Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education: A Phenomenological Study

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Family engagement contributes greatly to families, children, teachers, and classrooms succeed. The purpose of this research is to examine in detail the views and activities of preschool teachers about family engagement activities. To this end, phenomenology was employed as one of the qualitative research methods. There are 35 preschool teachers in the study group of the research. These teachers were identified using the maximum diversity sampling method. As a result of the research, two main themes emerged: family engagement perception and family engagement experience. The theme family engagement perception includes the meaning of family engagement and the ideal family engagement qualities. Family engagement theme involves planning, preparation, activities, evaluation, engagement issues, strategies to increase engagement and their effect. The findings of the study revealed the necessity and importance of family engagement in early childhood.

1. Introduction

Early childhood is a period of rapid development and learning, a period in which life skills are acquired, a period in which they form the basis for the following years, and a period in which they have a significant impact on subsequent developmental stages (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Pianta et al., 2012). Research indicates that the behaviors acquired in early childhood significantly affect the personality structure, habits, values, and beliefs of the individual when he or she becomes an adult (Burger, 2010; NICHD ECCRN, 2006; Smidt & Embacher, 2023; Ulferts et al., 2019). For this reason, since early childhood is considered critical in terms of child development, children and their families should be supported in educational institutions.

Children's first teachers are their parents. Education then continues in early childhood education schools on a planned and programmed basis (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). However, the involvement of the school does not mean that the family has completed the process of supporting the child's education. The continuation of what the child learns at school and the engagement of the family in the child's education increase the permanence and integrity of education (Epstein, 2009; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Knoche et al., 2012). At this point, the engagement of the family in the education of the child is considered very important in the early childhood period (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Pianta et al., 2012).

Learning the rules and policies of the school, getting information about the school program, having information about the development and education of the child, and ensuring the continuity of the child's education at home are only possible through the engagement of the families in education (Epstein, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; McWayne et al., 2013). The education of the child is an important responsibility

carried out jointly between the school and the family. The more the family participates in the child's education, the more successful the child and the program will be (Bertram & Pascal, 2016).

No matter how well and high-quality the early childhood education program is prepared, success and positive effects cannot be achieved in early childhood education unless the family participates in the child's education and the family and the teacher cooperate (Chazen-Cohen et al., 2009; El Nokali et al., 2010; Park & Holloway, 2017; Sheldon, 2009). For this reason, in order for the child's education to be successful, to achieve the desired efficiency in education, and to create permanent behavioral changes, both the family and the teacher should cooperate in terms of the continuity and integrity of education (Arnold, Zeljo, et al., 2008; Fantuzzo, et al., 2004; Marcon, 1999). This requirement highlights the importance of the concept of family engagement.

Research (Epstein, 2009; Epstein & Hohmann, 2012; McWayne et al., 2004) shows that family engagement in early childhood contributes positively to children's development and school life (Hiatt-Michael, 2005; Weiss et al., 2008). Since family engagement provides cooperation between school and home, it provides continuity in education by reinforcing the acquired knowledge and skills (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Gross et al., 2020; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Loughran, 2008; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009; Smith, 2020). In addition, research has revealed that family engagement has positive effects on children's academic achievement (Chao et al., 2006), language development (Chazen-Cohen et al., 2009; Hood et al., 2008; NICHD, 2002; Raikes et al., 2006), social development, self-esteem, and willingness to learn (Arnold et al., 2008; Culp et al., 2000; Hammer et al., 2011; Izzo et al., 1999; Kelley et al., 2000; Pungello et al., 2009; Voorhis et al., 2013).

It is reported in the related literature that families of all income and education levels and different cultural backgrounds benefit from family engagement in the development of their children (Cowan et al., 2009; Halgunseth et al., 2009; Paz-Albo Prieto, 2018). The benefits of family engagement on children's school and life success are obvious (Epstein, 2009; Halgunseth et al., 2009; Sheridan et al., 2007; Snell et al., 2020). In addition, although family engagement practices require teachers and principals to make an effort, they are very important for schools as they increase job satisfaction (Lim, 2012).

A large body of research has shown that family engagement practices of various forms and addressing needs produce positive results (Gross et al., 2020; Hiatt-Michael, 2005; Knoche et al., 2012; McWayne et al., 2004; Sheridan et al., 2007; Smith, 2020; Trivette et al., 2010; Weiss et al., 2008). If the necessary support for family engagement is not provided, the development of many children will be negatively affected, and the learning gap will open against disadvantaged children (Dearing et al., 2006; OMEP, 2020; UNICEF, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

Family engagement is clearly known to be important around the world, and it is included in detail in the early childhood education programs of many countries (Bertram & Pascal, 2016; Bredekamp, 2011; Izzo et al., 1999; MEB, 2013a; Murray et al., 2015; Office of Head Start, 2011; OECD, 2006; Pianta et al., 2012; Sims-Schouten, 2016; Povey et al., 2016). In the 2013 Preschool Education Program, which was also implemented nationally in Turkey, special importance was given to family engagement, which was included among the main features of the program (MEB, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). Practitioners are the key actors in the implementation of family engagement in the program. Teachers play a pivotal role in attaching the necessary importance to family engagement and enriching families by conducting effective practices. The purpose of this research is to examine in detail the views and activities of preschool teachers about family engagement activities. In this research, the focus is especially on the post-pandemic period. Family engagement studies in early childhood education during the pandemic period were examined by Dereli and Türk-Kurtça (2022). The pandemic period has brought very special conditions. During the pandemic period, the importance of school and family cooperation and unity has been seen by both teachers and parents (Dereli & Türk-Kurtça, 2022). It was aimed at examining whether this importance, which was also understood after the pandemic, was put into cooperation and practice. This study focused on the time outside the pandemic period.

