Full Length Research Paper

The preschool education web-sites and nutrition education activities: An assessment by prospective teachers

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The aim of this study is to determine how prospective preschool teachers evaluate preschool education websites and nutrition activities on them. The qualitative research methods were used in this study. The data was obtained by the evaluation of 20 websites using "website evaluation form" via document analysis technique by fourth-year prospective teachers (n=20) at Vocational Education Faculty. As a result, the websites in the study were found to have both positive and negative peculiarities in terms of general content, visual design and nutrition activities. It was also found that only seven of the websites in the study had nutrition activities.

Key words: Preschool education, prospective preschool teachers, preschool websites, nutrition education, nutrition activities.

INTRODUCTION

The first six years in human life is a period when children develop most quickly, effectively and qualified. In those years, they are also in interaction with the social environment at the most intensive level. The peculiarities which affect the further life of children in terms of their physical, mental, social, emotional and language development are gained during this period. Therefore, the education in those years should be suitable to the needs and features of children and be given as early as possible, which is a must not only for children and their parents but also the society they live in (Aydın, 2003; Ural and Ramazan, 2007). Besides these, early childhood is a critical time for the development of food preferences and eating patterns (Swadener, 1994; Saltos, 1999). Consumption of a healthy diet by young children is essential to provide for normal growth and development and to prevent a variety of nutrition-related health problems, such as anaemia, growth retardation, malnutrition, compromised cognitive achievement,

obesity, dental caries, and chronic diseases in later life. During the preschool years, children are still developing their eating patterns and often need encouragement to eat healthy meals and snacks. Preschool is the perfect setting to educate children on the principles of good nutrition. A key factor in the success of preschool nutrition education programs is the use of developmentally appropriate learning experiences for children (http://ceplacer.ucdavis.edu/files/44968.pdf).

Preschool learning environments offer prime opportunities for establishing healthful attitudes and knowledge about food and nutrition. Often, however, more emphasis is placed on flavor than on the teachable attributes foods offer like colors, shapes, food origin, texture, and smell. When introducing nutrition concepts to preschoolers, it is important to build upon their pre-existing knowledge and integrate nutrition education into other activities (Harris, 2007).

Teachers are finding opportunities throughout the day to integrate nutrition education activities, whether it be in language arts, science, social studies, sensory development, dramatic play, art, music, and of course, snack and meal times

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(http://ceplacer.ucdavis.edu/files/44968.pdf). It is also a fact that different learning methods are required due to the variation in children's interests. In view of these, it could be said that the monotonous and traditional teaching methods are inefficient in meeting the needs of children and they may affect their development adversely (Sevinç, 2003). The internet has emerged as the single most powerful vehicle for providing access to unlimited information and provides teachers with free (or low cost) materials they need (Kumar and Kaur, 2006; Serim, 1997).

The computer and the internet are thought firstly when the technology in education is taken into consideration (Şahin et al., 2010). Early childhood educators at all levels and early childhood teacher education students have begun to use the internet to communicate and to share information. Research suggests that use of electronic networking can help teachers (especially new teachers) reduce their sense of isolation, connect with peers, and increase their sense of professionalism and autonomy (Kumar and Kaur, 2006; Honey and Henriquez, 1993; Rothenberg, 1995).

Internet use provides access to high-quality research and practice information for practicing educators and college students. In the educational environment, internet has enabled easy access to many resources, and information sharing has, therefore, significantly increased. Moreover, the prevalence of this sharing has brought additional benefits in that these resources can be used in any location and any time (Şahin et al., 2010; Rothenberg, 1995; Means et al., 1993).

