



What is “Different”? Intercultural Comparison between Preschool Children’s Perceptions of Different People: Sample of Poland-Tunisia-Turkey

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Author’s contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

For many years, lots of different cultures have been together in the same school and classroom environments. Education community has always emphasized that peace and tolerance education should start in earlier ages. Therefore, necessary methods have been searched in recent years. The ability to consider differences such as richness constitutes the basis of peace and toleration. The aim of this research is to investigate factors affecting the “foreigner” perceptions of 5-6 year old children who live in different countries (Tunisia-Turkey-Poland) and to make an intercultural comparison study. Consequently, it has been discovered that elements affecting the perceptions of children on people living in different cultures are age, gender and some common points in preschool education periods.

Keywords: Early childhood; preschool; perception of different people; multicultural education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Everybody is a member of one of a number of different cultural and social groups. These differences are determined by such factors as geographical location, homeland, moral values, gender, social class and religion. An individual's being a member of a certain society does not necessarily mean that all his/her behaviors, values, physical characteristics, etc. will be the same as other members'. Each person represents his or her own experience as a member of a group and within his or her cultural context. The phrase cultural context within the early childhood education setting is inclusive of all aspects of a child's cultural identity that are unique and influential: ethnicity and race, primary language, family composition, socioeconomic status, and special needs. Each individual can simultaneously contribute in multiple ways to the richness of the cultural context [1,2]. That being said, there are always differences, even within groups. Every culture in the world has its own characteristics different from other societies.

Under the conditions of today's world, we need to understand and accept the fact that every person may possess different characteristics and this should not be considered a problem but perceived as richness. Our world is actually a multicultural environment and since the children live in this world, they need experiences to make them fit into this environment. Again some may claim that when children live in small groups, they lack the features of bigger groups and have narrow viewpoints, but knowing the lifestyles of different cultures gives children a humanistic sensibility and global perspective [3]. As society becomes increasingly multiracial, multilingual, and multicultural, so too grows the need for educators' abilities to support children's development by instilling in them the tools they need to live together respectfully and stand up to prejudice. The phrase 'cultural context' within the early childhood education setting is inclusive of all aspects of a child's cultural identity that are unique and influential: ethnicity and race, primary language, family composition, socioeconomic status, and special needs. Each individual can simultaneously contribute in multiple ways to the richness of the cultural context [2].

Throughout the world, in communities with multi-ethnic background, prejudice begins around the age 4 and 5. Psychologists and educators have increased their efforts to examine the development and possible effects of prejudice

developed at a very young age in children [4]. Indeed, children develop an understanding of the social world through a lengthy process of construction and they utilise what they see, hear and experience in their lives as a foundation for building an understanding of how people treat one another [5]. Therefore the preschool years are crucial in shaping cultural and racial understandings and are critical in forming attitudes toward diversity and difference [6]. This conception may help children, who are directly affected by our interpretations and prejudices, in creating the world of tomorrow. Children need guidance in order to empathize with others with different lifestyles.

Hence, the perceptions of children on "different" have been continually gaining importance in today's ever-changing multicultural societies. In many countries, multicultural education approaches have been introduced even in preschool education programs in order to raise "respect to differences". Present literature on early childhood about anti-racist and multicultural education emphasizes the importance of adopting a curriculum framework against prejudice and racism in young children [7].

Given that early childhood is an important period of time for children's learning and development, supporting children to value and respect diversity is a vital task for early childhood educators. By integrating multicultural education into their classrooms, children will be able to better understand differences among people and to value diverse perspectives [8].