2. Methodology

2.1.Research Model

The study employed the phenomenology design, one of the qualitative research methods. Phenomenology studies attempt to reveal people's opinions about one or more concepts or phenomena through subjective or objective experiences that are similar to others' and others' perceptions (Creswell, 2012). Phenomenology

studies focus on events that we are aware of but do not have a detailed and deep understanding of (Cropley, 2002; Gall et al., 2007). This method was preferred because it aimed to examine the experiences of preschool teachers about family engagement activities in detail. Interviews are conducted in this context to reveal the experiences and meanings of the events (Cropley, 2002; Gall et al., 2007).

2.2. Participants

The study group consisted of 35 preschool education teachers who worked in different provinces of Turkey and at different types of preschool education institutions in the fall term of the 2022–2023 academic year. In order to examine and reveal the differences between preschool teachers' thoughts, opinions and activities related to family engagement activities in Turkey, the criterion of working in different provinces and in different school types of the study group teachers was established. Therefore, the study was conducted using maximum diversity sampling, one of the purposeful sampling methods, to select the participants from the Turkish population. This method was chosen to examine the differences and variations in teachers' practices in depth. The reason there are 35 teachers within the scope of the research is that data saturation has been reached. Lincoln and Guba (1985) report that the saturation rate in the sample is effective in the selection of the sample. Since it is aimed to obtain the information at the maximum level, the increase in the sample is stopped at the point where no new information comes from the new participants, that is, the saturation point (Neuman & Robson, 2014). Therefore, it was decided by the researchers that data saturation had been reached among 35 teachers.

The genders of the teachers who constitute the participant group of the research consist of 35 people: 2 (5.7%) males and 33 (94.3%) females (according to the Ministry of National Education [MEB], 2022), the rate of male preschool teachers in Turkey is 6.04%). The participants' ages range from 24 to 47, with a mean age of 35.5. The participants work in Edirne (4), Istanbul (12), Kocaeli (3), Tekirdağ (3), Ankara (2), Antalya (2), Bursa (2), Adana (1), Çanakkale (1), Denizli (1), Eskişehir (1), Hatay (1), Osmaniye (1), and Şanlıurfa (1). The preschool teachers working in Istanbul comprise the majority of the participants, as Istanbul is the largest and most cosmopolitan city in Turkey. The demographic information of the participants, such as the type of school they work in and their professional experience, is given in detail in Appendix 1.

2.3. Data Collection Tools and Procedure

A semi-structured interview form was used in the research. The interview form prepared within the scope of this research consists of two parts. The first part includes 7 questions to determine the demographic characteristics of the participants, and in the second part, there are 14 questions prepared within the framework of the relevant literature (Ersen, 2020; Gross et al., 2020; Görür, 2020; Günay Bilaloğlu, 2014; Kocyigit, 2015; Sabol et al., 2018; Paz-Albo Prieto, 2018; Toran & Özgen, 2018) to examine the family engagement thoughts, opinions and activities of the study group in detail. The interview form was evaluated by two field experts 716r efor preschool teacher for suitability and clarity. Four questions were rearranged within the framework of expert opinions. Two of these have been revised as they may bias respondents. Rewritten as a single question as the other two have the same meaning. After these procedures, a total of 21 questions (7 of which 716r efor demographic information) were included in the interview form. All questions in the interview form were directed to 35 preschool teachers in the study, and their answers were obtained. No changes were made to the questions during the interview. Questions are shown in detail in Appendix 2.

The interview form developed by the researchers for this study was used in the interviews with the teachers with the approval of the University Ethics Committee (Decision date: 28.12.2022, Decision number: 2022.11.31). Before the interviews, it was recorded with mutual signatures that the data would only be used within the scope of this research and would never be shared in a way that would reveal the identities of the teachers. Within the scope of the study, data were obtained by the researchers through online interviews (zoom and microsoft teams) and individual telephone interviews with teachers.. Online interviews were held with 28 of the teachers on Microsoft Teams and Zoom, and phone calls were made with 7 of them. The longest of the interviews conducted by the researchers with the teachers lasted 61 minutes, while the shortest interview lasted 27 minutes. The questions in the semi-structured interview form were asked to the teachers and their answers were recorded by obtaining their permission before the interview. The obtained data were transcribed and transferred to Microsoft Word.

2.4. Data Analysis

In the analysis of the data, firstly, the audio recordings obtained from the interviews with the teachers within the scope of the research were transcribed. These transcribed data were then analyzed inductively and comparatively by the researchers. The aim of inductive analysis is to reveal concepts and relationships that can explain the data obtained. In other words, it is an attempt to summarize the available data within the framework of certain concepts and themes. In particular, data is interpreted in a way that is more understandable for readers (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2013). Within the scope of this research, inductive method was used to create and analyze the themes and concepts that emerged from the data obtained from interviews with teachers.

