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Early Childhood Preservice Teachers' Levels of Multiculturalism Perception and Ethnocultural Empathy: A Study in the Turkish Context

Tuğba EMİROĞLU İLVAN *
İstanbul 29 Mayıs University, Türkiye ORCID: 0000-0003-2762-4721

Şerife Nur VAROL
Gazi University, Türkiye ORCID: 0000-0002-7235-0582

Eslem Gözde ŞENÖZ
Sakarya University, Türkiye ORCID: 0000-0001-7700-0154

Remziye CEYLAN
Yıldız Technical University, Türkiye ORCID: 0000-0003-3227-7189

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The aim of this study is to investigate the multiculturalism perceptions and ethnocultural empathy levels of early childhood preservice teachers. This study was conducted in a correlational research design. This study had a sample of 380 undergraduate students studying in the academic year 2021-2022 in the Department of Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Education, Turkey. In this study, Multiculturalism Perception Scale, The Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy, and individual demographic form were used. The One-Way Variance Analysis (ANOVA) and Independent Samples t-tests were used to analyze if there are significant differences between early childhood preservice teachers' descriptive characteristics on their perceptions of multiculturalism and ethnocultural empathy levels. Pearson correlation was utilized to determine the relationship between early childhood preservice teachers' perceptions of multiculturalism and their ethnocultural empathy levels. According to research results, early childhood preservice teachers' perceptions of multiculturalism and their ethnocultural empathy are positively correlated. Furthermore, results revealed that those who have cross-cultural friends have higher mean scores on both multiculturalism perception and ethnocultural empathy than those who do not have cross-cultural friends. Moreover, early childhood preservice teachers who want to take courses on multiculturalism have higher scores on multiculturalism perception and ethnocultural empathy than those who do not want to. The results were discussed in the context of related research and recommendations were given for future research.

* Correspondency: temiroglu@29mayis.edu.tr

Introduction

In the last decade, Turkey has witnessed an increasing multi-ethnic immigration flow because of wars, political oppression, economic adversities, climate change, natural disasters, etc. As a result, people from various backgrounds, ethnicities, religions, and races had to come together. Turkey ranks first in the world with the number of refugees it hosts four million coming from countries such as Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan etc. (UNHCR, 2022). Thus, it can be said that society has transformed into a multicultural structure, which has brought with it the concept of ethnocultural empathy. Ethnocultural empathy emphasizes the importance of respecting different languages, religions, ethnic origins, and cultural differences. Ethnocultural empathy can be defined as the comprehension and acceptance of other ethnic communities (Lee, Neville, Schlosser, Valgoi & Cha-Jua, 2021). Studies demonstrated that ethnocultural empathy not only reduces prejudice, hostility, and discriminatory beliefs, it also increases tolerance, respect, and acceptance in intercultural relationships (Álvarez-Castillo, & Fernández-Caminero, 2015; González-González, Álvarez-Castillo & Fernández-Caminero, 2015). Therefore, ethnocultural empathy has become an important element in many areas of life in terms of both human relations and the preservation of social order (Rasoal, Eklund & Hansen, 2011). In this respect, it should be noted that one of the most important conditions for the country to achieve its political, economic, and socially sustainable development goals depends on the integration of differences in society. Since society has changed due to a rise in the number of individuals from various backgrounds, the education system is inevitably affected by this transformation. Hence, the education system should be updated with respect to these changes (Portera, 2011).