More specifically, brain research has shown that the "prime time" for emotional and social development in children is birth to 12 years of age. Differing aspects of emotional and social development, which incorporate higher capacities, such as awareness of others, empathy and trust, are important at different times. Emotional intelligence is critical to life success. The part of the brain that regulates emotion, the amygdala, is shaped early on by experience and forms the brain's emotional wiring. Early nurturing is important to learning empathy, happiness, hopefulness and resiliency. Social development, which involves both self-awareness and a child's ability to interact with others, also occurs in stages. The caregiver's efforts to nurture and guide a child will assist in laying healthy foundations for social and emotional development. Additionally, it is important that we catch them young, when the

likelihood of them having been socialized or enculturated with negative stereotypes and biases is less [9].

Moreover, as a part of their natural development, children tend to recognize and understand similarities and differences. And young children tend to organize information in broad categories that are often rigid and dichotomous. They sometimes see extremes rather than gradations and if they decide that two groups are different, resist seeing similarities [10]. This tendency mainly has two sources. The first is biological processes and such cognitive skills as "matching, classification, defining, discriminating and grouping" which increase as the child grows up [11-13]. The second is the characteristics of the social environment [14,15]. Children also learn which social categories are important by observing their environments [16]. Preschoolers develop an understanding of differences both within and outside of their families and communities [2]. They are likely to recognize that people in their families or neighborhoods are all in different heights and have different hairstyles, but perhaps almost all have the same skin color. Therefore, children may assume that they should avoid or dislike people with different skin colors than their own, even if no adult ever says this to them [11].

At the same time, they should also learn that being different does not mean being odd and strange, but interesting and valuable. As society becomes increasingly multiracial, multilingual, and multicultural, so too grows the need for educators' abilities to support children's development by instilling in them the tools they need to live together respectfully and stand up to prejudice. The phrase 'cultural context' within the early childhood education setting is inclusive of all aspects of a child's cultural identity that are unique and influential: ethnicity and race, primary language, family composition, socioeconomic status, and special needs. Each individual can simultaneously contribute in multiple ways to the richness of the cultural context [2]. This can be achieved only through special educational effort. That's why, it is an important dimension to determine and accept what is different [17].

However, some people still say that early childhood is not an ideal period to comprehend the cultural differences between people, multiculturalism and cultural interactions. Therefore it is thought that such complex notions concerning the society may "grab children's

attentions artificially" and unnecessarily tire him [18]. Although some may think prejudice is at minimum level or does not really exist in the early childhood years, researches show quite the contrary:

Studies carried out on this subject for many years demonstrate that children have the ability to grasp differences between people, even at a very young age [19,20,13,21-23]. Youngstrom & Goodman [24] stated that even three-year-old children can interpret the opinions, feelings and lifestyles of their peers or adults by only looking at their photos. Ramsey [25] emphasizes that children start to ask questions about their own and others' differing characteristics such as skin color, language and gender when they very young ages. Moreover, Aboud & Amato [26] state that systematic development of prejudices about others take place between the ages of 5-7 years and preschoolers are aware of family structures, socio-economic differences and values which the society attaches them.

For this reason, it is necessary to understand how and when children start to perceive differences and what and how affects the direction of these perceptions. The purpose of this study is to investigate how 5-6 year-old children living in very different cultures (Tunisia-Turkey-Poland) perceive people from different countries and factors affecting their perceptions and make an intercultural comparison.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study is a screening type of study including an intercultural comparison. In the study, the distributions of various factors affecting children's awareness of differences were calculated. The Chi-Square Test was used to determine the differences in perceptions in terms of country, gender and age.

2.2 Participants

The study was carried out with a total of 90 5-6-year-old children enrolled in preschool educational institutions in Turkey, Tunisia and Poland, 30 from each country. These countries were chosen with the expectation that they would provide a more global perspective thanks to their being located in different continents. At the same time, their being the countries having the most

cosmopolitan social structures in their regions was their shared characteristic. Of the children from the mentioned three different countries, 50% were female and 50% were male. 53% of the children were aged below 6 and 36,7% were 5 years old and 52% had been attending a preschool educational institution for one year and 47% for 2 years. Children were selected randomly from among students enrolled in public preschool institutions in their countries.