In qualitative research, it is recommended to use techniques such as long-term commitment, continual observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, and checking for members control to ensure these criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within the scope of this research, evidence was presented using the participants' thick description as methods to demonstrate transferability. Inquiry auditing is a technique used to demonstrate dependability. This is evidenced in this study through conformability audits. The fact that the data transcripts obtained from the interviews are made available to those who request them and analyzed by computer is another structure that increases credibility (Whittemore et al., 2001). Within the scope of this research, the data were recorded and then transcribed using a computer. In addition, the data were obtained from the teachers in detail. For the points that remained unclear during the interviews, probing questions were asked such as 'Did you mean that?" and "Can you explain a little more?". In addition, the researchers analyzed the data using MAXQDA software to ensure reliability. Each researcher performed the coding separately. Finally, the codes were compared, and a standardized approach was provided, which led to the development of a coding manual. The researchers obtained a kappa value of .91. This value was used to demonstrate inter-rater reliability by taking into account perfect agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition, detailed features of the participants were mentioned, and direct quotations were included in order to ensure transferability. The obtained results were shared with the teachers for confirmation. Within the scope of this study, 35 preschool teachers were interviewed, and the data obtained were analyzed. The analysis of the data set started with the transcription of the highest word count. The longest interview in the data set includes 4.871 words, and the shortest interview includes 1.814 words. The data obtained from 35 participants was included in the findings section of the study.

2.5. Ethical

The study was approved by the Social and Humanities Research Science Ethics Committee of Trakya University (Decision date: 28.12.2022, Decision number: 2022.11.31).

3. Findings

This section analyzes the answers given by the participants to the open-ended questions in the semi-structured interviews.

Table 1. *The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the participants' views on family engagement.*

Themes	Sub Themes
Family Engagement Perception	Meaning and Importance
	Ideal Family Engagement
Family Engagement Experience	Planning
	Preparation
	Activities
	Evaluation
	Engagement Issues
	Strategies for Increasing Engagement
	Effects

As a result of the analysis, two main themes emerged: (1) family engagement perception; and (2) family engagement experience. "Family engagement perception" is the main theme, consisting of "Meaning and

Importance" and "Ideal Family Engagement" subthemes. Also, the "Family Engagement Experience" main theme consists of "Planning", "Preparation", "Activities", "Evaluation", "Engagement Issues," "Strategies for Increasing Engagement," and "Effects" subthemes.

Family Engagement Perception

In order to understand preschool teachers' experiences of family engagement studies, participants' family engagement perceptions were determined in the first place. When the participants' responses are examined, it is seen that their opinions on the meaning and importance of family engagement and the ideal family engagement gathered under this theme.

Meaning

Participants consider family engagement as continuing education at home, a bridge between school and family, the engagement of families in activities, and providing education to families. They state that it especially provides an opportunity for parents and children to have an effective time. P9 expressed his opinion on this subject as follows: *"In my opinion, family engagement builds a bridge between school and home in order to support the development of children with the active engagement of parents. I think it creates a bond. I say, they are activities with parents and children that enable them to have fun with parents."*. P31, on the other hand, expressed her opinion as follows: "*Family engagement is the body of work we do for children to reinforce what they learn at school and to ensure that families participate effectively in the education and training process.*". Considering these statements, it is seen that the family engagement definitions of the participants are positive.

Preschool teachers state that family engagement is an indispensable part of education and is as important as education. While P5 expressed her opinion as *"I think family engagement practices are as important as the parents' meetings we held at the beginning of this year, erm… and the education itself."*, P35 said *"In my opinion, family education is integrated with preschool education and is an indispensable part of preschool education."*. The statements indicate that the participants consider family engagement important.

Ideal Family Engagement

Participants stated that an ideal family engagement should be planned. In addition, teachers thought that the characteristics of ideal family engagement are being informative for parents, increasing the interaction between parents and students, being participatory, primarily valuing the teacher, and motivating. First of all, they stated that it should be planned. P25 said, *"It should be organized and planned. No parent should say that they would come to family engagement the next day.*". In addition, they stated that not only school but also family factors should be taken into account when planning. P31 expressed, *"In my opinion, family engagement activities should definitely be organized and planned in a way to create integrity between family, parent, teacher, and child. It should not be planned in one way. It is not one-dimensional. Not for the teacher or the child. Well, all conditions should be evaluated, and there should be a jointly applicable plan.*". In addition, in terms of developing the family through ideal family engagement, P13 said "*Well, I think that activities should be done for developing families, teaching them, raising awareness for them, gaining responsibility, and creating awareness.*". On the issue of drawing attention to teacher leadership in family engagement, P29 stated, "*Family engagement is very important and necessary. In this situation, the teacher has serious responsibilities. Because the person who will manage the process is the teacher. Therefore, teachers need to have good knowledge of this subject, receive training, and constantly improve themselves.* At this point, they stated that families should also be motivated by training. P18 expressed her opinions as follows: "*I think families should be informed and made conscious of the studies and suggestions to increase the engagement of the family. The benefits of family engagement should be mentioned. Its increasing effect on the success of children should be mentioned. Families should be motivated and encouraged like this.*".