In order to respond effectively to diversity, it is crucial that teachers have the levels needed to work effectively with students from different backgrounds (Banks, 2008). Multicultural education comes to the fore to protect society's social order. According to Banks (2009, p.13), multicultural education is “an approach to school reform designed to provide education and equal opportunities for students from different ethnic, cultural and social groups, while respecting diversity”. Integrating multicultural education into classrooms will allow children to respect differences at an early age (Brahim & Syarif, 2010; Ogletree & Patricia, 2010). Furthermore, teachers’ awareness and knowledge of other cultures is linked with teachers’ expectations of classroom success (Pasch, Pasch, Johnson, Ilmer, Snyder, Stapleton, Hamilton & Mooradian, 1993). It is a fact that teachers’ beliefs, knowledge, expectations, attitudes, and behaviors in the classroom affect the way they implement the curriculum (Brown & Kysilka, 2002). Hence, it can be said that teachers have an essential role in children's lives affecting their views, perceptions, and behaviors (Ming & Dukes, 2006). In Turkey, teacher dominance still can be seen (Polat & Kılıç, 2013), so early childhood preservice teachers’ perceptions of multiculturalism and ethnocultural empathy levels have the utmost importance since teachers have critical roles in children’s lives and moral development (Phoon, Abdullah & Abdullah, 2012). However, in the current situation considering the increasing cultural diversity that exists in Turkey, there is still a scarcity of courses for preservice teachers about multicultural education (Karslı-Çalamak & Erdemir, 2019). Overall, since the first steps of moral development are taken during early childhood, it is substantial to investigate early childhood preservice teachers, who will be role models for children, ethnocultural empathy levels, and perception of multiculturalism. Moreover, since preschools and kindergartens are part of the community, they represent society, so it can be said that they include cultural elements (Moe, 2019). Thus, teachers need to build up convenient educational programs and teaching methods for children of different races, ethnicities, classes, and religions in the classroom (Karacabey, Özdere & Bozkuş, 2019). Multicultural education aims to promote a learning

environment where children from many racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds can receive equal opportunities and education.

Although there are some studies that investigate multiculturalism and ethnocultural empathy separately, no studies have found that multiculturalism and ethnocultural empathy are examined together. Some of these studies include the attitudes of academicians about multicultural education (Damgacı & Aydın, 2013), teachers' perceptions of multiculturalism (Akman, 2020; Bahadır, 2016; Coronel & Gómez-Hurtado, 2015; Danacı, Eran, Çetin, Pınarcık & Bahtiyar, 2016; Sharma, 2005; Mazı, 2018), teachers' attitudes toward multicultural education (Rissanen, Tirri & Kuusisto, 2015; Özdemir & Dil, 2013; Karacabey et al., 2019; Yazıcı, Başol & Toprak, 2009); preservice teachers' attitudes towards multiculturalism (LaDuke, 2009; Spinthourakis, Karatzia-Stavlioti, & Roussakis, 2009; Kim & Connelly, 2019; Taylor, Kumi-Yeboah, & Ringlaben, 2016; Demir & Başarır, 2013; Engin & Genç, 2015; Güngör, Buyruk & Özdemir; 2018), early childhood teachers' attitudes toward multiculturalism (Abdullah & Abdullah, 2018; Peköz, Külcü & Gürşimşek, 2018; Vittrup, 2016), college students' ethnocultural empathy (Kim & Tausen, 2022; Lu, Hill, Hancock & Keum, 2020), preservice teachers' ethnocultural empathy (Kapıkıran, 2021). As seen above, there is limited research of early childhood preservice teacher. Therefore, investigating early childhood preservice teachers' perceptions of multiculturalism and their ethnocultural empathy levels help fill the literature gap. Understanding in what way various variables affect the perception of multiculturalism and ethnocultural empathy can contribute to planning regulations that will improve the functionality of teacher training programs in universities. For this reason, research questions are listed below:

(1) How are the multiculturalism perception and ethnocultural empathy levels of early childhood preservice teachers'?
(2) Do early childhood preservice teachers' mean scores of the Multiculturalism Perception Scale and Ethnocultural Empathy Scale differ significantly from each other depending on their demographic characteristics?
(3) Are early childhood preservice teachers' levels of ethnocultural empathy and perceptions of multiculturalism interrelated?

