

# Examining Preschool Children's Perceptions of School

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## Abstract

The aim of this research is to examine the school perceptions of preschool children. The study employed a qualitative case study design to explore preschool children's perceptions of school. The research involved 100 children aged 60-72 months from five different preschools during the fall semester of the 2022-2023 academic year. Data was collected through the 'School Perception Interview Form' and 'School Picture Drawings' to explore the children's perceptions. To analyze the collected data, the study employed content analysis, a common method used in qualitative data analysis. The content analysis process involved four stages: coding the data, identifying themes, organizing codes and themes, and describing and interpreting the findings. The study findings revealed that the children perceived school as a place for learning new things and experiencing happiness. Their favorite activity was art, and they enjoyed the school's garden area. They preferred Lego/blocks and puzzles the most. Overall, they exhibited a positive attitude toward attending school, and their drawings depicted school buildings. In light of all these findings, it is recommended that the physical environments of preschool education institutions be organized, and they should be better equipped by increasing the variety of toys and materials.

**Keywords:** Preschool, school, perception, children

## About the Article

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## Introduction

During the preschool period, children undergo rapid development in cognitive, language, motor, social, and emotional domains, encompassing all areas of growth. This stage holds great significance as it plays a critical role in acquiring values and behaviors that form the basis of life (Köksal & Tükel, 2017; Selçuk & Yavuz, 2018; Tuğçeli & Zembat, 2017). The experiences children have during the preschool period greatly contribute to shaping the individuals they become in the future. Children begin to develop their perceptions of themselves and their surroundings, and these experiences play a significant role in determining their future characteristics and qualities. The preschool period is a time when children are particularly receptive to external influences from their environment (Akyol, 2016; Aral & Kadan, 2018). Given that children spend most of their time in school, it is important to focus on educational environments.

The environment is one of the most important factors in ensuring the effectiveness of the early childhood process, which supports the development of all areas of individuals. When designing educational environments, it is necessary to create spaces that allow children to move independently and interact with their peers, fostering their problem-solving skills and desire for learning (Pedok, 2017; as cited in the study by Gül, 2019). Educational environments also considerably influence children's life experiences (Nicholson, 2005). Therefore, when planning educational spaces, considerations such as materials, flooring, lighting, ceiling height, shape, texture, color, and size should be made to create a harmonious environment for children (Maxwell, 2007; Sakarya, 2019). Research has revealed that the quality of the educational environment affects children's cognitive and social-emotional development. It has a significant and long-lasting effect on children's development and impacts their behavior (Fontaine et al., 2006; Mashburn et al., 2008; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Sakarya, 2019). Accordingly, all arrangements to be made in the educational environment should be planned after considering the child's psychology, age group, health, safety, and comfort (Göregenli, 2013; Sakarya, 2019). However, Güven's (2006) research in Türkiye demonstrated that play and movement activities in preschool education institutions were not effectively implemented owing to inadequate implementation, materials, and the physical environment.

In this context, considering the role of schools in shaping children's behavioral and developmental changes, it is unclear how these interactions shape individuals' school perceptions. Schools, as educational institutions, play a vital role in educating today's society for the society of tomorrow (Heppell et al., 2004). Schools, serving as educational and training environments, are expected to impact children's behavior and developmental changes. The physical environment of schools should contribute to the development and learning of children (Baştepe, 2009; Güleş, 2013). Arnon et al. (2018) emphasized that children learn in indoor and outdoor learning environments in preschool education institutions. Studies comparing preschools across different countries demonstrate that the utilization of spaces and materials is closely linked to

the pedagogical approach of educators and the relationship between children and teachers (Cleghorn et al., 2008). In other words, how the child perceives the educational environment, materials and communication with the teacher is very important.

When considering the effects of educational environments on children, it is important to develop an understanding of how these effects shape individuals' perceptions of school. Perception is defined as a meaning-making process in which the stimuli received from the external world through the sense organs are interpreted through mental processes. Perception is a complex process that includes the current mental state, past experiences, and expectations about the future (Bakan & Kefe, 2014). School perception refers to individuals' overall views, observations, feelings, and thoughts about school. It is believed that attitudes toward school and the perception of school serve as predictors for various behaviors exhibited toward school (Gülcemal, 2019; Özdemir & Kalaycı, 2013). Several factors can influence school perception, such as the physical condition of the school, students' feelings at school, rules applied at school, socioeconomic status of children, and developmental level of the region where the school is located (Toprakçı & Gülmez, 2018; Voight et al., 2015; Yüner & Özdemir, 2017). Piaget stated that children cannot view the world as adults do (Wood, 2003). As different from adults, children's perception of their environment is shaped by their experiences, and their mental images of the environment develop as their interactions with the space evolve. The environment provides sensory stimuli that enable perception through the senses (Roth, 2002; Sakarya, 2019). Civek (2018) documented that preschool children perceive school as a place of learning and hold positive perceptions. They often envision their ideal school as being beautiful and large. In children's drawings, the school is depicted as a social environment where social relations are established and developed. Some children perceive school as a place that fulfils their needs for play and movement. Accordingly, the quality and quantity of preschool education institutions impact children's perceptions of school, emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive organization both indoors and outdoors. Children with positive school perception exhibit behaviors such as enjoying school, actively participating in activities, having positive relationships with peers and teachers, and indicating overall happiness. Children with negative school perceptions tend to be unhappy, reluctant to attend school, and disinterested in activities (Özdemir & Kalaycı, 2013). Andersson and Strander (2004) determined that a positive perception of school is associated with a more optimistic outlook on the future, better problem-solving skills, and the belief that conditions can be positively changed.

Aksoy and Baran (2010) concluded that the quality and quantity of preschool environments, including the content and various dimensions, significantly influence children's perceptions. Consequently, it is crucial to equip preschool education institutions with appropriate resources and environments. Studies have revealed that preschool children's perceptions of school can affect their academic achievement in the following years (Katz & McClelland, 2016; Pekrun et al., 2009). Developing a positive perception of school during the preschool years can contribute to increased

academic achievement and positively impact children's lives (Denham et al., 2015; Kostelnik et al., 2015). When the literature is examined, it is seen that there is no research examining the school perceptions of preschool children in Turkey, except for the thesis study conducted by Civek (2018). This situation shows that we do not have enough data about the factors affecting children's perceptions of school and the schools where they spend most of their time. This situation prevents the creation of educational environments and the development of educational programmes by taking into account children's perspectives on educational environments. In addition, revealing children's school perceptions is important in terms of accelerating children's school adaptation processes and their future academic lives. It is thought that the research will make significant contributions to national and international literature. Given these findings, it becomes imperative to examine the factors associated with preschool children's perceptions of school and provide recommendations to enhance their perceptions. In light of this information, this study aims to examine preschool children's perceptions of school. In order to achieve this aim, answers to the following questions were sought.

1. How do preschool children define the concept of school?
2. What are preschool children's reasons for attending school?
3. How do preschool children feel at school?
4. What are preschool children's favourite activities at school?
5. What school activities do preschool children dislike?
6. What are preschool children's favourite areas at school?
7. Which toys/materials do preschool children like the most at school?
8. What else would preschool children like to see in order to make the school a better place?
9. Do preschool children prefer to attend school or stay at home?
10. How do preschool children portray the concept of school in their drawings?

## Method

### Research Model

The study employed a qualitative research method to explore preschool children's perceptions of school. Qualitative research aims to understand and interpret events and phenomena in their natural environment, taking into account the holistic and realistic aspects. Qualitative research is defined as 'research in which qualitative data collection methods such as observation, interview, and document analysis are used and a qualitative process is followed to reveal perceptions and events in a realistic and holistic manner in a natural environment'. The research process follows a qualitative approach, which involves formulating a research question and seeking answers through the collection and analysis of data (Creswell, 2007; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). In this research, the basic qualitative research design, one of the qualitative research

approaches, was used. The aim of basic qualitative research, which strives to reveal the undiscovered "meanings" created by individuals, is to understand how people understand their lives and experiences. In basic qualitative research, researchers focus on the process and try to understand it (Merriam, 2013). In this study, the researcher tried to understand children's school perceptions by focusing on their perceptions.

### **Study Group**

In the study, conducted during the fall semester of the 2022–2023 academic year, 100 children aged 60-72 months, who were enrolled in five different preschools, participated. The study group comprised 41 girls and 59 boys. Twelve children participating in the study have been attending preschool education institutions for three years, 82 children for two years and 6 children for the first time. All of the children participating in the study attend public schools. All the children in the study group exhibited normal development and did not have any special needs. The researchers employed purposive sampling to form the study group (Patton, 2014), a method commonly used in qualitative research. Purposive sampling allows for the selection of participants based on specific criteria, aiming to include individuals who can provide rich and informative insights on the research topic (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). In this sampling approach, the researchers identify important criteria for participant selection, ensuring that the sample represents the target population with its diverse characteristics (Tavşancıl & Aslan, 2001).