They emphasized that the content should be created in an informative, student-centered manner in accordance with the curriculum. P2 said, *"First, it should be child-centered. So maybe you will ask this later; that question will come. I think I remember. It shouldn't be just for family engagement; I mean, not only for showing off, or something like 'we invite the parents to the class' or 'we assign these as a duty'. These activities should also be the ones that are chosen by taking into account the actual development of children and age groups."*. They also drew attention to the importance of parental features in content creation. *"I think family engagement studies should be done first without leaving families in a very difficult situation, taking into account their socioeconomic and cultural differences,"* said P9.

The qualifications listed by the participants regarding ideal family engagement activities indicate that a planned process should also contribute to the development of the child and the teacher.

Family Engagement Experience

Participant responses about how family engagement activities were carried out show that they involved planning, preparation, implementation, evaluation, engagement issues, strategies for increasing engagement, and the effects of engagement.

Planning

The family education needs assessment form and family engagement preference form recommended by the Ministry of National Education were used first in the planning phase (MEB, 2013b, 2013c). P5 explained that she benefited from these forms by saying, *"For example, at the meeting at the beginning of the year, I give two forms to parents. One is the family education needs assessment form. The other is the Family Engagement Practices Form. I mean, can they participate in an activity I will do in the classroom or an activity I will do outside of the classroom? If they do, at what rate do they participate?"*. The teachers also take parental characteristics into account. P3 said, "*Of course, we also take into account the socioeconomic environment. For example, the environment where I work is very cosmopolitan. There are people of all kinds, from all levels of society, even from all nations. So there are also immigrants. That's why we take shape according to the environment we are in, frankly." Family engagement… Well, I try to get to know a family first. As I just mentioned, for example, my work with a family that completed undergraduate studies and a primary school graduate family makes a little difference."* By saying these things, P4 stated that she made the activities suitable for the parents. Just as the activity is planned according to the parent, the time is determined according to the parent, too. P1 said, *"We make plans in these situations; there are some mothers who work too much. So getting them involved in these family engagements is a bit difficult. For example, they may get permission. They inform us in advance, like 'I am available that time' or 'I can come this day',"* and we prepare a schedule. We invite them according to that.".

Preparation

The preparation phase involves organizing the class, providing materials, preparing the students, and communicating with the parents. P1 drew attention to the preparation process of the class by saying these "*I start by organizing the class before the family comes to class. In fact, we do this with the children. I would like to engrain in children that our class should be more organized and clean because of our respect for our guests coming to our class."*. In addition to the preparation of the classroom, necessary materials should also be provided. P25 expressed this as *"What can be the materials? How can I make it interesting? I prepare in this way. Students are prepared by arousing curiosity."*. P16 mentioned that saying, *"Let's say there is a family engagement event that day. I arouse curiosity in children. Today someone will come; a guest will come, and I wonder whose parent will come. I mean, I make them guess with which activity they will come."*. Concerning communication with the parents, P29 stated *"Before the event, there are 3–4 meetings to see how we should do this or that."*. In addition, P21 expressed "*Whenever we think it necessary, we do a short rehearsal before the event at the request of the parent, and we make sure that there is no problem in the classroom during the activity.*".

Activities

During the pandemic period, family engagement was carried out, especially by sending an activity home and inviting parents to school. About sending activities home, P13 said, *"For example, I do activities like this. Every year, for example, I send a book to a child every week. They study it with their families. Children come and tell us about the books they read with their families; they tell us stories."*. These activities are prepared in a way that supports what is done at school. P22 said, "*There are mostly activities such as stories, games, job presentations, experiments, and science activities—especially the children enjoy these—that are mostly done in the classroom and will support the activities at school as well. When the parents are invited to the school, activities based on the parents' skills are mostly carried out. For example, if she is a housewife, kitchen events are planned; if she can play musical instruments, activities suitable for this skill are planned. In addition, activities such as experiments, drama, and reading books are also carried out*". P2 stated, *"Some people have a hobby, for example. A parent who is skilled in handicrafts brings the materials and makes them with the children. She allows them to do it; I mean by bringing the materials".* ". *The area in which families feel most comfortable is making cookies. A child can say, "My mother makes very good cookies; let her come and make them for my friends. When the mother comes and makes cookies for her child's friends at school or in the classroom with*

other children, it can make both the mother and the child feel good. If the family can do it and has the means, we also organize much bigger activities. In other words, we make arrangements according to the conditions of the school and the family," said P27, emphasizing culinary activities. They also engage parents about job presentations. P16 expressed, *"Generally, I give more importance to job presentations. The mother or father can be a nurse or a police officer. We did this in the previous years; it was very useful, and we invited them to our class. There can be job presentations. In line with the skill of the parent, we organize the schedule according to ourselves, since family engagement is generally optional.".* Other activities implemented include preparing brochures and bulletins, organizing parent seminars and meetings, trips, home visits, and sharing photos of activities at school with parents.

