelong learning, lifelong learning need and learning perseverance.

In order to determine the reliability of the measurement tool, a trial scale consisting of 36 items was applied to a preliminary group of 30 students, and according to the results obtained, 6 items were excluded from the scale which tend to decrease the reliability. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of final scale having 30 items was calculated to be .81. The final scale consists of 30 items classified as positive attitude towards lifelong learning (8 items), negative attitude towards lifelong learning (10 items), life-long learning need (6 items) and learning perseverance (6 items).

Data analysis

To analyze and interpret the data, percent, mean and t tests were used to understand the differences between groups at p<0.05 significance level. The results were evaluated and calculated by means of SPSS (Statistical package for social sciences).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The average and standard deviation of the responses offered by the measurement tool in order to determine the overall perception of the preschool pre-service teachers concerning lifelong learning are listed in Table 1.

While analyzing the level of participation of preschool pre-service teachers regarding statements about lifelong learning, students did strongly agree with the statement that "people can learn at any age" and thought that learning was an ageless activity. Likely, students did agree with the statements, "I am passionate about learning new things all the time", "I am thinking of attending all the required courses in order to progress in my profession", "I feel unnecessary to attend any course since internet is offering all kinds of information", “I have no curiosity in learning different subjects other than my profession”, “I would like to study if there will be a tangible return on me; otherwise I’m not interested in training activities”, “If I might secure a financially comfortable life in the future, I do not want to further struggle to improve myself”, "If there is anything that’s stuck in my mind, I somehow find a way to learn it", "I think people should continue learning lifelong instead of only throughout the school years", "I feel uncomfortable by constantly feeling the need to learn new knowledge and skills", "I trust myself to learn when faced with brand new information".

In this regard, it is concluded that preschool pre-service teachers do believe in the necessity of lifelong learning; however they do feel the pressure if constantly
learning new things become a “must” for them. They expressed their willingness to learn new things in order to progress in their own professions and their self-confidence and pleasure in learning new things, while underlying that expressions that the only basis for continuity of learning could be the expectation of tangible outcomes and instead of attending a course for a brand new issue, searching in the web would be much easier and practical.

On the other hand, students gave uncertain feedbacks concerning the statements such as “I think graduate education is necessary for my professional development”, “People are required to have enough financial sources to continue lifelong learning”, “Lifelong learning pushes people to work harder and compete more”. Accordingly, it was concluded that the students did hesitate about having graduate study in terms of professional progress, and rather they believed they could improve themselves with alternative educational activities. Concerning the rest of the uncertain feedbacks, students preferred not to express any opinion about the cost of lifelong learning probably because they had lack of information regarding the social and economic consequences of lifelong learning.

Respondent pre-service teachers did not agree with the statements, "I want to learn something new only when I need to", "I prefer my education life is over as soon as I graduate from the university", “I think undergraduate education is enough for my professional development”. They expressed the willingness to learn new things although they might not need at that moment, to attend courses even after undergraduate study rationalizing that vocational education during undergraduate study would not be sufficient during their whole professional lives.

The relationship between the gender variable of the pre-school pre-service teachers and their perceptions concerning lifelong learning was calculated to be statistically insignificant at p<0.05 level. On the other hand, when analyzing the relationship between the grade level of the students (1st and 4th) and their perceptions concerning lifelong learning, the significantly related statements are listed in Table 2.

When considering the T-test results and mean of the groups together, it appears that 4th grade students do believe that everyone should have the chance to learn during lifetime in comparison with 1st grade students. This indicates that as a result of the undergraduate study, students developed positive attitudes for lifelong learning. In another statement that had significant relationship between grades and the lifelong learning attitudes, 1st grade students had less interest in non-vocational subjects when compared with 4th grades. In other words, 4th grade students—as a result of their undergraduate study—did gain the vision of stating teaching as a