2.3 Process

The study was carried out by the researcher in three countries (Turkey-Tunisia-Poland) at different times. It took about three years to complete the study carried out through one-to-one interviews. The study was carried out with the same systematic in three countries.

In the first stage of the study, the children in the research group watched a short slideshow. The slideshow included some photos of children from 24 different countries (Turkey, China, Venezuela, Canada, U.S.A, Ethiopia, Morocco, Ireland, Mexico, etc.). The children in about 50 photos reflected the typical characteristics of their

countries and races such as nationality, skin color, physical characteristics, clothes and living environments.

In the slides, only music was used on the grounds that it is the common language. Following the short slideshow taking about 15 minutes, the second stage started.

In the second stage of the study, the children were asked some questions with the aim of determining what elements they found most different in the slideshow (living quarters such as houses, roads, etc., clothes, physical characteristics such as skin color, hair color, etc.) and understanding their perceptions of these differences. The interview forms were filled in through one-to-one conversation with each child. To eliminate the possibility of children's affecting one another, the interviews were held at separate places. Since the children in Turkey do not know to read and write, the researcher filled in the forms based on their answers. In Tunisia and Poland, in order to overcome the language problem, the researcher and the classroom teacher held the interviews in the same way.



Fig.1. 5 years old/Girl/ Turkey "I drew an Arabian kid and a white human"



Fig. 2. 6 years old/ Girl/ Tunisia/ "I drew a Japanese kid doing ballet"



Fig. 3. 6 years old/ Boy/ Poland/ "I drew a Chinese kid and I drew a kerchiefed girl"

In the last stage, the children were asked to draw pictures about the slides attracting them most. However, in the study, the pictures which the children drew were excluded from the statistical analysis. They were evaluated as the supporting data to help explain the children's "different" perceptions. Below are some example pictures drawn by children showing what they consider different.

3. FINDINGS

As it is seen in Table 1, the Turkish children perceived the eyes as different in the other countries' children at the highest rate (56%) while the Polish and Tunisian children perceived the hair color as different (93%-90%). The second most frequently perceived difference was the hair color (50%) for the Turkish children, the clothes for the Polish children (80%) and the eyes for the Tunisian children (73%). It is seen that the three countries' children perceived the characteristics related to the living quarters least differently.

As it is seen in Table 2, the Polish children answered "yes" to the question "Did you see different children in the movie you have just seen?" at the highest rate (96,7%). There was not a significant difference between the three countries' children in terms of the answers given to the question "How many different children do you think there are?"(p>0,05). However, it is

seen that the Polish children stated having seen 10-15 and 15-20 different children, which was a higher rate compared to the others. It is again seen that the Tunisian children answered "yes" to the question "Would you like to have these kinds of different children in your class or around you?" at the highest rate.

As it is seen in Table 3, it was the girls who answered "yes" to the question "Did you see different children in the movie you have just seen?" at the highest rate, which was statistically significant (p<0,05). When it was examined in terms of the variable of age, it was observed that the children in both age groups answered "yes" at a high rate, too. Although there was not a statistically significant difference according to gender between the answers given to the question "How many different children do you think there are?" (p>0,05), it was observed that the boys gave the answer "1-5" at a high rate, whereas girls gave the answer "10-15" at a higher rate. At the same time, it was also observed that the 6-year-old children gave the answer "15-20" at a statistically significantly high rate (p<0,05). It was observed that the girls gave the answer "yes" to the question "Would you like to have these kinds of different children in your class or around you?" at a higher rate. In terms of the variable of age, it was observed that the 5 year-old children gave the answer "yes" at a higher rate.