Access to the internet is achieved by means of web pages (Ergün and Ergün, 2008). The increasing amount of data available on the web provides a huge amount of useful information that can be processed to discover useful knowledge from web (Roussinov and Zhao, 2003). Websites which are very prominent for education provide links to audio and visual tools, interactive environments, communication tools and to other websites and form a rich learning environment (Uzunboylu and Ballı, 2004). Websites which have caused obvious changes in the ways lecturers and trainees access information are the most important services internet provides us (Yavuz and Karaman, 2004). The websites are among the resources that university students use to do research or assignments. Preschool teachers bring experience with children, knowledge of the limits imposed by the curriculum frameworks and flow of life in kindergartens. They also need to master a number of practices and to be aware of preschool technology experiences and their importance in subsequent school development. They also have to be adaptive researchers (Pange, n.d.). Teachers and prospectives in the early childhood education and child development fields have some familiarity with computers and are able to use a variety of computer software and the technological capacities of the internet to expand the boundaries of the classroom and enrich the learning experiences like planning creative, innovative and interesting activities for children or doing some projects/assignments and applications (Lonergan, 2001; Hinchliffe, 1996).

For these reasons, the websites with creative, interesting, functional and content-rich activities as well as being open to sharing will enable both employed and prospective teachers to make use of them more effectively. As mentioned earlier, the increasing importance of nutrition education has brought about with it the practice of nutrition based educational activities in preschool education period, which has led to the appearance of nutrition based educational activities on websites just like the other educational areas.

The purpose of research

Nutrition education and nutrition related activities are indispensable parts of preschool education. Different kinds of health problems related with nutrition affect the health and life quality of individuals. Nutrition education at preschools and teachers giving that education at these institutions are very important in the prevention of this problem. As a matter of fact, Higher Education Institute (HEI) in Turkey made it compulsory that Mother and Child Nutrition subject take part in the curriculum of Preschool Teaching and Child Development and Education (Kavak et al., 2007). The prospective preschool teachers in Turkey also face nutrition based activities in theory and practice during the university subjects such as Science Education, Science at Early Childhood Period, and Mathematics Education. Nutrition education has also been given place in the Preschool Education Curriculum Book issued by the Ministry of Education under the headings of Self Care Skills and nutrition related aims and acquisition (Gürkan et al., 2006).

Preschool education websites are among the sources to which teachers and prospective teachers apply in studying the activities in the preschool education program and as popular source of information for activities about nutrition education. The occurrence of nutrition-based educational activities will encourage preschool teachers and prospective preschool teachers to examine and apply these activities and create an opportunity for children's nutrition beginning from the early years. One of the main sources of teachers and prospective teachers is preschool education websites. Access to the nutrition education activities on these web sites is important for the optimum use of time, energy and environmental sources. This study that creates preschool education websites are fundamental resources for preschool teachers and prospective preschool teachers in their search of scientific and artistic educational activities as well as nutritional activities. This study is original in that it reveals the scarcity of nutrition-based educational activities in pre-school websites and the potential of the

Table 1. Prospective teachers' computer and the internet access and usage status (n=20).

Activity question	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
Do you have your own computer?	10	50.0	10	50.0
Have you got internet access?	10	50.0	10	50.0
Preferred means of reaching information				
Book	4	20.0	16	80.0
Internet	16	80.0	4	20.0
Time spent on the internet (min/day)				
1- 30 min	3	15.0	17	85.0
30–59 min	2	10.0	18	90.0
More than 60 min	15	75.0	5	25.0

f, Frequency.

existent activities.

METHODOLOGY

In this descriptive study, qualitative research method was used. The qualitative data was obtained by using "website assessment form" to assess preschool education websites with document analysis technique. Document analysis involves the analysis of written materials which include aimed fact or facts (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2008). In electronic document analysis via the computer and the internet messages, there are a wide variety of data like e-mails, e-groups, personal comments, websites, blogs (Suzuki et al., 2007).

Sample

The sample of the study is composed of 20 senior class prospective teachers attending Preschool Education Department at Faculty of Vocational Education in Selcuk University, in fall semester of 2009 and 20 preschool education websites which were reached. The web sites examined in the study were detected by searching the words "preschool education activities, nursery activities, early childhood activities" on the Google search engine. Out of these websites, 20 active ones were given to the volunteer, 20 prospective preschool teachers (one website for each student) who accepted to obey the research principles.