### **Data Collection Tools**

To examine preschool children's perceptions of school, the study utilized two different data collection tools: the 'School Perception Interview Form' and the 'School Picture Drawings'.

### **School Perception Interview Form**

A semi-structured interview form comprising nine questions developed by the researcher was used as a data collection tool to reveal preschool children's perceptions of school. The researcher developed the form by creating a pool of questions and selecting those that were relevant to the research objectives. The questions were formulated based on existing literature on ranking principles and data sources (Patton, 2014; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). The researcher ensured that the questions were open-ended, single-dimensional, non-directive, and easy for the participants to understand. The interview form was reviewed for content and face validity by three faculty members (one professor and two associate professors) with expertise and experience in early childhood education. The pre-application of the questionnaire was conducted with ten preschool children, and corrections were made to two questions that were unclear or poorly worded.

## **School Picture Drawings**

As part of the data collection process, children's drawings were utilized as a tool to capture preschool children's perceptions of school. The children were provided with crayons and white A4 paper, allowing them the freedom to express their perceptions through drawings. They were given as much time as they needed to complete their drawings without any time constraints.

## **Data Collection from Children's Drawings**

One of the major challenges in conducting studies with preschool children is their potential reluctance to provide information to unfamiliar researchers and participate actively in the research process. The study recognized the importance of engaging preschool children in a fun and interesting manner to facilitate data collection and establish trust between the children and the researcher. To achieve this, various methods were employed, including having children draw pictures, take photographs, and play games (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Punch, 2002). The study employed the draw-and-tell technique to collect data on children's perceptions of school. The draw-and-tell technique involves children creating drawings and subsequently providing explanations of their drawings. This technique serves as a diagnostic method that helps researchers understand how children construct thoughts and concepts (McWhirter et al., 2000; Shepardson, 2005). Prior to the implementation of the draw-and-tell technique, the children in the sample were interviewed and engaged in a conversation about school. Then, they were instructed to draw a picture by giving the instruction "Everyone draw a school picture". They were provided with crayons and white A4 paper, allowing them the freedom to draw their perception of a school. They were given ample time to complete their drawings without any interference or guidance. After the drawings were completed, each child was asked to describe their picture, and the researcher took notes during these descriptions.

## **Collection of Interview Data**

The data collection process in the study involved conducting individual interviews with the children. These interviews were conducted in a designated area between the two classrooms to ensure that the children's responses were not influenced by each other. Prior to the interviews, introductory questions such as What is your name? and Do you have siblings? were asked to establish rapport and gather demographic information (Creswell, 2007). During the interviews, the researcher used a voice recorder to record the conversations. The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. Following the interviews, the researcher transcribed the recorded audio into a Word document on the computer.

## **Data Analysis**

In the study, content analysis was employed as the method for analyzing the interview records and children's drawings, which is a commonly used approach in qualitative

data analysis. The content analysis was conducted in four stages: coding the data, finding themes, organizing codes and themes, and defining and interpreting the findings in the processing of qualitative research data obtained from documents (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). During the coding process, the researchers created codes based on the purpose of the research. The open coding method was used to generate the codes, and they were then tabulated and interpreted. Themes were developed by categorizing the codes, either by utilizing pre-existing themes developed by others or by creating a new theme system (Bilgin, 2006).

In the study, researchers analyzed the interviewees' discourses separately in terms of the determined themes and conducted an inter-coder reliability analysis. Aside from the researcher, one associate professor, one assistant professor, and one associate professor specializing in educational sciences participated as independent coders in the analysis of interview data. The content of the children's drawings was listed in detail. Themes related to similar qualities were created from the list. Afterwards, the themes were coded. After this first analysis, a break was given for 15 days. At the end of 15 days, the pictures were analysed again for the second time, lists were created and coding was done. The results of the first and second analyses were compared and the themes and codes were finalised. The inter-coder reliability percentage was calculated at 95% using the inter-coder reliability formula (Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to Kabapınar (2003), a consistency level of 80% or above is considered reliable in research analyses. In research using descriptive analysis, including direct quotations from the interviewees and drawing conclusions based on them are crucial (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). To ensure the transferability of the results obtained, the researchers described the data in detail and supported their findings with direct quotations from time to time. In the direct quotations, the real names of the participants were kept confidential and the direct quotations were expressed as C1, C2, etc. In the study, the researchers cited the sections they deemed important as quotations.

### **The Researcher's Role**

At the beginning of qualitative research studies, the position of the researcher and possible biases that are thought to affect the study should be explained. In this context, if the researchers have any tendency, assumption, past experience or prejudice about the study, it is explained in this section (Creswell, 2016). The researcher has previously conducted many studies in the field of preschool education, directed theses and conducted many qualitative studies. In this study, all interviews with children were conducted by the researcher. The researcher was involved in the reporting process of the study by undertaking tasks such as content analysis, methodological structure, transcription and literature review as well as interviews.

The task of the researchers in this qualitative study is to reveal the participants' perceptions of the school and shed light on the problems and needs they experience. The researchers' other task is to protect the participants' information and data

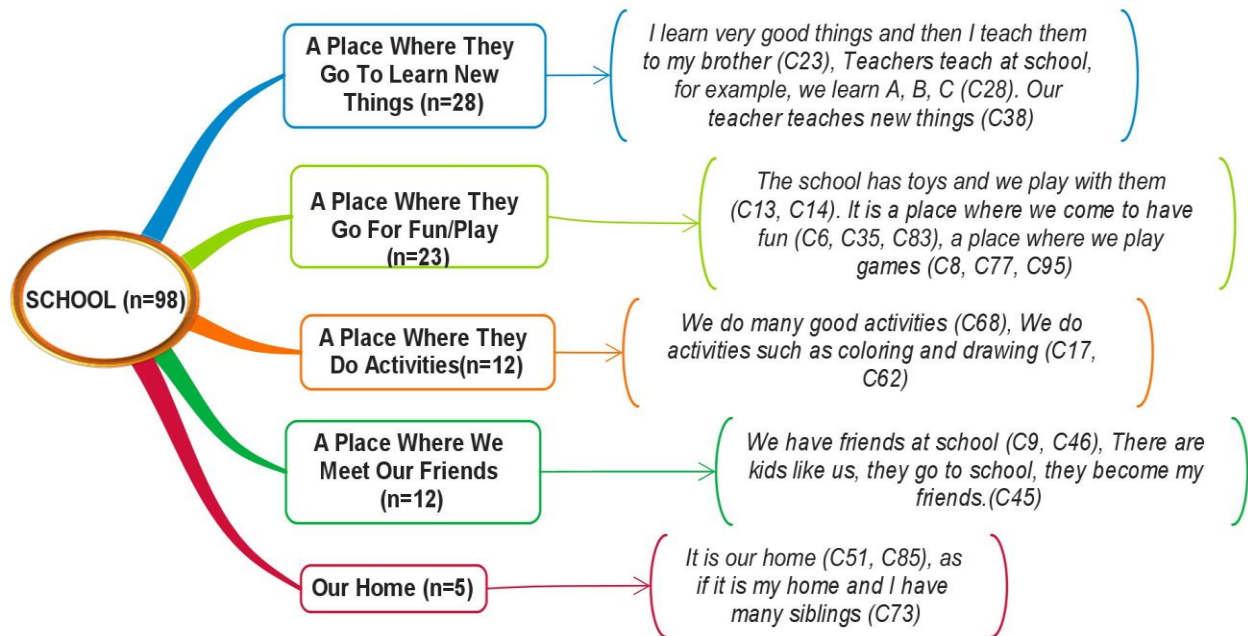
confidentiality. The protection of data confidentiality is one of the first priorities of this study.

## Findings

The study aimed to examine preschool children's perceptions of school. The findings obtained were categorized and presented in line with this purpose. In the analysis of the data collected from the demographic information form, semi-structured interview form, and children's drawings, the researchers identified ten themes related to preschool children's views on the concept of school. One of the themes focuses on preschool children's views on defining the concept of school. Figure 1 presents preschool children's views on defining the concept of school.

**Findings Related to Preschool Children's Definitions of the Concept of School:** Figure 1 presents the views of preschool children on the concept of school.

**Figure 1.** Preschool Children's Views on the Concept of School



According to Figure 1, preschool children mostly defined school as A Place Where They Go To Learn New Things (n:30), A Place Where They Go For Fun/Play (n:28), and A Place Where They Do Activities (n:23). Figures 2 and 3 depict the pictures reflecting the views of the children.



**Figure 2.** An example of a Picture Related to the Theme of a Place Where You Go to Learn New Things (Age5) (C23)



Figure 2 presents a visual representation of the picture drawn by a child who defined school as 'a place to go to learn new things' at the highest rate. The child's drawing in this figure may include a teacher figure and letter symbols.