Table 1. The comparison of distributions of features children considered different in other countries' children in terms of countries (Turkey-Tunisia-Poland)

Characteristics that children considered different in other countries' children	Countries					
	Turkey		Tunisia		Poland	
	n	%	N	%	N	%
Hair color	15	50	25	83,3	27	90
Eyes	17	56,7	22	73,3	23	76,7
Length, physical structure	2	6,7	18	60	14	46,7
Clothes	8	26,7	17	56,7	24	80
Others (living quarters such as house, etc.)	4	12	5	16,6	14	46,7

*Children were let to choose more than one alternative in this question

Table 2. Comparison of children's awareness of differences according to countries

Sub-questions		Countries						Chi-square analysis	
		Turkey		Tunisia		Poland		Chi-square	P
		n	%	n	%	N	%		
Did you see different children in the movie you have just seen?	Yes	26	86,7	26	86,7	29	96,7	-	-
	No	4	13,3	4	13,3	1	3,3		
	Total	30	100	30	100	30	100		
How many different children do you think there are?	1-5	8	30,8	10	38,5	4	13,8	7,98	0,239
	5-10	9	34,6	5	19,2	6	20,7		
	10-15	4	15,4	6	23,1	9	31,0		
	15-20	5	19,2	5	19,2	10	34,5		
	Total	26	100	26	100	29	100		
Would you like to have these kinds of different children in your class or around you?	Yes	21	80,8	22	84,6	23	79,3	-	-
	No	5	19,2	4	15,4	6	20,7		
	Total	26	100	26	100	29	100		

Table 3. Comparison of children's awareness of differences according to gender and age

Sub-questions		Gender				Chi-square analysis		Age				Chi-square analysis	
		Girl		Boy		Chi-square	P	5		6		Chi-square	P
		N	%	N	%			n	%	n	%		
Did you see different children in the movie you have just seen?	Yes	39	97,5	42	84	Fisher's exact	0,041	48	90,6	33	89,2	Fisher's exact	1
	No	1	2,5	8	16			5	9,4	4	10,8		
	Total	40	100	50	100			53	100	37	100		
How many different children do you think there are?	1-5	12	30,8	10	23,8	1,8	0,614	12	25,0	10	30,3	9,4	0,023
	5-10	11	28,2	9	21,4			17	35,4	3	9,1		
	10-15	7	17,9	12	28,6			11	22,9	8	24,2		
	15-20	9	23,1	11	26,2			8	16,7	12	36,4		
	Total	39	100	42	100			48	100	33	100		
Would you like to have these kinds of different children in your class or around you?	Yes	33	84,6	33	78,6	0,051	0,821	40	83,3	26	78,8	0,051	0,821
	No	6	15,4	9	21,4			8	16,7	7	21,2		
	Total	39	100	42	100			48	100	33	100		

Table 4. Comparison of children's awareness of differences according to length of preschool education

Sub-questions		Length of preschool education						Chi-square analysis	
		1 year		6 years		Chi-square	P		
		n	%	n	%				
Did you see different children in the movie you have just seen?	Yes	43	91,5	38	88,4	89,2	Fisher's exact	0,732	
	No	4	8,5	5	11,6	10,8			
	Total	47	100	43	100	100			
How many different children do you think there are?	1-5	14	32,6	8	21,1	30,3	4,5	0,212	
	5-10	10	23,3	10	26,3	9,1			
	10-15	12	27,9	7	18,4	24,2			
	15-20	7	16,3	13	34,2	36,4			
	Total	43	100	38	100	100			
Would you like to have these kinds of different children in your class or around you?	Yes	33	76,7	33	86,8	78,8	0,77	0,378	
	No	10	23,3	5	13,2	21,2			
	Total	43	100	38	100	100			

As it is seen in Table 4 above, although there was not a statistically significant difference between the groups in terms of the answers

given to the question "How many different children do you think there are?" ($p > 0,05$), it was observed that the children attending a preschool

educational institution for 1 year gave the answer "1-5" at a higher rate, whereas the children attending a preschool educational institution for 2 years gave the answer "10-15" at a high rate. At the same time, it was observed that the children attending a preschool educational institution for 2 years gave the answer "yes" to the question "Would you like to have these kinds of different children in your class or around you?" at a higher rate.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the research give interesting data about children's perceptions on differences of children from other countries. Accordingly, when characteristics of children from different countries that are perceived as different by children are compared, it is seen that Turkish children perceive the eyes as the most different, whereas Tunisian and Polish children think that it is the hair color. Apart from these, clothes, height and physical structure are among the primary characteristics that children perceive as different. Only the alignment of these factors differ between the countries while the elements perceived as different by children seem similar. It is seen that the least attention-grabbing characteristics in each of these three countries are the ones related to living environments.