Means of data collection

In the study, the researchers developed "website evaluation form" by reviewing the literature (Levi and Conrad, 2010; Kutluca, 2009; Uzunboylu and Ballı, 2004) and examining various websites so that prospective preschool teachers can assess preschool education websites. In the first part of the form, individuals' computer ownership and how much they use the internet were questioned. In the second part, general characteristics of websites are given and in the third part, whether these websites include activities that can be used in nutrition education in pre-school period was questioned. If the website has educative activities, questions about the type of these activities, which issue of nutrition it is prepared for, the type of technique used in the activity, functionality and easy of understanding are asked. After the prospective preschool teachers made necessary explanations about how to fill in web site evaluation form, each prospective preschool teacher was randomly given one website address to analyze. The prospective preschool teachers analyzed the websites according to criteria in the form in December, 2009. The SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for Windows 15.0 was used to calculate frequency (f) and percent (%).

RESULTS

From Table 1, it is shown that 50.0% of the prospective teachers had computer and access to the internet. Also, 20.0 and 80.0% of prospective teachers preferred book and internet, respectively to reach information, 15.0% of them spent 1 to 30 min, 10.0% spent 30 to 59 min, 75.0% spent more than 60 min on the internet.

The frequency and percentage values related to websites (n=20) prospective teachers, examined in terms of preschool education are given in Table 2.

When Table 2 was examined, prospective teacher found out that websites do not have questionnaires (80.0%), date of update (55.0%), contact information (55.0%), frequently asked questions (75.0%), counter (50.0%), internal search engine (55.0%) and sharable content (70.0%). It is seen that 80.0% of websites are beneficial to visitors in terms of content, and in (60.0%) of the websites users can contribute to content. It was also found out that 65.0% of the activities have satisfying amount of content, 70.0% of websites have subject categories, 70.0% have links to other websites. The percentage about the existence of news, scientific views and reports about scientific activities are the same (50%).

Prospective teachers' views about the visual features of websites are given in Table 3. 50.0% of the prospective teacher gave positive responses to questions. Is the site interface interesting? Does the site have a sitemap? Does it have a good visual design? Prospective teachers assessed (80.0%) of the sites examined as easy to surf

Table 2. Prospective teachers' views about the general content of websites (n=20).

Activity question	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
Is subscription compulsory to surf the website?	2	10.0	18	90.0
Do you have to subscribe to use the website?	8	40.0	12	60.0
Is the content categorized into themes?	14	70.0	6	30.0
Is the content open to sharing?	6	30.0	14	70.0
Is it possible to contribute to the content?	12	60.0	8	40.0
Is the language used understandable?	10	50.0	10	50.0
Is it beneficial to visitors?	16	80.0	4	20.0
Is there a menu?	17	85.0	3	15.0
If yes, does it have a rich content?	8	40.0	12	60.0
Do activities have a full content?	13	65.0	7	35.0
Does it have an update date?	9	45.0	11	55.0
Is information be downloaded in short time?	16	80.0	4	20.0
Are there active links?	14	70.0	6	30.0
Can one make comments about the site?	10	50.0	10	50.0
Are there questionnaires?	4	20.0	16	80.0
Can users share information?	14	70.0	6	30.0
Is there an internal search engine on the site?	9	45.0	11	55.0
Is there a counter?	10	50.0	10	50.0
Is there contact information?	9	45.0	11	55.0
Is the name of the person who prepared the web site mentioned?	4	20.0	16	80.0
Is there a frequently asked question section?	5	25.0	15	75.0
Is there news about scientific activities?	10	50.0	10	50.0
Are there scientific views and reports?	10	50.0	10	50.0

f, Frequency.

Table 3. Prospective teachers' views about visual features of websites (n=20).