**Figure 3.** An Example of a Picture from the Category of a Place to Go for Fun/Play (Age 5) (C35)

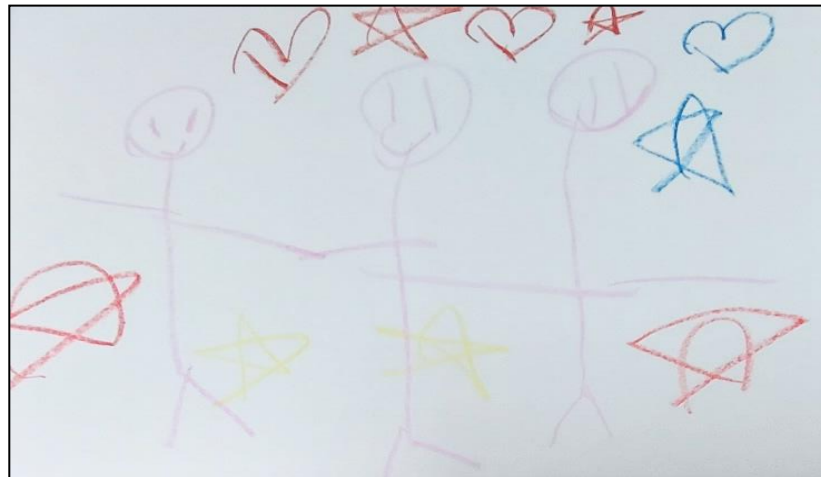


Figure 3 represents the picture drawn by a child who defined school as 'a place where children go for fun/play' at the highest rate. In this picture, the child is depicted as playing games with her friends.

**Findings on Preschool Children's Reasons for Attending School:** Figure 4 presents the views of preschool children on the reasons for attending school.

Figure 4. Preschool Children's Views on the Reasons for Coming to School

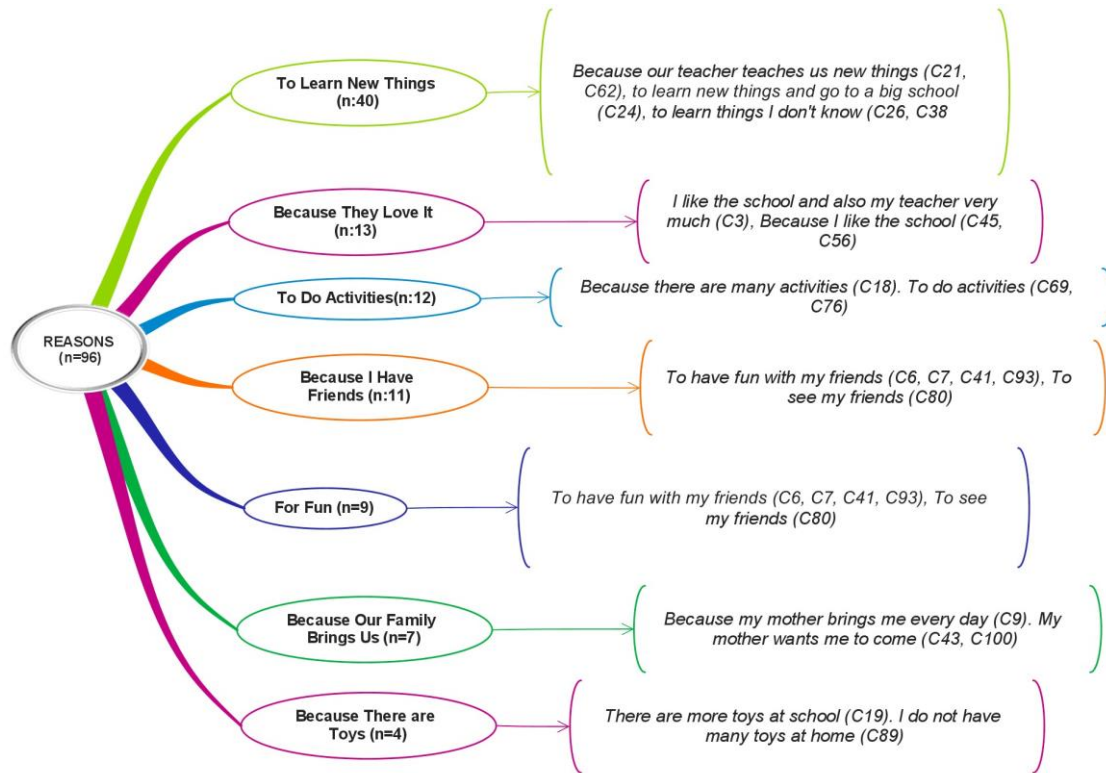
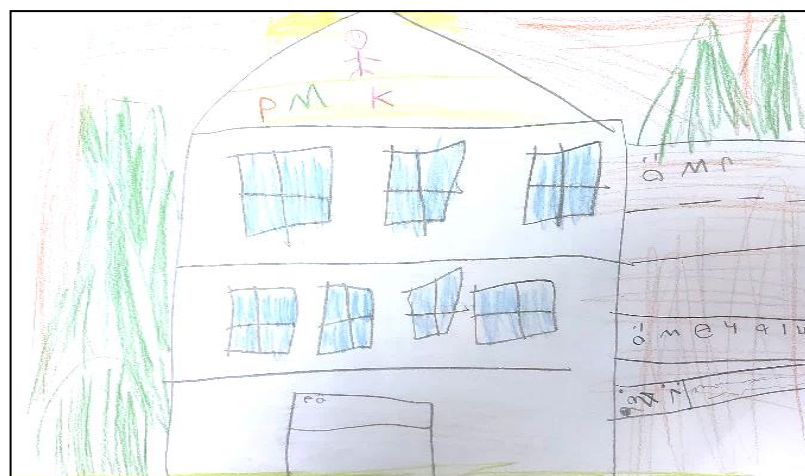


Figure 4 represents the reasons stated by preschool children for coming to school. The highest rate of responses included To Learn New Things (n: 40), Because They Love It (n: 13), and To Do Activities (n: 12). Figures 5 and 6 depict pictures reflecting the views of the children.

Figure 5. An Example of a Picture in the Category 'To Learn New Things' (Age 6) (C38)



In Figure 5, the child who defined the reason for coming to school as 'to learn new things' drew letter symbols on and around the school building.

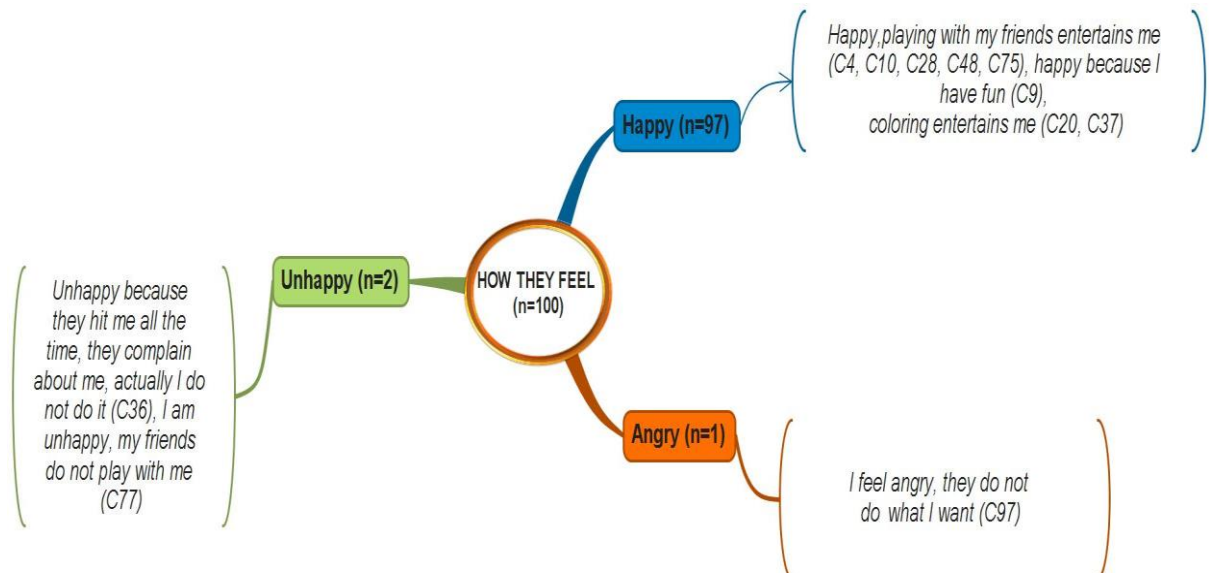
**Figure 6.** An Example of a Picture in the Category 'Because I Have Friends' (Age 5) (C93)



In Figure 6, the child who defined the reason for coming to school as 'Because I have friends' drew himself and his friends in front of the school building.