Evaluation

Participants take into account parental engagement rates, parent-child interaction, goal achievement, student engagement, and parental satisfaction to evaluate the effectiveness of the activities. P13 stated, *"Or, for example, how was the engagement in other family engagement activities or family work? How much and what can I do to maximize the potential of the crowd in general, that is, the parent group? How can I do it? This is how I usually make my evaluations on engagement".* Regarding interaction, P32 said *"I look at the state of the parent-child relationship and effective communication, the value the parents give to their child, the time they spare, and the positive energy between them during the activity for evaluation.".* Again, regarding the evaluation, P9 expressed, *"I see this a lot in schools, especially in project work." In other words, it is done just to have it done and to be photographed. How much did these activities support the development of our children and their parents' education? Could I reach my goal? I pay close attention to that".*

Engagement issues

Participants working in preschool institutions stated that families have problems, especially with time. These problems include not being able to take enough time off work, to spare time due to work fatigue, and to find time due to people in need of care at home. P12 said *"Regarding work life, they said their hours weren't available because the family worked.".* P3 said, *"Housewives come; they find a way. But some of them have babies. They can't leave them with the neighbors; they can't leave them here or there. There was a year like this. It was all chaos.".* P8, on the other hand, said, *"I think the reason why they are not willing is the intensity of their business life because we go to work in the morning and return from work in the evening. After returning home, we take care of certain personal needs, such as eating and resting. So I don't think they are very enthusiastic about these issues. I think they put their needs in the foreground.".*

Parents' not feeling confident about engagement also emerges as an important problem. While P19 expressed that *"some parents may also not want to participate," The children may feel emotionally incomplete as they see the engagement of other parents. I think the reason for this is that parents are worried that they will not be able to perform adequately in the classroom.".* P34 said, *"Perhaps it is because they do not want to be in the foreground in family engagement activities, or it may be because of reservations from other parents, or because of illusions about their financial situation, or something. There are many different people, and there are many different characters. Parents can sometimes be uncomfortable with this situation, just like us.".* In addition, they also stated that family engagement was neglected by parents, teachers, and the Ministry of National Education. Regarding the negligence of the Ministry of National Education, P5 expressed, *"In other words, no in-service training was provided regarding family engagement. This is not a topic that national education focuses on, but I think it is an issue that needs to be focused on.".* P29 considers teachers themselves as the obstacle in front of family engagement, saying, *"There are those who say they do not include families in class or interfere with their job. If you perceive this as interference with your work, it is wrong from the beginning. Our job is family, child, and teacher, so the three of us should always go hand-in-hand".* In addition, parents' indifference, unpreparedness, and lack of attention to preschool education are matters of concern. P12 said, *"Kindergarten classes are not considered as important as primary and secondary schools by parents. They consider preschools a place where children go for nothing. Why is it so? What is done is not fully explained to the parents. The parents do not know what is done at the school. So parents have a thought like "What will happen if I do this? What if I do not?".*

In addition to all these, in family engagement activities, there are also problems such as parents not having information about child development, comparing their children and themselves with others, finding it easy to choose the activity, doing the activity for the child, and not being able to manage the classroom. P21 expressed,

"*Having another person in the classroom on the day of family engagement causes relaxation and excessive activity in children, and there may be quite a difficult time maintaining classroom order. Children get bored quickly with activities that take a long time. Because they cannot wait for the end of the activity, there is chaos and disorder in the classroom. Apart from that, there are generally noises and chaos arising from the parents' problems in the domination of the class,*" she said, and expressed that she had problems with classroom management. In addition, they can focus on their own children, and children can misbehave more easily with their parents. In addition, parents cannot make a difference by choosing activities that are easy for them. P 16 (laughed) said, "*They often prefer their culinary activities like making cakes, pastries, cookies, popcorn, and pudding. I direct them towards a few more different activities in the classroom. I give an example and ask if they could do it. But parents generally prefer culinary activities.*".

Strategies for Increasing Engagement

Preschool teachers create facilitating conditions and motivate parents to increase engagement. The teachers themselves create facilitating conditions by planning the time, conducting activities based on the parent's skills, giving material support, and inviting other people the child lives with. Teachers primarily try to increase engagement by determining the appropriate time for parents. However, if there is a problem with engagement despite this, they try to increase engagement by being flexible about time. Sometimes they do this by shortening the duration of the event. P32 said, "*There are people with time restrictions. Some say, 'I can never come; I work like this, and I work like that'. I got those people to come to the school at least for 15–20 minutes. So this is my most extreme thing. It is better to come for 15–20 minutes and read a book instead of not coming at all. In other words, it is more important for the child to see his mother at school than to achieve.*". Sometimes they solve it by doing activities outside of class hours. P9 expressed, "*I also worked in the central kindergarten for a year. If working mothers are in the majority, I did my family engagement on the weekend. They all participated. Therefore, I pay attention to them. For working mothers, the biggest problem is not being able to spare time.*". In addition, they plan activities and materials in line with the parent's skills and plan the activities to include materials appropriate to their socioeconomic level. Because of the parents' work, grandparents can be supported by teachers in family engagement. In addition, within the scope of family engagement, parents' elders and other children they care for can be invited to the class. " *I concentrate on working not only for mothers but also for grandparents and fathers, so that all of them will be happy,*" said P9, and stated that she included non-parents in the process. P12 said, "*You can also take your little one; this is a kindergarten class, and they can join us while we are doing activities. It can happen; some take their elders and come. They wonder. So I'm trying to help as much as I can to make them participate. I always try to find an extra solution in my own way.*".

Teachers directly intervene to motivate family engagement. In addition to this, the activity actually has a reinforcing effect. Teachers try to motivate by rewarding, showing examples of activities, guiding, organizing awareness-raising meetings, and constantly interacting. About raising awareness of family engagement, P15 said, "*First of all, I think families should be well informed about this issue because when the family realizes the importance of this, they participate more. I explain the importance of this in my parents' meeting and explain its effects.*" P13 stated "*I tell them we are together until the end of the process; we will do it together through parent meetings and individual interviews, which is of course family engagement work.*". P31, on the other hand, states that she uses the rewarding method and says, "*Preparing special certificates for those parents after engagement or at parent meetings is something that families like a lot. Also, the children draw a picture of the guest, and it turns into a booklet by writing, 'From my point of view... (person's name)'. This is very special for them.*". In addition, the activity has its own reinforcing effects. These can be listed as the children's request from their parents to come to the school, the wish to do it again once the activity takes place, and the other parents being a model. Speaking about the influence of the child, P1 said, "*When other children's mothers come and the children tell this to their parents, like 'her mother came or his father came, they made us do an activity at school' at home, so the children have pressure, then it gets better, and they come, of course*". Pointing out that the engagement of other parents could set an example, P24 said: "*When I shared the activities they performed in the group, it would attract more attention from other parents. That was doubling the engagement*".

Effects

Teachers stated that thanks to family engagement, they got the chance to get to know the students and their parents better and could make requests from the parents more easily. On the other hand, the presence of parents in the classroom can cause some teachers to feel pressure. P5 drew attention to the attitude towards

knowing parents and said, "*I observe what the families went through in the process, their attitude towards students, and whether they allow individual work.*". Talking about a negative situation, P10 said: "*Apart from that, another important problem is that sometimes as a teacher I can feel myself under pressure with the family.*". The effect on the parents occurs especially in the feeling of empathy. P7 expressed this: "*At least they understand the teacher, because preschool teaching is a profession that requires a lot of patience, you know. Some parents have thoughts like, "Did the teacher not see my child or look at his activity?" They see order in classroom activities; their prejudices are over. As I said, their attitudes and behaviors towards the teacher change. This makes the teacher comfortable. Then they don't have very high expectations. As a teacher, I already try to do everything I need to do in the best way possible.*". On the other hand, P29 said: "*Kindergarten is not just a cut-and-paste place. It is actually perceived in this way. When they come to the classroom and do an activity, they really understand us.*". Also, parents understand their place in their children's education. According to P17, "*the family feels that it has an important place in education; the family feels its presence in education and also sees that they can participate in the process.*". It also ensures that parents spend quality time with their children. P32 expressed: "*This family engagement guides the family who do not know what to do with their child. You give them something in a structured way, after all. You say, and they do what you say. Family engagement helps them spend more quality time together. When we leave it to them, they cannot always do quality things with their children.*". Parents enjoy participating in these types of activities. As for students, it has both positive and negative emotional effects on them. The child likes it if the parent participates. P13 expressed this as: "*The way they hug their mothers, the things like 'this is my mother; she came to my class, and I have a mother," 'make them feel cool. I mean, it is pleasing for them*". P17, on the other hand, stated "*The children feel valued, supported, and loved while the parents are with them, and this is reflected in all their actions.*".

Teachers stated that negative situations can also occur in family engagement studies. One of them is that children whose parents do not come to the class in family engagement studies are upset. P19 said, "*Of course this is bad for the children. The families of others come; their family cannot come, which is sad for them.*". P23, on the other hand, said: "*When they are incomplete, when their friends do but they can't, they feel bad. Unfortunately, I cannot actively involve every family in the process.*". It also increases the child's sense of belonging to the school. P28 expressed her opinions: "*Another effect is that it helps to develop a sense of trust towards the school and the teacher and to nurture positive feelings and thoughts*". In addition, it increases the child's self-confidence. P6 expressed "*Also, another good thing about family engagement work is that even if there are children who are very quiet in the classroom, when their parents come to school or do activities with their families, they start talking, and their self-confidence increases.*". In addition to all these, the participants stated that family engagement had positive effects on the child, such as supporting development, ensuring permanent learning, providing motivation, and increasing interaction with parents.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

The present study looked into the family engagement experiences of preschool teachers. In this study, the examination was made by focusing on times other than the pandemic period. As a result of the data analysis, two main themes emerged: family engagement perception and family engagement experience. The theme of family engagement perception includes the meaning and importance of family engagement and the ideal family engagement qualities. The family engagement theme covers planning, preparation, activities, evaluation, engagement issues, strategies to increase engagement, and their effects. While the studies conducted during the pandemic period emphasized the role of parents as proxy teachers, this post-pandemic study revealed the situation regarding the participation of parents (Campos & Vieira, 2021; Davis et al., 2020; Campos and Vieira, 2021; Dereli & Türk-Kurtça, 2022).