Activity question	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
Does it have good visual design?	10	50.0	10	50.0
Is the site interface interesting?	10	50.0	10	50.0
Is it an easy to surf on the site?	16	80.0	4	20.0
Is there a sitemap?	10	50.0	10	50.0
Can the scripts fonts be read easily?	17	85.0	3	15.0
Can the visitors reach the information they need easily?	12	60.0	8	40.0

f, Frequency.

and stated they can easily have access to information they search in (60,0%) of the websites.

Prospective teacher respond to the question whether they could find any sample activity that you could be used when preparing nutrition education activities was that they could find such activities only on 7 websites out of 20 websites (Table 4). It is seen that five (71.4%) of the seven websites, in which activities were sampled, had original and functional. It was determined that 42.9% of the activities are not aesthetic, 71.4% are not supported with visuals (video, music), 85.7% of them were not staged.

The prospective teachers found a total of 12 activity samples on the seven websites on which they determined nutrition education activities. The subjects and activity types of these examples are given in Table 5. 75.0% of activities are about food groups, 25.0% are about table manner. It was determined that 16.7% of the activities are play and physical activity, 16.7% are Turkish activities, 16.7% are music activities, 8.3% are science-

Table 4. Prospective teachers' views about the nutrition education activities on the websites (n=7).

		Yes		No	
		f	%	f	%
	Could you get access to the nutrition education activities on the websites?	7	35.0	13	65.0
Activity	Is it original?	5	71.4	2	28.6
	Is it functional?	5	71.4	2	28.6
	Is is aesthetic?	4	57.1	3	42.9
	Is it appropriate to development level?	5	71.4	2	28.6
	Is it economical?	6	85.7	1	14.3
	Is it prepared with easily available materials?	7	100.0	-	-
	Is the activity supported with visuals?	2	28.6	5	71.4
	Does the activity have stages?	1	14.3	6	85.7

f, Frequency.

Table 5. The types of activities related to nutrition on the websites (n=12).

Activity	f	%
The subjects of nutrition		
Food groups	9	75.0
Table manner	3	25.0
The type of Activity		
Art	4	33.3
Play and physical activity	2	16.7
Turkish	2	16.7
Music	2	16.7
Science and math	1	8.3
Drama	1	8.3

f, Frequency.

math activities and drama activities.

DISCUSSION

From Table 1, it is shown that 50.0% of the prospective teachers had computer and access to the internet. Also, 20.0 and 80.0% of prospective teachers preferred book and internet, respectively to reach information, 15.0% of them spent 1 to 30 min, 10.0% spent 30 to 59 min, 75.0% spent more than 60 min on the internet.

In a similar study, Börü (n.d.), found that 74.0% of prospective teachers have their own computers, 89.5% use the internet. In another study, Çicek and Demirel (2010) reported that 64.1% of the prospective teachers have their own computer, and 96.3% use the internet. It is stated that computer and the internet opportunities provided to prospective teachers at university environment have positive contributions to prospective teachers' preference of the internet as means of learning (Hong et al., 2003). The percentage of nutrition and dietetics trainees who make use of the internet to reach information about their courses is 97.2% (Yıldız et al., 2008). Kır et al. (2004) found that half of the trainees at medicine faculty prefer books to reach information.

When Table 2 was examined, prospective teacher found out that websites do not have questionnaires (80.0%), date of update (55.0%), contact information (55.0%), frequently asked questions (75.0%), counter (50.0%), internal search engine (55.0%) and sharable content (70.0%). It is seen that 80.0% of websites are beneficial to visitors in terms of content, and in (60.0%) of the websites users can contribute to content. It was also found out that 65.0% of the activities have satisfying

amount of content, 70.0% of websites have subject categories, 70.0% have links to other websites. The percentage about the existence of news, scientific views and reports about scientific activities are the same (50%). Thanks to contact information, visitors can easily reach to the sections they are visiting. In a study in which the websites of schools and companies are compared, it is stated that e-mail is used as a means of getting in contact (Misic and Johnson, 1999). Contact information on websites is highly necessary for interaction between the visitors and the designers of website (Kaplanidou and Vogt, 2004). Websites appreciated by visitors are updated at least once a month (Evans and King, 1999). It is stated that providing the date when the website was last updated also increase visitors trust in the website (Kaplanidou and Vogt, 2004). One of the desirable properties websites is that they are to have links that work (Irgat and Kurubacak, 2002). Technical aspects also include how links are working within a site. If there are dead links, then there is no accessibility to and from a site through a broken link (Kaplanidou and Vogt, 2004).