Method

Research Model

This research, which was carried out to examine the multiculturalism perceptions and ethnocultural empathy levels of early childhood preservice teachers', was designed in the correlational research design. According to Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2012), correlational studies investigate the possibility of relationships between two or more than two variables. This correlational research was conducted in the 2021-2022 academic year between March 10th and June 10th, 2022. The inclusion criterion was studying in the Department of Early Childhood Education in the Education Faculty. The sampling method was chosen as convenience sampling method to identify the sample because accessing the full target population for a representative sample is burdensome. Considering the 0.05 margin of error and 95% confidence interval, the sample should consist of at least 365 early childhood preservice teachers. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), 380 early childhood preservice teachers represent the population of the study.

Table 1. Characteristics of early childhood preservice teachers

Variables	Groups	N	%
Gender	Female	342	90.0
	Male	38	10.0
University Type	State	317	83.4
	Private	63	16.6
Grade Level	Freshman	106	27.9
	Sophomore	146	38.4
	Junior	93	24.5
	Senior	35	9.2
Residential Area	Metropolis	217	57.1
	City Centre	57	15.0
	Town	74	19.5
	Village	32	8.4
Total		380	100.0

In this study, forty-three early childhood preservice teachers declined to participate and did not complete the questionnaires. Six of them filled out the questionnaires incompletely. Therefore, forty-nine early childhood preservice teachers' were excluded from the study sample. The sample of this research includes 380 undergraduate students in total studying in the Department of Early Childhood Education in the Faculty of Education during the 2021-2022 academic year in the Marmara and Central Anatolia Regions of Turkey. Characteristics of early childhood preservice teachers are given in Table 1. Altogether, there were 342 females (90%) and 38 males (10%). While 317 early childhood preservice teachers attend state universities (83.4%), 63 of them attend private universities (16.6%). Among them, 106 early childhood preservice teachers are freshmen (27.9%), 146 are sophomores (38.4%), 93 are juniors (24.5%), and 35 are seniors (9.2%). The mean age of early childhood preservice teachers is 21.62 (SD=3.38).

Data Collection Tools

In this research, individual demographic form developed by the researchers, "Multiculturalism Perception Scale" developed by Ayaz (2016), and "The Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy" adapted to Turkish culture by Özdikmenli-Demir and Demir (2014) were used as data collection tools.

Individual demographic form

This form consists of 12 items enquiring the early childhood preservice teachers' gender, age, grade level, type of university, parents' educational level, having cross-cultural friends, taking courses related to multiculturalism, and willingness to take courses on multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism perception scale (MPS)

Ayaz (2016) developed this scale to measure the level of multiculturalism perception of preservice teachers. The scale has a one-dimensional structure and consists of 25 items. The total score ranges from 25 to 125. The scale is scored from 1 to 5 (1=Totally disagree... 5=Totally agree). Lower mean scores imply a lower level of multiculturalism perception. The Cronbach α value of the scale was discovered to be .94. In this study, the total Cronbach α value of the scale was detected as .92.

The scale of ethnocultural empathy (SEE)

This scale was developed by Wang, Davidson, Yakushko, Savoy, Tan and Bleier (2003) and it was adapted to Turkish by Özdikmenli-Demir and Demir (2014). The original 31-item scale has a four-factor structure, is rated from 1 to 6 (1= Strongly disagree, 6= Strongly agree). The total score ranges from 36 to 186. On the other hand, the 30-item Turkish version of the scale has a three-factor structure, is rated from 1 to 5 (1= Strongly disagree, 5= Strongly agree). The total score ranges from 30 to 150. The 11-item first factor is named "Empathic Feeling and Expression," the 11-item second factor is named "Empathic Perspective Taking and Acceptance of Cultural Differences", and the 8-item third factor is named "Empathic Awareness". The total Cronbach α value of the Turkish version of the SEE scale was .93. The Cronbach α values of the subscales were found to be .87 for empathetic feeling and expression, .85 for empathic perspective taking and acceptance of cultural differences, and .81 for empathic awareness. In this study, the total Cronbach α value of the scale was .91; the Cronbach α values of the subscales were calculated as .86, .79, and .76, respectively.