**Findings on How Preschool Children Feel at School:** Figure 7 presents the views of preschool children on how they felt at school.

**Figure 7.** Preschool Children's Views on How They Feel at School



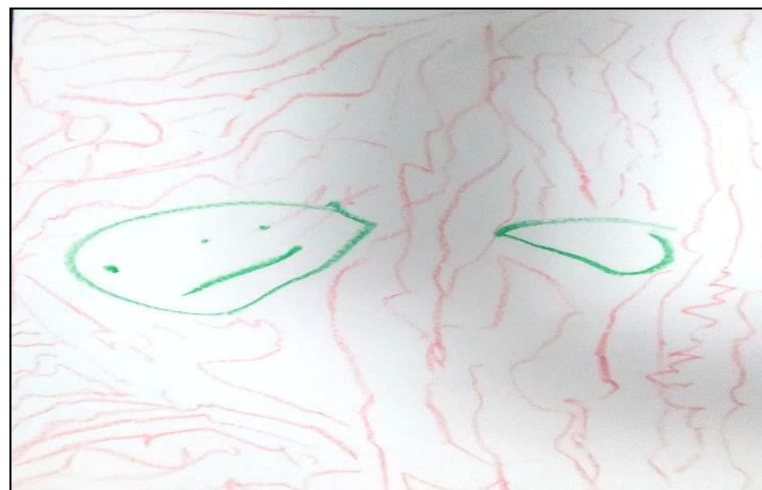
According to Figure 7, preschool children reported feeling happy at school at a very high rate (n: 97), two children reported feeling unhappy, and one child reported feeling angry. Figures 8 and 9 depict pictures reflecting the views of the children.

**Figure 8.** An Example of a Picture from the Happy Category (Age 6) (C10)



In Figure 8, the child who stated that he felt 'happy' at school drew himself inside the school building and indicated that he was happy by drawing a heart symbol.

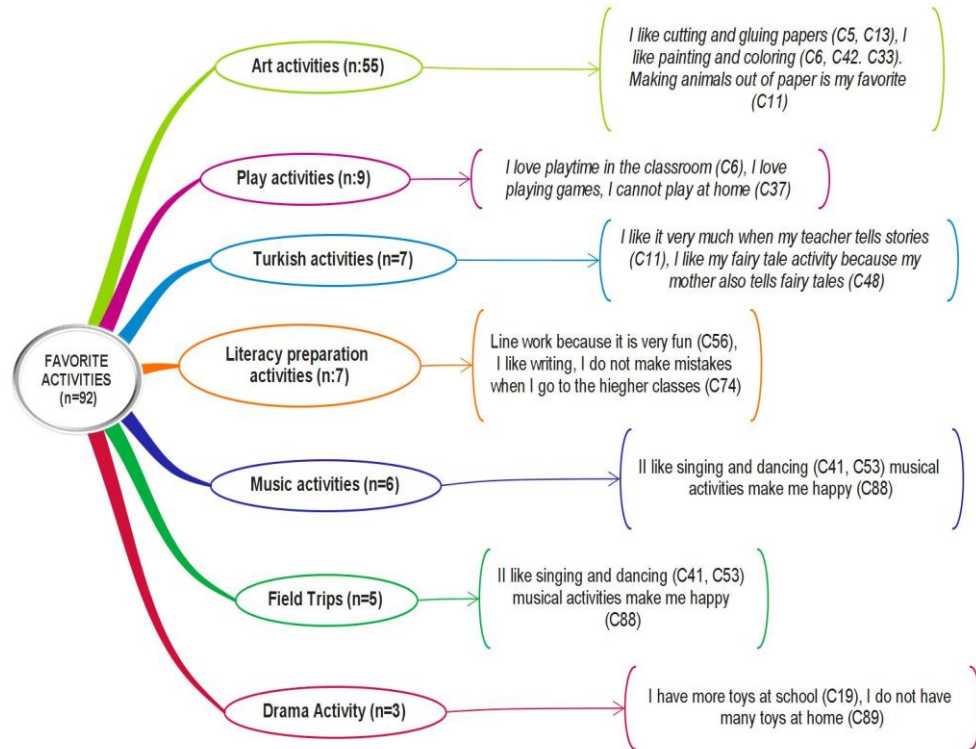
**Figure 9** An Example Picture for the Unhappy Category (Age 6) (C36)



In Figure 9, the child who stated that he/she felt 'unhappy' at school drew himself/herself inside the school building with a lonely and emotionless expression.

**Findings on Preschool Children's Favorite Activities at School:** Figure 10 presents the preschool children's views on their favorite activities at school.

Figure 10. Preschool Children's Opinions on Their Favorite Activities at School



In Figure 10, preschool children's favorite activities at school included art activities (n: 55), play activities (n: 9), Turkish activities, and literacy preparation activities (n: 7). Figure 11 depicts the picture reflecting the views of the children.

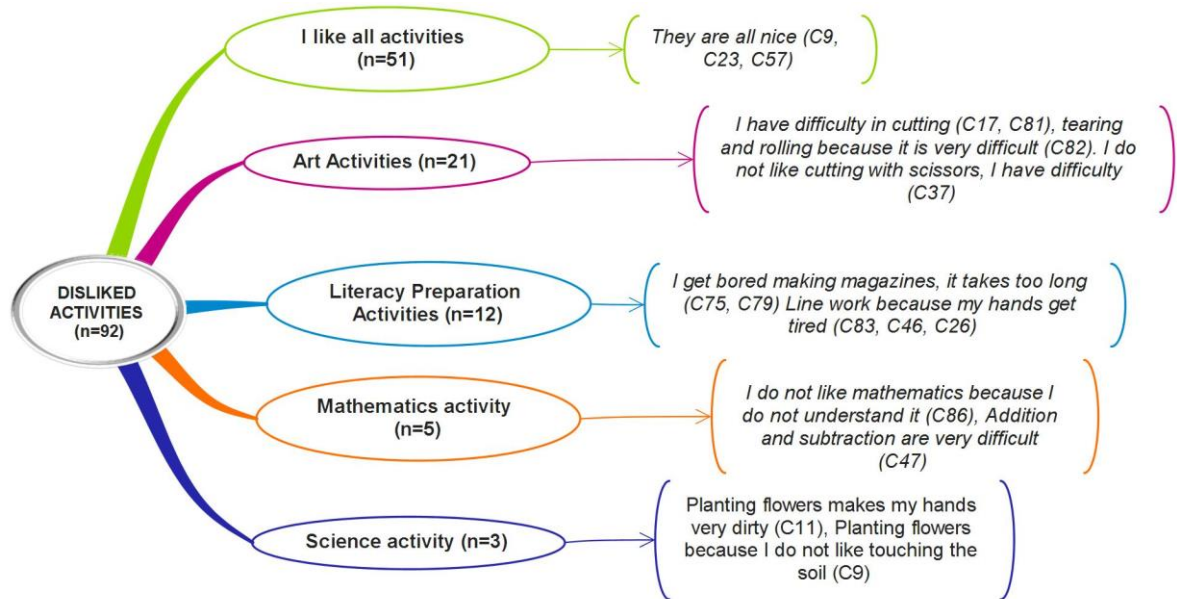
Figure 11. An Example of a Picture from the Art Activity Category (Age 5) (C42)



In Figure 11, the child who defined his/her favorite activity at school as 'Art' drew herself with paints in her hands.

**Findings Related to the Activities that Preschool Children Dislike at School:** Figure 12 presents the views of preschool children on the activities they disliked at school.