In a study carried out by Kaşlı and Avcıkurt (2008) to define the characteristics of websites of universities in Turkey, they found that only a few university websites have properties like the speedy links, surfing on the site, compulsion of subscription to download information, and the existence of form page. It was also found out that even fewer university websites have sitemap and internal search features, which are the most important characteristics of websites.

Prospective teachers' views about the visual features of websites are given in Table 3. 50.0% of the prospective teacher gave positive responses to questions. Is the site interface interesting? Does the site have a sitemap? Does it have a good visual design? Prospective teachers assessed (80.0%) of the sites examined as easy to surf and stated they can easily have access to information they search in (60.0%) of the websites.

Navigation is accepted to be the essential requirements for a website to have a successful design and navigation menus influence visual character of a site (Henderson, 2008). It is necessary to ease visitors' navigation in web pages on the websites and easy-to-learn navigation tools which aims to keep visitors busy on the website (Gretzel Yet al., 2000). The graphics and key command (print, save, search, etc.) being the same on each page of a website makes it easier for visitors to have an idea about what the pages look like and to remember how they work (Head, 1999). Besides, it makes visitors feel comfortable and encourages them to visit the site again (Cited in Kaplanidou and Vogt, 2004).

Prospective teacher respond to the question whether they could find any sample activity that you could be used when preparing nutrition education activities was that they could find such activities only on 7 websites out of 20 websites (Table 4). It is seen that five (71.4%) of the seven websites, in which activities were sampled, had original and functional. It was determined that 42.9% of the activities are not aesthetic, 71.4% are not supported with visuals (video, music), 85.7% of them were not staged.

The awareness society attained about preschool education lead family, teacher and all stakeholders to websites which is one of the sources they can access to various information about the subject. Preschool period is a crucial important time for gaining healthy nutrition patterns (Contento, 2011). It is considered that the activities on the websites being comprehensive, scientifically based, appropriate to children's development level and functional will play a prominent role in the effectiveness and sustainability of nutrition education. However, the findings of this study indicate that the websites examined do not have such activities or do not have required functionality to reach the objectives.

The prospective teachers found a total of 12 activity samples on the seven websites on which they determined nutrition education activities. The subjects and activity types of these examples are given in Table 5. 75.0% of activities are about food groups, 25.0% are about table manner. It was determined that 16.7% of the activities are play and physical activity, 16.7% are Turkish activities, 16.7% are music activities, 8.3% are science-math activities and drama activities.

Some activities like play and physical activity, Turkish, music, puppets, puzzles, science and math, art and drama are carried out in the daily educational program by taking the children's ages, development levels, interests and requirements, and environmental differences into consideration (Darıca, 2004; Contento, 2011). But the websites examined in this study are considered to be inadequate in terms of both subject variety and activities types to contribute to nutrition education.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It is concluded that the general content analysis of the examined websites is determined in a way that these sites are beneficial to their visitors and visitors can share information on the site. This case is expected to increase demand for websites. The websites which enables the sharing of experiences and which includes accurate information will contribute to professional development of prospective teacher and teachers. In pre-school period where the basis of a healthy life is laid, primarily pre-school teachers and other partners hold important responsibilities so that children can acquire healthy nutrition habits. In this period, attempts for nutrition education will be influential on life quality of children in the future. The internet which is widely used to reach information in the modern world is an important source for nutrition education activities for pre-school children. Pre-school websites and the nutrition activities on these websites create awareness in pre-school teachers,

prospective teachers and families.

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