Procedure

After obtaining ethical approval from the ethics committee of the Istanbul 29 Mayıs University, early childhood preservice teachers were recruited from, early childhood preservice teachers were recruited from 10 March 2022 until 10 June 2022. The data were collected in two ways: online and face-to-face. As the first way, researchers created a questionnaire on Google Forms. There was an informed consent form at the beginning of the questionnaire. Early childhood preservice teachers were sent the questionnaires through social media networking sites and e-mails. In the second way, researchers printed the data collection tools and informed the early childhood preservice teachers about the aim of the study. Participants who volunteered gave back the data collection tools to the researchers. The questionnaires were completed by the participants in approximately 15-20 min.

Data analysis

The IBM SPSS 24 program was utilized, with a significance level of 0.05, to analyze the data. First of all, to test whether the data is normally distributed, skewness and kurtosis values were examined. The skewness and kurtosis ranged from ±3, indicating normal distribution (Jondeau & Rockinger, 2003). Therefore, parametric tests were used in the analysis of the data. The Independent samples T-Tests, One-Way Variance Analysis (ANOVA), Tukey test and Pearson correlation were performed.

Results

Descriptive Analysis of Multiculturalism Perception and Ethnocultural Empathy Level

The first research question was 'how are the multiculturalism perception and ethnocultural empathy levels of early childhood preservice teachers'? The distribution of the MPS, SEE, and its subscales are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of the MPS and the SEE Total Score and Subscale Scores of Early Childhood Preservice Teachers

Scales/Subscales Scores	$\bar{X}$	SD	Min	Max
MPS	107.05	12.20	47.00	125.00
SEE	117.06	15.56	62.00	150.00
EFE	45.49	6.25	19.00	55.00
EPTACD	41.44	6.81	19.00	55.00
EA	30.03	4.88	14.00	40.00

Notes: MPS, Multiculturalism perception scale; SEE, Scale of ethnocultural empathy; EFE, Empathic feeling and expression; EPTACD, Empathic perspective taking and acceptance of cultural differences; EA, Empathic awareness.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the MPS and the SEE Total Score and, the subscales of the SEE, respectively. In this sample, The MPS Total Scores ranged from 47 to 125 (M=107.05, SD=12.20). This result shows that early childhood preservice teachers have high mean scores of multiculturalism perception. The SEE total scores ranged from 62 to 150 (M=117, SD=15.56), where the mean scores of its subscales were 45.49, 41.44 and 30.03, respectively. The results indicate that early childhood preservice teachers have a high level of multiculturalism perception.

Descriptive Results Concerning the Characteristics of Early Childhood Preservice Teachers

The second research question was whether early childhood preservice teachers' mean scores of the Multiculturalism Perception Scale and Ethnocultural Empathy Scale differ significantly from each other in terms of their descriptive characteristics.

Table 3. Investigation of Multiculturalism Perception and Ethnocultural Empathy Scores by Gender

Scales/Subscales Scores	Gender	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	t	*p*
MPS	Female	342	107.29	11.28	.780	.440
	Male	38	104.89	18.57		
SEE	Female	342	117.05	15.25	-.044	.965
	Male	38	117.18	18.30		
EFE	Female	342	45.63	6.17	.393	.694
	Male	38	45.21	7.08		
EPTACD	Female	342	41.35	6.72	-.758	.449
	Male	38	42.24	7.66		
EA	Female	342	30.06	4.69	.307	.760
	Male	38	29.74	6.38		

*p< .05. Notes: MPS, Multiculturalism perception scale; SEE, Scale of ethnocultural empathy; EFE, Empathic feeling and expression; EPTACD, Empathic perspective taking and acceptance of cultural differences; EA, Empathic awareness.

Independent samples t-test was used to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between early childhood preservice teachers' perceptions of multiculturalism and their levels of ethnocultural empathy in terms of the gender variable. Table 3 demonstrate that no statistically significant difference was observed between the MPS total [t(378)=.780; p>.05], the SEE total [t(378)=-.044; p>.05], the first subscale [t(378)=.393; p>.05], the second subscale [t(378)=-.758; p>.05] and the third subscale [t(378)=.307; p>.05] scores according to early childhood preservice teachers' gender.