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### Table 1. The distribution of the opinions of the pre-school pre-service teachers concerning lifelong learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std.Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am passionate about learning new things all the time</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>3.8387</td>
<td>.90101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person can learn at any age</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>4.3704</td>
<td>.98446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to learn something new only when I need to.</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>2.4836</td>
<td>1.01682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel my education life is over as soon as I graduate from university</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>2.6168</td>
<td>1.26450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think of attending all courses in order to progress in my profession.</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>3.6866</td>
<td>.87848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is not necessary to attend any course since internet is offering all kinds of information</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>3.8618</td>
<td>.85487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have no curiosity in learning different subjects other than my profession</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>4.0046</td>
<td>.88453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to study if there will be a tangible return; otherwise I'm not interested in training activities</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>3.6498</td>
<td>.97035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I might secure a financially comfortable life in the future, I do not want to further struggle to improve myself</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>3.8333</td>
<td>1.06967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If there is anything that's stuck in my mind, I somehow find a way to learn it</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>3.9724</td>
<td>.73860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think undergraduate education is necessary for my professional development</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>3.3796</td>
<td>1.03175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think people should continue learning lifelong instead of only throughout the school years</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>4.2857</td>
<td>.85061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are required to have enough financial sources to continue lifelong learning</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>3.0698</td>
<td>1.11480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel uncomfortable to learn new knowledge and skills</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>3.5115</td>
<td>1.06767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I trust myself to learn when faced with brand new information</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>3.9439</td>
<td>.75473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think vocational education of teaching in college will be enough for my life long</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>2.5628</td>
<td>1.08279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifelong learning pushes people to work harder and compete more</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>3.4286</td>
<td>1.09532</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. The distribution of the grade levels of the pre-school pre-service teachers and their perceptions concerning lifelong learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Grade 1</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tail)</th>
<th>Std. error difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everyone should have the chance to be educated during his own life</td>
<td>4.1774</td>
<td>4.3585</td>
<td>1.043</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.17354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have no curiosity in learning different subjects other than my profession</td>
<td>4.0484</td>
<td>.492</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>.17491</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I might secure a financially comfortable life in the future, I do not want not to further struggle to improve myself</td>
<td>3.6290</td>
<td>3.9623</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to study if there will be a tangible return me; otherwise I'm not interested in training activities</td>
<td>3.5000</td>
<td>3.9057</td>
<td>-1.296</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>.21337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I trust myself to learn when faced with brand new information</td>
<td>4.0976</td>
<td>-.890</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.20146</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can be alternatively stated as, 4th grades do link the lifelong learning effort more with financial satisfaction. It can be concluded that 1st grades do not have financial expectation on lifelong learning activities; however, 4th grades do impose more financial outcomes on any extra educational activity while getting closer to graduation and earning his/her own living. Lastly, 4th grade students are more self-confident in learning new things when compared with 1st grades proving that self-confidence concerning learning skills proportionally increases as the educational experience accumulates.

Conclusion

According to the results of the study, pre-school pre-service teachers do believe in the need and the importance of lifelong learning, however, they do not feel comfortable about the fact that lifelong learning adventure is becoming a burden. Learning for adults, due to its nature, should be asked and realized on voluntary basis. So, it is quite meaningful that during their entire lives, teachers do “voluntarily” want to learn something, instead of being forced to.

Furthermore, it is concluded that pre-school pre-service teachers have grasped the fact that professional development needs to be maintained throughout their lives even before actually starting their professional lives. It is promising that candidates of teaching profession requiring sophisticated professional and personal development are thinking in the above stated way. On the other hand, another noteworthy finding is that although the pre-service teachers have positive approach concerning lifelong learning, they showed no interest in learning new subjects other than their profession that will have eventually a tangible return. This indicates that one of the criticism factors of lifelong learning which is (Learning to “L” Earn) understanding does also affect preschool pre-service teachers.

According to the survey results, 4th grade pre-service teachers were observed to express extra favorable opinions concerning lifelong learning in comparison to 1st grades as a result of their undergraduate study. Another positive finding of the study is that although there is no course in the undergraduate program of Abant Izzet Baysal University, Department of Pre-School Education that can be associated with the lifelong learning, the undergraduate program has somehow created the need and awareness for the concept in students' minds. However, considering the fact that only awareness will not be enough to emphasize the importance of lifelong learning, a necessity to develop teacher education programs will arise by adding lifelong courses in the program. Through this course, lifelong learning can be discussed in multi-dimensional perspective such as importance, necessity, positive and negative sides etc

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES