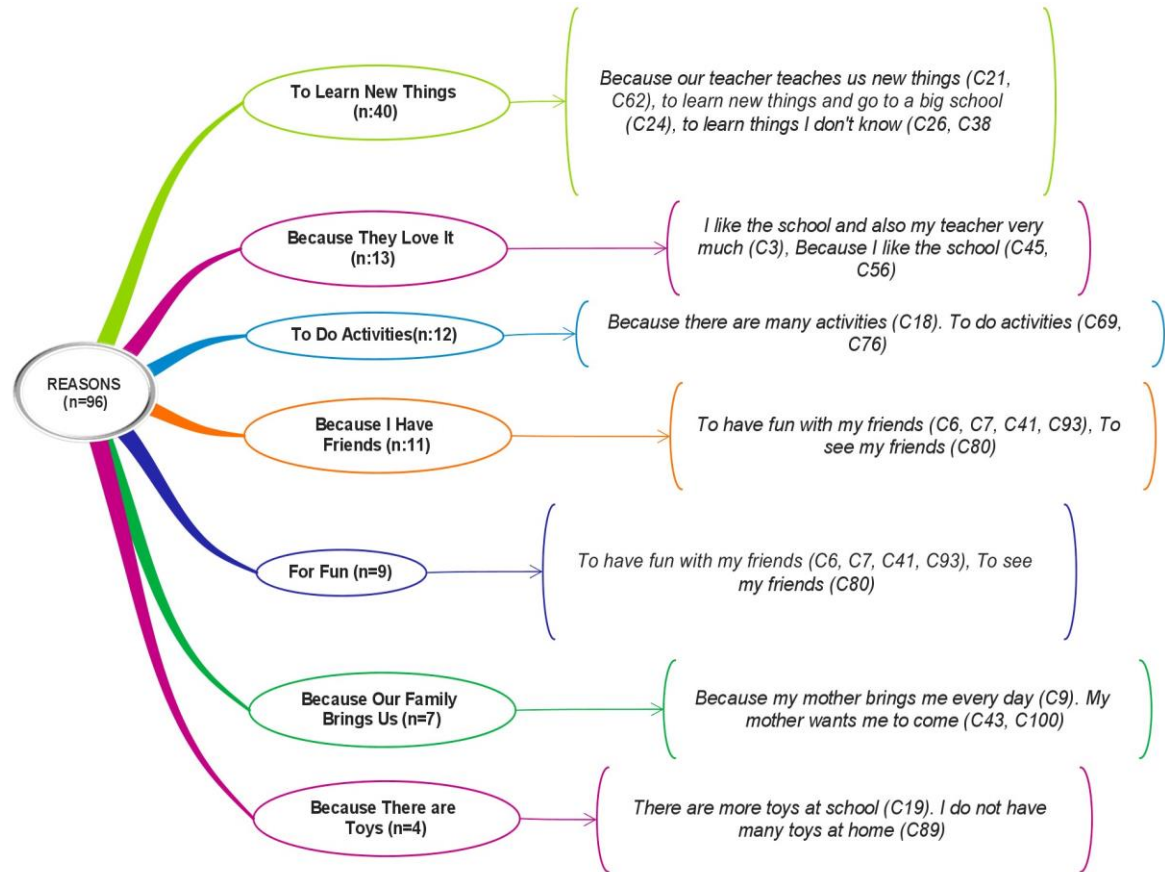
**Figure 12.** Preschool Children's Opinions on Activities They Dislike at School



In Figure 12, the activities that preschool children disliked at school were Art Activities (n: 20) and Literacy Preparation Activities (n: 10) at the highest rate.

**Findings on Preschool Children's Favorite Areas at School:** Figure 13 presents the preschool children's views on their favorite areas at school.

Figure 13. Preschool Children's Opinions on the Areas They Like at School



According to Figure 13, preschool children's favorite places at school were the Garden (n: 30), the Dramatic Play Center (n: 23), and the Playground (n: 14). Figures 14 and 15 present pictures reflecting the views of the children.

**Figure 14.** An Example of a Picture from the Garden Category (Age 6) (C55)



In Figure 14, the child who expressed the area he liked most as the 'Garden' drew a park area next to the school building in the picture.

**Figure 15.** An Example of a Picture from the Dramatic Play Center Category (Age 6) (C14)

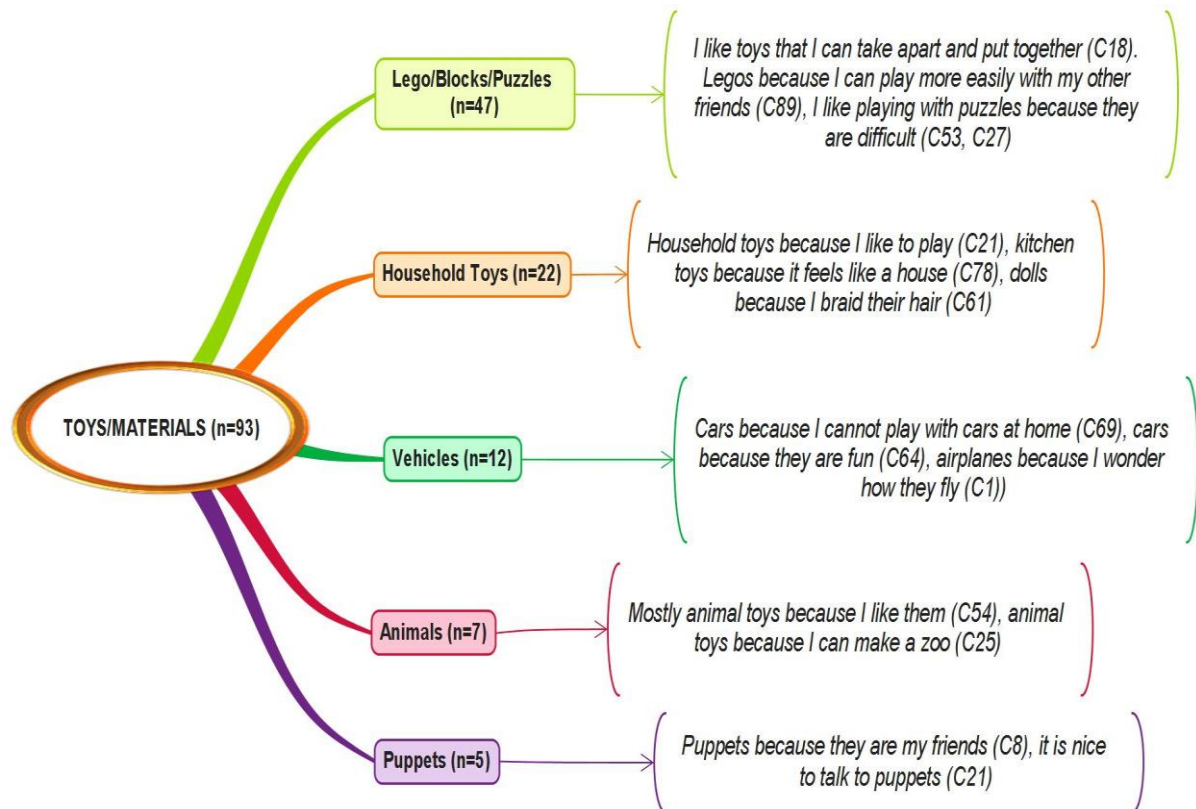


In Figure 15, the child who defined her favorite place at school as the 'Dramatic Play Center' drew herself in the dramatic play center with her friends and a doll in her hand.



**Findings on Preschool Children’s Favorite Toys/Materials at School:** Figure 16 presents preschool children's views on the toys/materials they liked the most at school.

**Figure 16.** *Preschool Children's Opinions on the Toys/Materials They Most Enjoy at School*



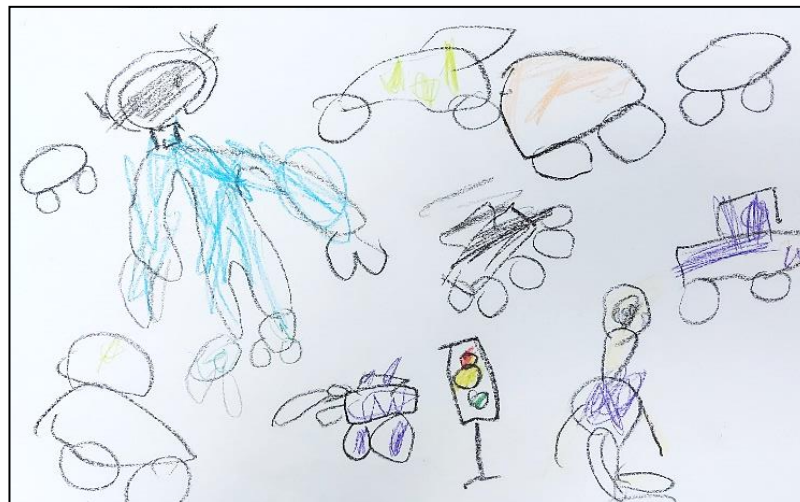
In Figure 16, the toys/materials that preschool children most enjoyed playing with at school were Lego/Blocks/Puzzles (n: 47), Play House Toys (n: 22), and Tools (n: 12). Figures 17 and 18 demonstrate pictures reflecting the views of the children.

**Figure 17.** An Example of a Picture from the Lego/Blocks Category (Age 6) (C57)



According to Figure 17, the child who defined the toys/materials she liked to play with the most at school as 'Lego/Blocks/Puzzles' made towers with blocks in the picture she drew.