Table 4. Investigation of Multiculturalism Perception and Ethnocultural Empathy Scores by Type of University

Scales/Subscales Scores	Groups	N	X̄	SD	t	*p*
MPS	State	317	106.11	12.22	-3.414	**.001***
	Private	63	111.78	10.98		
SEE	State	317	116.18	15.27	-2.491	**.013***
	Private	63	121.49	16.36		
EFE	State	317	45.19	6.06	-2.846	**.005***
	Private	63	47.62	6.85		
EPTACD	State	317	40.96	6.83	-3.138	**.002***
	Private	63	43.87	6.20		
EA	State	317	30.04	4.81	.056	.955
	Private	63	30.00	5.22		

*p< .05. Notes: MPS, Multiculturalism perception scale; SEE, Scale of ethnocultural empathy; EFE, Empathic feeling and expression; EPTACD, Empathic perspective taking and acceptance of cultural differences; EA, Empathic awareness.

Independent samples t-test was used to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between early childhood preservice teachers' perceptions of multiculturalism and their levels of ethnocultural empathy in relation to the type of university (Table 4). Table 4 reveals that the scores gathered for early childhood preservice teachers' at state and private universities differ significantly according to the MPS total [t(378)=-.3.414; p<.05], the SEE total [t(378)=-.2.491; p<.05], the first subscale [t(378)=-.2.486; p<.05], and the second subscale [t(378)=-.3.138; p<.05]. The above-mentioned subscales all differ significantly in favor of the private university. However, the third subscale scores do not differ significantly [t(378)=.056; p>.05].

Table 5. Investigation of Multiculturalism Perception and Ethnocultural Empathy Scores by Grade Level

Scales/Subscales Scores	Groups	N	X̄	SD	F	*p*	Post-Hoc
MPS	Freshman	106	108.05	13.32	.328	.805	
	Sophomore	146	106.62	10.58			
	Junior	93	106.68	11.53			
	Senior	35	106.86	16.41			
SEE	Freshman	106	120.09	14.82	1.599	.062	
	Sophomore	146	114.79	15.89			
	Junior	93	116.80	15.23			
	Senior	35	118.09	16.24			
EFE	Freshman	106	46.66	5.81	2.484	.189	
	Sophomore	146	45.03	6.35			
	Junior	93	45.16	6.46			
	Senior	35	45.83	6.46			
EPTACD	Freshman	106	42.28	6.66	3.699	.060	
	Sophomore	146	40.29	7.11			
	Junior	93	42.33	6.16			
	Senior	35	41.31	7.19			
EA	Freshman	106	31.15	4.90	2.470	**.012***	1-2 1-3
	Sophomore	146	29.47	4.80			
	Junior	93	29.30	4.930			
	Senior	35	30.94	4.39			

*p< .05. Notes: MPS, Multiculturalism perception scale; SEE, Scale of ethnocultural empathy; EFE, Empathic feeling and expression; EPTACD, Empathic perspective taking and acceptance of cultural differences; EA, Empathic awareness.

Table 5 demonstrates the ANOVA findings of early childhood preservice teachers' multiculturalism perception and ethnocultural empathy levels according to their grades.

The results indicate that the third subscale scores [F(3,376)=2.470; p<.05] differ significantly according to their grades. The post hoc comparisons, using the Tukey test, revealed that early childhood preservice teachers who are in their freshman year have higher levels of empathic awareness scores than those who are in their sophomore and junior years. However, the results also reveal no statistically significant difference between the MPS total [F(3,376)=.328; p>.05], the SEE total [F(3,376)=1.599; p>.05], the first subscale [F(3,376)=2.484; p>.05], and the second subscale [F(3,376)=3.699; p>.05] scores of early childhood preservice teachers depending on their grade level (Table 5).