This situation can be explained with the human prototypes children are used to see in their own countries. Faust [17] states that little children tend to perceive the characteristics they are used to see in their own cultures as "normal" and perceive the rest as "different" when they make comparisons between the characteristics of their own cultures and others because they generally simulate from general to the specific. This classification is mainly done in terms of physical features. The findings of the research support this opinion.

When children's awareness towards differences are compared between the countries, it is seen that awareness rate of Polish children are higher in terms of perceiving the number of children from other countries. It has been stated that Tunisian children are more eager to have different children around them. There are findings supporting the idea that this situation is relevant to the values brought in children of the research group by the societies they live in. For example, Tropp and Wright [27] similarly used photos in a research they carried out in order to determine the attitudes of children about different

people. It has been determined that there is a linear connection between the children perceiving others as negative or positive and the structure of the society they live in. Augoustinos and Rosewarne [28] investigated the distinction between stereotype knowledge and personal beliefs in young children's (5–6 year old and 8–9 year old) racial prejudice development. The researchers' findings indicate both age groups had a level of knowledge concerning cultural stereotypes related to skin color. In addition, the children had a higher level of negative descriptions and attributes for situations relating to black skin and the opposite was evident for situations relating to white skin.

When children's awareness about differences is compared by gender, it is seen that girls are more perceptive in terms of awareness of changes in children. This can be explained with the fact that girls of preschool age have a better vision perception compared to boys [29]. It is also seen that girls are more willing to be with different children in terms of willingness to be around different children. This can be explained by the fact that girls have stronger interpersonal intelligence. Many studies determined that girls have higher score of interpersonal intelligence than boys in preschool period.

When children's awareness about differences is compared by age, it is seen that children in age group of 6 have a significant superiority. In other words, awareness about differences increases as the children get older. This finding is supported by Aboud and Amato's [26] study that was originally conducted in order to determine the relation between age and factors influencing children's preconception about individuals of other races. Researchers made a comparison between race-related preconceptions of children aging between 5-6 and 8-9. According to findings, preconceptions of children in both groups started to develop at the age of 6 and these preconceptions are more likely based on social interactions. However, the preconceptions start to turn into personal attitudes after the ages of 8 and 9.

When the children's willingness to be around different children, it is seen that children in age group of 5 are more willing to be around children with different features. Normally, it is known that children below the age of 5 have no preconceptions about differences, but they are heavily influenced during social interactions as

they grow older. Cristol and Gimber [30] did a scientific research in order to determine and understand the sources of race-related preconceptions. Findings suggest that social learning is a significant factor. In other words, children may be influenced by each other or adults and develop preconceptions of their own. This influence takes root after the age of 5. This finding also supports the finding of research.

When children's willingness to be around different children is compared by the preschool education time, it is seen that *children attending preschool education institutions for two years* are more willing than those who attend preschool education institutions for a year. According to this statistical data, preschool education period has a positive impact on children's willingness around people that they perceive differently. This may be explained by the fact that children's social skills develop during preschool education. This could also be the result of including some activities about different cultures in preschool education programs. However, this finding also stresses the necessity to include even more activities like these in early childhood programs. According to studies, giving children the message "diversity is richness" during education process can prevent negative thoughts:

For instance, in their study called "Perceptions of the Other in Children's Drawings" Orly and Maureen [31] did some research on an intercultural project supervised by a teacher and implemented by two Jewish students in a Bedouin school in the south of Israel. In this study, they intended to analyze children's perception of "other" in a program that was developed by teachers specifically to promote awareness and acceptance between cultures. The study revealed that the drawings of Jewish and Arabian people's figures, which were made by children before and after the education program, differed greatly. According to the research results, education they receive help children get rid of their negative attitudes and stereotyped preconceptions. McGillivray [32] shows in his research that it is possible to break down prejudices through long visits abroad.