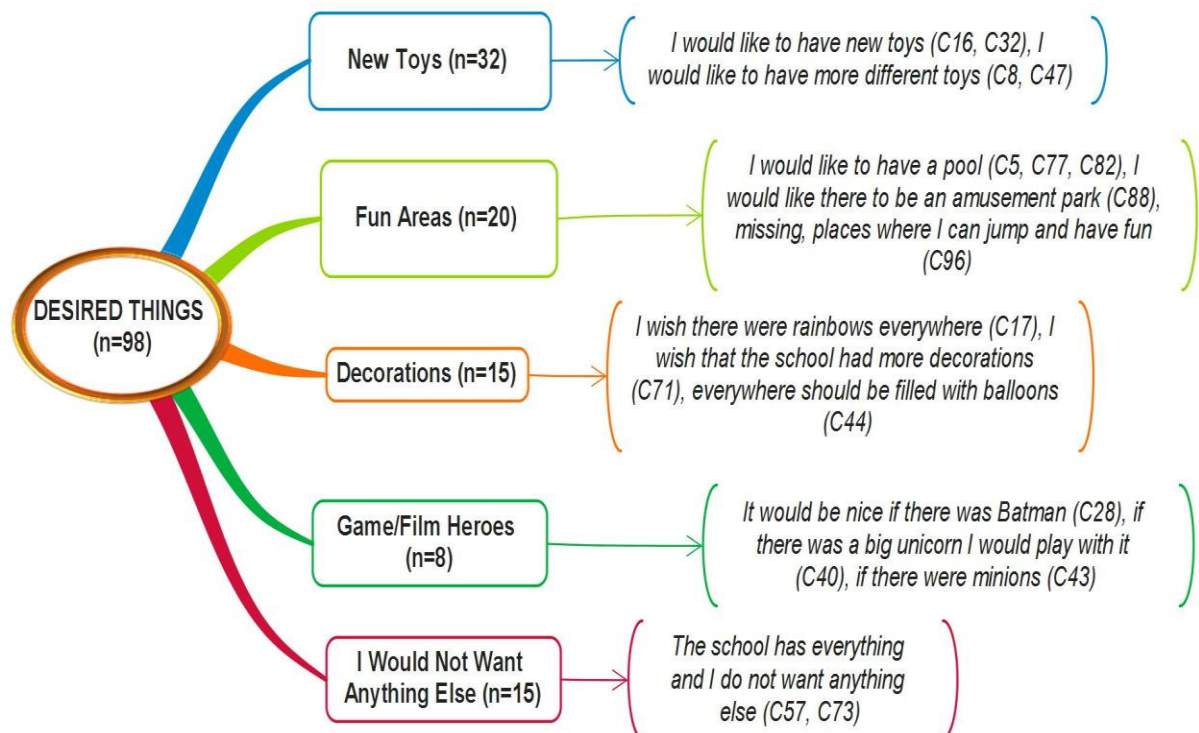
**Figure 18.** An Example of an Image from the Vehicles Category (Age 5) (C64)



In Figure 18, the child who defined the toys/materials he liked to play with at school the most as 'Vehicles' drew cars in his drawing.

**Findings Regarding What Other Things Preschool Children Want to Make School A Better Place:** Figure 19 presents the opinions of preschool children on what else they would like to see at school to make it more beautiful.

**Figure 19.** Preschool Children's Views on What Else They Would Like to See At School



In Figure 19, preschool children stated that the school would be more beautiful if there were new toys (n: 32), fun areas (n: 20), and decorations (n: 15) the most. Figures 20 and 21 show pictures reflecting the views of the children.

**Figure 20.** An Example of a Picture from the Decorations Category (Age 5) (C71)



In Figure 20, the child who stated that the school would be more beautiful if there were 'Decorations' in the school decorated the roof of the school in the form of a rainbow.

**Figure 21.** An Example of a Picture from the Decorations Category (Age 5) (C44)



In Figure 21, the child who stated that the school would be more beautiful if there were 'decorations' in the school decorated the school with balloons.

**Findings on Preschool Children's Preferences for Attending School and Staying at Home:** Figure 22 presents the views of preschool children on their preferences for coming to school and staying at home.

**Figure 22.** Preschool Children's Opinions on Their Preferences for Coming to School and Staying at Home

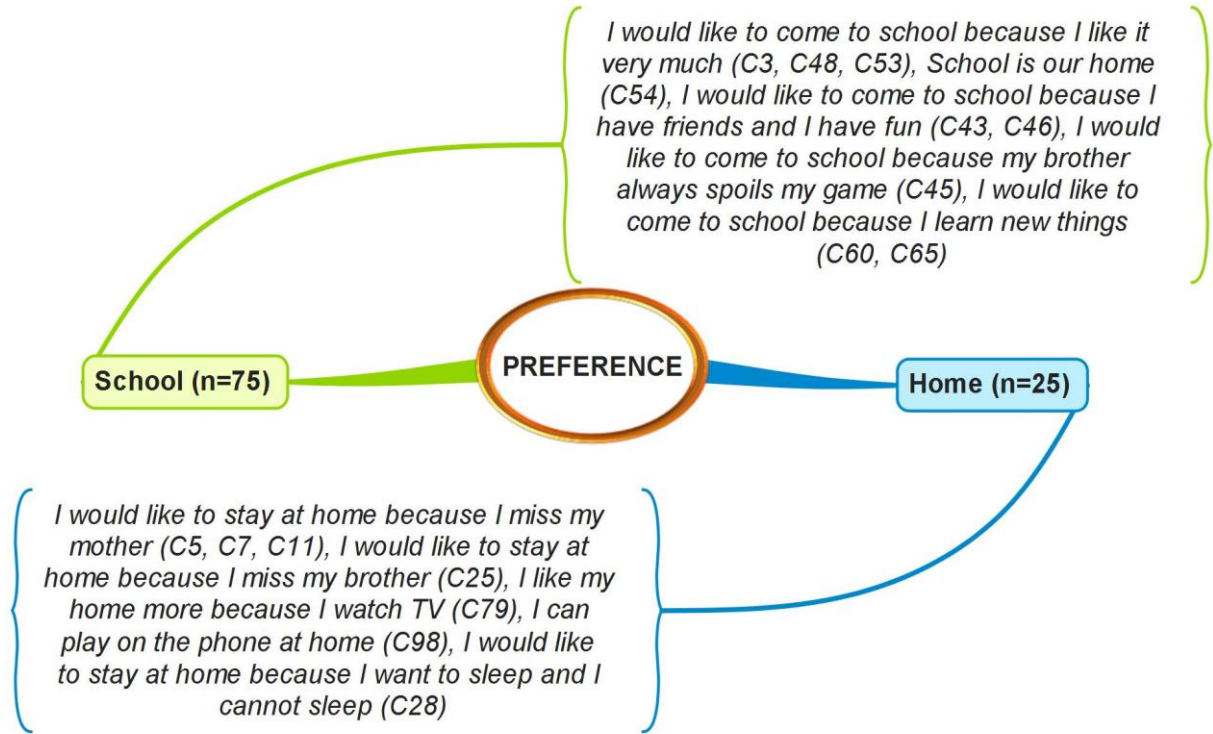


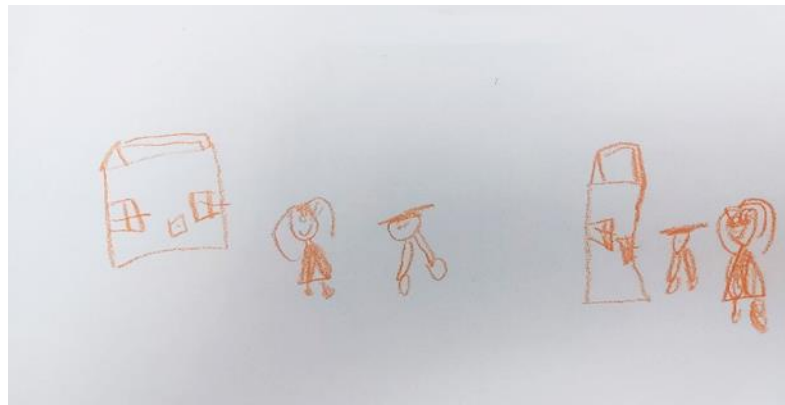
Figure 22 shows that the number of preschool children who wanted to come to school (n: 75) was higher than the number of children who wanted to stay at home (n: 25). Figures 23 and 24 show pictures reflecting the views of the children.

**Figure 23.** An Example of a Picture from the Category 'I Want to Come to School' (Age 5) (C60)



In Figure 23, the child who said 'I want to come to school' drew a picture of a school and decorated the surroundings of the school with pictures.

**Figure 24.** An Example of a Picture from the Category 'I Want to Stay at Home' (Age 5) (C98)



In Figure 24, the child who said 'I want to stay at home' drew his teacher and himself next to the school and his mother and brother next to the house.

**Findings Related to Preschool Children's Reflection of the Concept of School in Their Drawings:** Figure 25 presents an analysis of preschool children's drawings of the concept of school.