Table 6. Investigation of Multiculturalism Perception and Ethnocultural Empathy Scores by Residential Area

Scales/Subscales Scores	**Groups**	**N**	**X̄**	**SD**	**F**	***p***
MPS	Metropolis	217	107.44	11.31	2.289	.078
	City Centre	57	103.56	17.23		
	Town	74	107.34	10.41		
	Village	32	110.00	10.11		
SEE	Metropolis	217	117.61	15.63	1.443	.230
	City Centre	57	114.84	17.29		
	Town	74	115.45	14.18		
	Village	32	121.03	14.47		
EFE	Metropolis	217	45.90	6.11	1.346	.259
	City Centre	57	44.70	7.55		
	Town	74	44.82	5.91		
	Village	32	46.81	5.25		
EPTACD	Metropolis	217	41.46	6.79	1.909	.128
	City Centre	57	41.00	6.72		
	Town	74	40.64	7.08		
	Village	32	43.97	6.15		
EA	Metropolis	217	30.25	4.80	.801	.494
	City Centre	57	29.14	5.53		
	Town	74	29.99	4.28		
	Village	32	30.25	5.46		

Notes: MPS, Multiculturalism perception scale; SEE, Scale of ethnocultural empathy; EFE, Empathic feeling and expression; EPTACD, Empathic perspective taking and acceptance of cultural differences; EA, Empathic awareness.

In this study, to investigate whether there is a significant difference between early childhood preservice teachers' multiculturalism perception and ethnocultural empathy levels according to their residential area ANOVA was conducted (Table 6). Table 6 demonstrates that the MPS total [F(3,376)=2.289; p>.05], the SEE total [F(3,376)=1.443; p>.05], the first subscale [F(3,376)=1.346; p>.05], the second subscale [F(3,376)=1.909; p>.05], and the third subscale [F(3,376)= .801; p>.05] scores did not differ significantly in terms of their residential area.

Table 7. Investigation of Multiculturalism Perception and Ethnocultural Empathy Scores by Having Cross-Cultural Friends

Scales/Subscales Scores	Groups	N	X̄	SD	t	*p*
MPS	Yes	191	108.63	12.45	2.550	**.011***
	No	189	105.46	11.75		
SEE	Yes	191	119.91	16.50	3.645	**.000***
	No	189	114.19	14.01		
EFE	Yes	191	46.57	6.44	3.109	**.002***
	No	189	44.60	5.91		
EPTACD	Yes	191	42.76	7.16	3.861	**.000***
	No	189	40.11	6.17		
EA	Yes	191	30.58	5.33	2.223	**.027***
	No	189	29.48	4.32		

*p< .05. Notes: MPS, Multiculturalism perception scale; SEE, Scale of ethnocultural empathy; EFE, Empathic feeling and expression; EPTACD, Empathic perspective taking and acceptance of cultural differences; EA, Empathic awareness.

As shown in Table 7, independent sample t-test was used to investigate the variable having cross-cultural friends. The MPS total [t(378)=.2.550; p.05], the SEE total [t(378)=.3.645; p.05], the first subscale [t(378)=3.109; p.05], the second subscale [t(378)=3.861; p.05], and the third subscale [t(378)=2.223; p.05] scores were all statistically different from one another. Early childhood preservice teachers who have cross-cultural friends had higher scores in multiculturalism perception and ethnocultural empathy total and subscale scores.

Table 8. Investigation of Multiculturalism Perception and Ethnocultural Empathy Scores by Taking Courses on Multiculturalism and Willingness to Take Courses on Multiculturalism

Scales/Subscales Scores	Taking courses on multiculturalism				Willingness to take courses on multiculturalism			
	Groups	N	X̄ (SD)	Analysis	Groups	N	X̄ (SD)	Analysis
MPS	Yes	43	107.81 (13.51)	t=.434 *p*=.664	Yes	332	107.78 (11.66)	t=3.106 *p*=.002*
	No	337	106.96 (12.04)		No	48	102.00 (14.56)	
SEE	Yes	43	115.79 (19.52)	t=-.465 *p*=.644	Yes	332	117.74 (15.36)	t=2.256 *p*=.025*
	No	337	117.23 (15.01)		No	48	112.35 (16.26)	
EFE	Yes	43	44.67 (7.90)	t=-.826 *p*=.413	Yes	332	45.81 (6.12)	t=1.840 *p*=.067
	No	337	45.71 (6.02)		No	48	44.04 (7.01)	
EPTACD	Yes	43	40.42 (9.02)	t=-.813 *p*=.421	Yes	332	41.53 (6.94)	t=.685 *p*=.494
	No	337	41.57 (6.48)		No	48	40.81 (5.86)	
EA	Yes	43	30.70 (5.18)	t=.951 *p*=.342	Yes	332	30.40 (4.64)	t=3.921 *p*=.000*
	No	337	29.95 (4.84)		No	48	27.50 (5.73)	