As a result, preschool period is a very sensitive time for a child in terms of social development and shortcomings during this period can be really hard to deal with later on. Therefore, multiculturalism, or cultural interaction education, must begin during this period. Failing to do so will result in some kind of "emptiness" in child's

consciousness, which will later on probably be filled with negative thoughts and preconceptions towards different ethnic and religious groups [23]. Racial prejudice development begins in earlier stages of a child's life [33]. It is imperative to begin exposing children early to curriculum and other programs to reduce racial prejudice [30].

In the early childhood programs, a primary aim of multicultural approaches is to lead children and families to respect and accept cultural diversity. However, it is necessary to support teachers who are to give education on this subject [34]. Multicultural education supports children in developing cultural competencies by learning about, understanding, and respecting cultural diversity [35]. A primary purpose of multicultural approaches in early childhood is to provide children and families with cultural diversity and make them embrace this diversity. Cultural competencies help children operate successfully in different cultures. Multicultural education also offers equal educational opportunities for culturally diverse children, teach children to value and understand cultural differences, and preserve cultural pluralism [35-37,34]. Multicultural education can help counter dominant cultural advantages by changing how young children view themselves and their families and by impacting how they see those around them in a positive light no matter the cultural differences [8].

However, it is imperative to support teachers on the subject. However, teachers to give education also need support. Early childhood educators share a major responsibility in teaching for social justice and fostering an anti-bias curriculum that challenges racism, prejudice and hegemonic beliefs and upholds equity, justice and human dignity. Indeed, without pedagogical intervention by educators, the attitudes and behaviours of children regarding race, ethnicity, gender etc. can become more negative and more difficult to alter as children grow older [38,10].

In order to provide authentic multicultural education, early childhood educators should make education pertinent to children's lives by incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching. Culturally relevant pedagogy links the experience of students to school practices so that it makes learning culturally related to students [39]. Early childhood educators who want to provide culturally relevant education using culturally responsive teaching should first reform curriculum contents and

classroom environments in order to make education meaningful to children [8].

About the matter of respect for differences, there are many findings indicating that teachers' perceptions and attitudes affect children as well [40,41,42,43,9,44]. The common ground for all these studies is the fact that attitudes of teachers towards children and their families, which may be considered different, (because of race, language, religion, socio economic status, physical traits etc.) influence their students. Based on this, it can be said that preschoolers, who usually learn by taking someone as a role model, tend to shape their conceptions of "different" and attitudes by observing their teachers. As an early childhood educator, it is important to create an authentic multicultural classroom and to value diverse perspectives by integrating multicultural educational practices. According to Sinclair, Dunn and Lowery [45] individual differences in implicit racial prejudice predict how people evaluate and behave towards those around them. Through multicultural practices, children not only from diverse culture but also from dominant backgrounds benefit from it [10,46].

Young children's thoughts and understandings of social diversity upon which anti-bias curricula are based remain poorly theorised [7].

5. SUGGESTIONS

This study can be expanded in a way to include more different cultural groups and countries. Hence, a more global perspective can be developed in children about different characteristics of people living in other countries and factors affecting their perceptions.

A special education system needs carrying out in order to create a sense of tolerance in children. Early childhood education programs need restructuring around the world in a way to include the education of 'respect for all differences' around the world. Early childhood educators, too, need to increase their positive perceptions and knowledge about different cultures. For this reason, it can be suggested to support them via in-service trainings.

DISCLAIMER

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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