As can be seen, parents have abandoned the more active role they assumed during the pandemic period. Within the scope of family engagement, sending activities home and inviting parents to the school are more frequent, while job presentations, trips, brochures, bulletin preparation, and meetings are used more effectively. These results are consistent with the literature. Activities to be carried out within the scope of family engagement in early childhood education can be considered in two groups: school-based and home-based activities. Activities such as parents' engagement in parent education studies (workshops and seminars) and parent-teacher (parent) meetings, classroom activities, management, and decision-making processes are school-based family engagement activities (Hornby ve Lafaele, 2011; Morrison, 2006). Activities such as parents doing the activities sent from school with the child and checking what the children are doing, exploring the environment with the child, and teaching their children songs and finger games are also home-

based family engagement activities (Günay Bilaloğlu, 2014; Hornby ve Lafaele, 2011). Epstein (2010), on the other hand, states that family engagement occurs in the form of parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and cooperation with the community. Abbak (2008) defines family engagement activities as the annual plan of teachers to include activities to be held at home and through parents' engagement in training and school visits. In addition, teachers also make home visits, have meetings, and make phone calls (Abbak, 2008). Research on this subject has revealed that family engagement studies in early childhood education are mostly carried out through participation in classroom activities. (Kutlu Abu & Kaymaz, 2020; Castro et al., 2004).

The biggest obstacle for family engagement studies in early childhood education is seen as the parent's inability to get permission from work. On the other hand, the fact that families do not give enough importance to early childhood education also emerges as a problem for family participation. Families consider pre-school education more focused on caregiving. Crites (2008) states that parents' lack of knowledge about early childhood education and workplace working conditions are major barriers to family engagement. Orçan Kaçan et al. (2019) also determined that the time constraints of the parents are the biggest obstacles to family engagement. In addition, parents' need to take care of another child at home was also mentioned as a major obstacle to family engagement activities. Lack of understanding of the importance of early childhood education by parents is another factor that hinders participation. (Kutlu Abu & Kaymaz, 2020). Parents need to be informed that the more they participate and cooperate in their children's early childhood education, the more their children's outcomes will improve (Dearing et al., 2006; Swick et al., 2006). Another problem experienced in family engagement is that parents do activities instead of children. Therefore, it should be emphasized that the activities should be done by the children instead of the parents, especially for their development and support.

The participants' responses within the scope of the research show that there are various obstacles to family engagement. These include barriers such as the parent's low self-esteem and inability to manage the classroom. Therefore, teachers can start with activities that are suitable for parents and that they can easily cope with. On the other hand, teachers did not express any opinion that they could not do family engagement activities. Therefore, it can be said that teachers have high self-efficacy in this subject. Kaya (2007) found that teachers have high self-efficacy in family engagement. However, Güzelyurt et al. (2019) showed in their research that teachers with little professional experience fell short in family engagement. As can be seen, self-efficacy is an important factor in increasing family engagement for teachers. However, parents' lack of self-confidence in family engagement seems to be a hindering factor. This result is consistent with the research findings of Günay Bilaloğlu and Aktaş Arnas (2019). Especially in this study, it was found that some of the parents felt inadequate in doing the activities sent home with their children. It was also found that some parents did not know what to do when they participated in classroom activities. It was determined that parents were especially worried that they would not be able to realize the activities (Günay Bilaloğlu & Aktaş Arnas, 2019).

Preschool teachers especially use family engagement forms in the planning stage (MEB, 2013b; MEB, 2013c). Akkaya (2007) also found that teachers benefited from these forms. Besides, according to the statements of the participants, it is seen that family engagement depends on the teacher's effort. Joshi and Taylor (2005) emphasize that teacher-parent interaction is influenced by teachers' being equipped, at peace with themselves, and free from prejudices, as well as developing themselves about their profession and having insight (Joshi & Taylor, 2005). Also, although this study found that fathers participated in professional activities and some in-class activities, it was determined that they participated in activities less than mothers. However, it is thought that fathers can easily participate in sports activities, family games, reading activities, building activities, and nature activities (Ancel et al., 2018). Especially with the participation of mothers in business life, it has become a necessity for fathers to take an active role in their children's social and educational lives (Kocatepe & Bilgi, 2018). But this may not be the case for every family. There may also be situations in which the father works longer than the mother and the mother is not involved in work life. In such cases, mothers may come to the fore in family engagement. The present study was conducted on the basis of teachers' perceptions. Because of this, the teacher may not have a complete observation and knowledge about parent-child interaction in the child's home environment. Karadeniz and Kahyaoğlu Çakmakçı (2021) revealed that, especially during the period of the pandemic, fathers spend time with their children both with outdoor games and games established with materials at home.

It was stated that family engagement had positive effects on teachers, parents, and children. The participants in the study stated that family engagement provides an opportunity for parents to realize the importance of themselves in the education of their children. In addition, it was emphasized that it also provides an opportunity for families to spend more quality time with their children. Family engagement studies primarily provide cooperation between school and home (Günay Biloloğlu, 2014; Günay Biloloğlu & Aktaş Arnas, 2019). In this way, children's education is continuous both at home and at school (Güven, 2011; Yıldırım, 2021). Duran (2005) also stated that family engagement studies in early childhood contributed to the development of the school program. He emphasized that these studies improved parenting and leadership skills for the family and facilitated families' relationships with school and society. He also added that teachers contributed to their work more effectively.