**Figure 25.** The Distribution of the Objects Used in the Drawings of Preschool Children

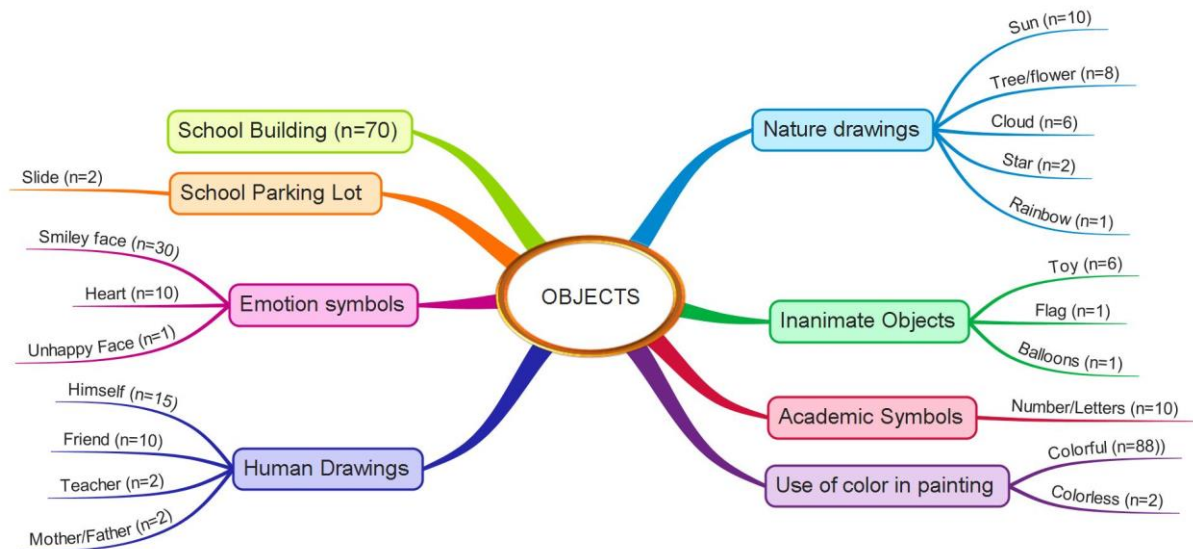


Figure 25 shows that children mostly drew school buildings (n: 70), emotion symbols (n: 41), humans (n: 27) and nature (n: 27). The category of School Buildings was the most commonly observed (n: 70) in children's drawings. This suggests that children spend most of their time at school, and this environment leaves a dominant impression on them. Representations related to the category of School Park Area, Slide (n: 2), reflect children's interest in the outdoor spaces on school premises and show children's interest in playgrounds and elements such as slides in the school park area and the significance of the time they spend in these areas.

In the Emotion Symbols category, Smiley Face (n: 30) was the most frequently drawn emotion expression, suggesting that children prefer to express their positive emotions. Further, the Heart (n: 10) symbol represented emotions such as love or contentment, and the scarcity of the Unhappy Face (n: 1) in drawings indicated that children express their negative emotions less.

Under the category of Human drawings, children drew Themselves (n: 15), Friends (n: 10) who are important in their social environment, Teachers (n: 2) and family members (Mother/Father, n: 2). In the Nature category, the use of natural elements such as the Sun (n: 10), Trees and Flowers (n: 8) and Clouds (n: 6) showed that children are interested in nature and see these elements as a part of their daily lives. Stars (n: 2) and Rainbows (n: 1) were drawn less frequently.

In the category of Inanimate Objects, Toys (n: 6) and less frequently Flags (n: 1) and Balloons (n: 1) were drawn, showing children's preferences during playtime. In the Academic Symbols category, Numbers/Letters (n: 10) were represented, indicating the importance of learning processes and school in children's lives. Regarding the Use of Colour in Drawings, the predominance of Coloured (n: 88) drawings and the scarcity of Colourless (n: 2) drawings were noteworthy.

## Results and Discussion

Based on the results of the study, preschool children defined school as *The Place Where You Go to Learn New Things* at the highest rate. Children exhibited this in their drawings with the number/letter symbols they drew. The results suggested that children perceived school as a place where new acquisitions are made and academic skills are acquired. Civek (2018) observed that preschool children defined school as a *Learning Place* at the highest rate. When the literature is examined, this result is in line with the traditional perception in societies. According to the traditional view, school is considered as a place of learning, not play (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Wildinger & McIntyre (2011) stated that children think that preparation for primary school should be done in the preschool period. It can be said that parents' wishes are also effective on children's perceptions of school. Further, children perceived school as a *Place to Go for Fun/Play*. In response to the question *What else would you like to see that would make the school beautiful?*, the children stated that the school would be more beautiful if there were more *New Toys* and *Fun Areas*. Yazıcı et al. (2018) stated that preschool children believed that school was an 'entertaining' element and that children produced metaphors such as 'Playground', 'Park', and 'Fun' under the category of 'Fun' related to the concept of 'school'. The reason for this can be that children learn by having fun because the activities offered to children in the preschool period are play-based; therefore, they view school as an entertaining element (MoNE, 2013; Yazıcı et al., 2018).

According to the research findings, most preschool children *felt happy at school and preferred to go to school rather than stay at home*. In the school drawings of the children, the children expressed their positive perceptions of the school by using positive emotion expressions such as *Smiley Faces* and *Hearts*. In the analysis of the opinions of the children, they used expressions such as *Happy, playing with my friends entertains me*, and *Happy because I have fun*. Therefore, it is important for children to spend time and play games with their friends at school. Uusitalo-Malmivaara (2012) stated that relationships with peers are an effective variable related to school happiness (Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012). According to Koçyiit (2014), almost all children stated that teachers should play games and/or that they would be happier if they did. At the same time, the fact that preschool education environments are rich in materials and that children can play with toys can also be considered as a reason why children feel happy. Civek (2018) stated that in an environment with rich, pleasant, and interesting play materials, children were extremely happy and developed positive perceptions of the school environment. Aksoy and Baran (2010) examined children's perceptions of school through pictures and concluded that the content of the environment and the quantity and quality of its different dimensions effectively determined the child's perception and that it was important to equip preschool education institutions. The results of the research show that one child felt angry and two children felt frustrated at school. When the opinions of the children are analysed, it is seen that they used expressions such as *"unhappy because they hit me all the time"*, *"my*



*friends do not play with me*". When these views of the children are analysed, it can be said that negative relationships with their friends affect their perception of school. Similarly, Uusitalo-Malmivaara (2012) and Nairn et al. (2011) stated that relationships with peers affect school perception.

The research results further suggested that while most of the children preferred to come to school instead of staying at home, some preferred to stay at home. Children who wanted to stay at home stated that this was because they did not want to be separated from their family members, such as *I want to stay at home because I miss my mother, I want to stay at home because I miss my sibling* and because they wanted to play with technological devices, such as *I like home more because I watch TV, I can play on my phone at home*. When a child's enrolment in preschool coincides with the birth of a sibling, if the birth of a sibling coincides with the start of preschool education, the child may worry that their family no longer values or loves them as much as before. These concerns can manifest as resistance or reluctance towards attending school (Özkaya, 2020; Solter, 2020; Yavuz, 2016). One can assume that these children have negative perceptions toward school due to the reasons mentioned above. Özdemir and Kalaycı (2013) stated that children with a negative school perception were unhappy, did not want to come to school, and exhibited disinterested behaviors in activities.

The results of the research indicated that preschool children's favorite activities at school were *Art Activities* and *Play Activities*. Their least favorite activities were *Art Activities* and *Literacy Preparation Activities*. The examination of the opinions of the children revealed that their opinions regarding the reasons for not liking art activities were as follows: *I have difficulty in cutting, tearing, rolling because it is very difficult, I do not like cutting with scissors, it is hard for me*. Their opinions regarding the reasons for not liking the Literacy Preparation Activities were as follows: *I get bored making magazines, line work takes too long, and my hands get tired*. Based on these results, one can understand that the fine motor development of the children was not at the desired level and the activities being carried out were not suitable for their developmental characteristics. Accordingly, children developed a negative attitude toward the work done in these activities. An analysis of the literature revealed studies showing that teachers lacked sufficient knowledge to support preschool children's writing preparation skills (Fogo, 2008; Güleç, 2008). Children with inadequate readiness in skills such as holding a pencil and cutting with scissors may experience frustration and develop negative emotions, which may also affect their academic success. For this reason, researchers have stated that practices that will improve children's attention and fine motor skills should be included more (Ericsson, 2008; Grissmer et al., 2010; Vander Fels et al., 2015).

When the results are examined, it is noteworthy that *Art Activity* was among the activities that children both liked and disliked. Teachers may have incorporated art activities more frequently than other activities, which is why this condition exists. According to Kesiciolu (2018), art activities were the activity that preschool teachers included the most. Civek (2018) stated that the activities that children did at school

were mostly limited to activities such as games, art, and literacy preparation activities and that other activities were not included much.