The goal of family education is to provide parents with educational experiences that will help them gain knowledge and understanding (Gestwicki, 2004). When studies on family engagement in early childhood are thoroughly reviewed (Paz-Albo Prieto, 2018; Snell et al., 2020), it is seen that family engagement affects children's future school success (OECD, 2012; Paz-Albo Prieto et al., 2017). It was revealed that children of families that are involved in family engagement activities score better in higher scores and achievement tests, perform better in reading and mathematics (Arnold et al., 2008; Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Marcon, 1999), have low school absenteeism, have fewer behavioral problems, have better social skills (Denham et al., 1991; McNamara et al., 2010), and adapt to school better, and that family engagement has long-term positive results such as the desire to receive education after high school. Furthermore, family engagement activities are particularly effective in preventing child abuse (Lim, 2012).

It was stated by the participants in this study that there may be negative aspects to family engagement studies. Examples of these are the teacher's feeling of pressure due to the presence of the parent in the classroom, and the child may be given a morale upset because his or her parent does not come to the class. In order to eliminate such problems, teachers develop strategies such as planning appropriate time for parents and bringing other family members that they care for to the classroom in order to engage families more. Thus, teachers provided flexibility to facilitate family engagement. Especially teachers working in early childhood education should pay attention to being flexible, reliable, and accessible when working with families (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 2006; Mcwayne et al., 2022; Smith, 2020).

5. Recommendations

Most of the participants in this study are female teachers. Male teacher participants are very limited. It is thought that future studies with more male teachers in the study group can be designed. In this study, evaluations were made based on the opinions of the teachers and the information they provided. In the future, studies can be planned in which evaluations can be made based on the opinions of the families. In addition, study patterns can be created in which researchers can actively observe family involvement studies. It is observed in the present study that the participants have deficiencies in taking courses on family engagement at the undergraduate level. It is thought that besides theoretical lessons about working with the family, practical lessons, especially for preschool, can be added to the curriculum. Environments can be created by the Ministry of National Education where teachers can see effective practices in family engagement studies at the national level that they can share. In addition, most of the participants within the scope of this research do not focus on educating families about family engagement. It was observed that the participants mostly focused on in-class activities. In addition, they talk about parents' lack of knowledge about child development. For this reason, it is important to organize trainings for families, especially about child development, communication with children, etc.

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Appendix 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participant

Participant	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	P16	P17	P18	P19	P20	P21	P22	P23	P24	P25	P26	P27	P28	P29	P30	P31	P32	P33	P34	P35
Gender																																			
Female	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Male														X															X						
Education																																			
Associate's								X												X			X											X	
Bachelor's	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X			X	X
Bachelor's																										X							X		
Master's		X										X						X																	
Teaching																																			
1-5 years								X				X				X			X			X		X			X			X	X			X	
6-10 years			X	X	X	X				X	X				X		X	X								X		X					X		
11-15 years	X						X			X			X			X					X			X		X				X					X
16-20 years		X												X																					
21 years +																				X															
School type																																			
Public	X		X	X						X					X	X	X		X	X			X	X	X				X			X	X		X
Public		X			X	X	X		X		X	X	X	X				X									X	X			X				
Private								X														X				X									
Private																					X													X	
Socioec sta																																			
Lower									X											X	X						X	X							
Middle	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X		X	X	X
Higher				X												X																X			
Prepared																																			
No								X				X		X												X			X		X				
A little	X			X		X	X						X			X	X	X		X			X	X			X	X					X		X
Good			X		X					X	X								X			X			X					X				X	
Very good		X																											X						

Appendix 2. Interview Questions

First Part. Demographic Information Questionnaire

1. Gender? Female/ Male
2. How old are you?
3. Please indicate your education level? Associates's/ Bachelor's/ Bachelor's Open Education/Mater's/PhD
4. How many years have you been working in the profession? 1-5/ 6-10/ 11-15/ 16-20/ 21+
5. Which would you describe your school with? Public Kindergarten/Public Nursery Class/ Private Kindergarten/ Private Nursery Class/ Public Day-Nursery
6. How would you describe the socioeconomic status of the families of the children in your class? Lower/ Middle/ Higher
7. How well has your education (university or in-service training) prepared you for family engagement? No/A little/Good/Very Good

Second Part. Family Engagement Teacher Interview Questions

The Meaning and Importance of Family Engagement

1. What is family engagement in your opinion?
2. What are the effects of family engagement activities on children?
3. What are your thoughts on the importance / necessity of family engagement studies?

Activity Content in Family Engagement

4. How do you think family engagement activities should be?
5. How do you prepare for family engagement activities?
6. What kind of activities do you organize on family engagement?

Situations Encountered in Family Engagement

7. What are the most important problems you experience in family engagement?
8. What are the difficulties / obstacles you face while implementing family engagement work? What do you think are the sources of these?
9. How are the socioeconomic levels of families reflected in family engagement activities?

Strategies for Increasing Teacher Competence and Quality in Family Engagement

10. Which of your works do you think will lead you to success in family engagement studies? Can you explain?
11. What are the points you pay attention to while evaluating family engagement activities?
12. What feedback do you get from your parents about family engagement activities?
13. What are your suggestions for further development of family engagement activities?
14. Do you have any other comments and suggestions you would like to add about family engagement?