Another finding of the study indicated that preschool children's highest-rated favorite places at school were the *Garden* and the *Dramatic Play Center*. Aksoy and Baran (2010) concluded that the place where children felt the happiest in the school environment was the section for playing at home. They stated that this situation was caused by the fact that this section was mostly accessible and usable by children. In the literature, similar studies have shown that the area that the children preferred the most was the dramatic play center (Çandır, 2020; Özyürek & Kılıncı, 2015; Yılmaz, 2019). Çandır (2020) stated that the reason for this situation was that the dramatic play center was rich in terms of materials and that the variety of activities was high. İsmailoğlu and Yılmaz (2019) stated that all children enjoyed spending time in the garden. Çandır (2020) observed that children preferred a structured playground consisting of playground equipment such as slides, climbing areas, and large towers. However, an analysis of the results of this study revealed that only two children drew pictures of the school garden area. The reason for this situation can be the lack of space in the garden area, the insufficiency, or the underutilization of school garden areas. Hinkley et al. (2016) stated that children enjoyed spending time in the garden, but there were not enough activities organized in these areas. Similarly, Çelik (2012) stated that the open spaces in preschool education institutions were not used effectively and that the gardens were not suitable for children to move freely. Karaküçük (2008) stated that the gardens in preschool education institutions did not have sufficient features. Kuo and Faber Taylor (2004) stated that children who spend time in nature are less stressed and happier than those who do not spend time in nature. Similarly, Wells and Evans (2003) and Lundy and Trawick Smith (2021) found that children who spend time in nature have longer attention spans, higher creativity, and increased levels of the happiness hormone. In a study conducted by Bjørgeren and Svendsen (2015), it was determined that as teachers included outdoor activities, teachers enjoyed garden activities more and became better role models for children.

## Recommendations

In light of all these findings, preschool education institutions should be better equipped by increasing the variety of toys and materials. Researchers should investigate the reasons why children do not want to go to school. In preschool education institutions, teachers should include all activities based on children's developmental levels. They should conduct appropriate activities for fine motor skills development. Promoting children's perceptions of school can be achieved through various strategies, including organizing school areas to meet children's mobility needs and maximizing the utilization of school gardens. For preschools without a dedicated garden, it is important to create alternative spaces that cater to children's needs. Additionally,

establishing social areas that encourage peer interaction can contribute to positive perceptions of school among children.

This study's limitations include the fact that there were only 100 children in the study group, and that the data collected only included the participants' drawings and responses to the semi-structured interview questions. Although it is acknowledged that the effects of uncontrollable variables on participant answers may be minimal, they might nonetheless originate from the researcher, participants, and application contexts.

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## Genişletilmiş Türkçe Özet

Okul algısını okulun fiziki durumu, çocukların okulda kendilerini nasıl hissettiği, okulda uygulanan kurallar, çocukların sosyoekonomik durumu, okulun bulunduğu bölgenin gelişmişlik düzeyi gibi faktörler etkileyebilmektedir (Toprakçı & Gülmez, 2018; Voight, Hanson, O'Malley & Adekanye, 2015; Yüner & Özdemir, 2017). Piaget, çocukların dünyayı yetişkinlerin gördüğü gibi göremeyeceklerini belirtmiştir (Wood, 2003). Bu nedenle çocukların okula ilişkin algıları da yetişkinlerden farklı olacaktır. Çocuk için mekân doğrudan anlaşılmaz. Fakat yaşadıkları deneyimler aracılığıyla şekillenir. Mekân ile etkileşim geliştikçe; mekânın zihinsel çerçevede oluşan görüntüleri de gelişmektedir. Mekân sahip olduğu pek çok uyarıcı ile duyu organlarına bilgi aktarımı sağlamaktadır. Olumlu okul algısı olan çocuklar okul öncesi dönemden itibaren okulu sevme, etkinliklere katılma, arkadaşları ve öğretmenleriyle iyi geçinme, mutlu birer birey olma gibi davranışlar sergilerken, okul algısı olumsuz olan çocukların bu durumun tam tersi olarak mutsuz oldukları, okula gelmek istemedikleri ve etkinliklere ilgisiz davranışlar sergiledikleri gözlemlenmektedir (Özdemir & Kalaycı, 2013).

Okul öncesi dönem çocukların okul algılarının ortaya çıkarılması amacının gerçekleştirilmesi için araştırmada nitel araştırma yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Nitel araştırma "gözlem, görüşme ve doküman analizi gibi nitel veri toplama yöntemlerinin kullanıldığı, algıların ve olayların doğal ortamda gerçekçi ve bütüncül bir biçimde ortaya konmasına yönelik nitel bir sürecin izlendiği araştırma" türü olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Bu araştırmada temel nitel araştırma modeli kullanılmıştır (Creswell, 2007; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Araştırmaya 2022-2023 eğitim-öğretim yılı güz döneminde beş farklı anaokulunda eğitim gören 60-72 ay olmak üzere toplamda 100 çocuk katılmıştır. Çalışma grubundaki çocukların 41'i kız, 59'u erkek çocuktan oluşmaktadır. Çalışma grubunda yer alan çocukların tamamı normal gelişim gösteren ve özel bir gereksinimi bulunmayan çocuklardır. Çalışma grubunun oluşturulmasında amaçlı örnekleme kullanılmıştır (Patton, 2014). *Okul öncesi dönem çocukların okul algılarının incelenmesi amacıyla "Okul Algısı Görüşme Formu" ve "Okul Resimlerinin Çizimi"* olmak üzere iki farklı veri toplama aracı kullanılmıştır. Okul öncesi dönemde çocuklarla yapılan çalışmaların en büyük zorluklarından biri çocukların tanımadıkları bir araştırmacıya bilgi vermek istememesi ve araştırmaya katılmak istememesi olabilmektedir. Çocuklara resim çizdirme, fotoğraf çekme ve oyun oynama vb. yöntemler; yapılandırılmamış süreçlerle çocukların daha eğlenceli ve ilginç zaman geçirmesini sağlayacak ve çocukların araştırmacıya olan güvenini artırarak veri toplamasını kolaylaştıracaktır (Punch, 2002; Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin & Robinson, 2010). Bu nedenle araştırmada çocukların okul algılarına ilişkin verileri toplamak için çiz ve anlat tekniği kullanılmıştır. Araştırmada ikinci olarak veriler görüşme tekniği kullanılarak elde edilmiştir. Çocuklarla yapılan görüşmeler iki sınıf arasında bulunan alanda çocuklarla tek tek yapılmıştır. Bu sayede çocukların birbirinin cevaplarından etkilenmeleri engellenmiştir. Her bir görüşme öncesi öncelikle, çocuklara daha rahat iletişim kurabilmeleri için ve demografik bilgilerini de ortaya çıkaran "Adın nedir?, Kardeşin var mı?" gibi ısıdırma soruları sorulmuştur (Creswell, 2007). Görüşmeler ses kayıt

cihazı ile kayıt altına alınmıştır. Her bir görüşme 30-40 dakika arası sürmüştür. Daha sonra alınan ses kayıtları araştırmacı tarafından bilgisayar ortamında word belgesi olarak hazırlanmıştır. Görüşme kayıtlarının ve çocukların resimlerinin değerlendirilmesi sürecinde, elde edilen verilerin daha ayrıntılı bir şekilde irdelenmesi amacıyla, nitel veri analizinde kullanılan yöntemlerden biri olan "içerik analizi" kullanılmıştır.

Araştırma sonucunda çocukların okulu yeni şeyler öğrenilen yer olarak tanımladıkları, okulda kendilerini mutlu hissettikleri, en sevdikleri etkinliğin sanat etkinliği olduğu, okulda en sevdikleri alanın bahçe alanı olduğu, en çok lego/blok ve yapbozları tercih ettikleri, okula gelmeyi tercih ettikleri ve resimlerinde en çok okul binası çizdikleri görülmektedir. Tüm bu bulgular ışığında okulöncesi eğitim kurumlarında oyuncak ve materyal çeşitliliğinin artırılarak daha donanımlı hale getirilmesi, okula gelmek istemeyen çocukların okula gelmeme nedenlerinin araştırılarak özellikle ebeveynlere kardeş kıskançlığı üzerine eğitimler verilmesi, okul öncesi eğitim kurumlarında öğretmenlerin etkinlikler arasında denge sağlayarak bütün etkinliklere dengeli bir şekilde yer verilmesi, öğretmenlerin çocukların gelişim düzeylerini çok iyi saptaması ve yapılan etkinliklerde çocukların gelişim düzeylerine, özellikle küçük kas gelişimlerine, uygun etkinlikler yapılması, okullarda çocukların hareket ihtiyaçlarını sağlayacak alanlar düzenlenmesi ve özellikle okul bahçelerinin etkili olarak kullanılması, okul bahçesi bulunmayan anaokullarında çocuklara uygun alanlar ve çocukların akranlarıyla zaman geçirebilecekleri sosyal alanlar oluşturulmasının çocukların okula ilişkin algılarını olumlu yönde artırabileceği düşünülmektedir.

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