*p< .05. Notes: MPS, Multiculturalism perception scale; SEE, Scale of ethnocultural empathy; EFE, Empathic feeling and expression; EPTACD, Empathic perspective taking and acceptance of cultural differences; EA, Empathic awareness.

The independent sample t-test results showed in Table 8 demonstrated that early childhood preservice teachers' the MPS total [t(378)=.434; p>.05] and the SEE total [t(378)=-.465; p>.05], the first subscale [t(378)=-.826; p>.05], the second subscale [t(378)=-.813; p>.05], and the third subscale [t(378)=.951; p>.05] scores did not differ significantly according to the status of taking courses related to multiculturalism. Besides that, results revealed that early childhood preservice teachers who were willing to take courses about multiculturalism had higher scores in the MPS total [t(378)=3.106; p<.05], the SEE total [t(378)=2.256; p<.05] and the third subscale scores [t(378)=3.921; p<.05]. In addition to this, the first subscale [t(378)=1.840; p>.05], and the second subscale [t(378)=.685; p>.05] scores did not show a significant difference according to the willingness to take courses about multiculturalism variable.

Correlation Analysis

The last research question was whether early childhood preservice teachers' levels of ethnocultural empathy and perceptions of multiculturalism are related. The Correlation Analysis was used to investigate the study variables (Table 9).

Table 9: Bivariate Correlations Among the Study Variables

Variables	**X̄**	**SD**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**
1 MPS	107.05	12.20	-					
2 SEE	117.06	15.56	**.683****	-				
3 EFE	45.59	6.25	**.681****	**.921****	-			
4 EPTACD	41.44	6.81	**.540****	**.862****	**.682****	-		
5 EA	30.03	4.88	**.553****	**.806****	**.704****	**.478****	-	
6 Age	21.62	3.38	-.099	-.091	-.092	-.025	**-.138****	-

*p< .05. Notes: MPS, Multiculturalism perception scale; SEE, Scale of ethnocultural empathy; EFE, Empathic feeling and expression; EPTACD, Empathic perspective taking and acceptance of cultural differences; EA, Empathic awareness.

As shown in Table 9, there is a moderately significant positive correlation between early childhood preservice teachers' perceptions of multiculturalism and their ethnocultural empathy levels (r= .683 p<.001). As early childhood preservice teachers' perceptions of multiculturalism increase positively, their ethnocultural empathy levels increase. Nonetheless, the ages of early childhood preservice teachers and their perception of multiculturalism were not significantly related but their empathic awareness and their age correlated negatively at a low level (r= -.138, p<.001).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, early childhood preservice teachers' perceptions of multiculturalism and ethnocultural empathy levels were measured and examined in terms of various variables. The first objective of this study is to examine early childhood preservice teachers' level of ethnocultural empathy and perception of multiculturalism. The findings revealed that early childhood preservice teachers had high scores on the perception of multiculturalism and ethnocultural empathy scales, which implies a good sign for awareness and acceptance of different languages, religions, ethnic origins, and cultural differences. This finding is consistent with the study of Nadelson et al. (2012) reporting that preservice teachers have a high level of multicultural attitude. Also, research conducted with teachers showed they have a favorable mindset toward multicultural education (Aktoprak, Yiğit & Güneyli, 2017; Damgaci & Aydın, 2013).

The second objective of this study is to examine whether early childhood preservice teachers' mean scores of the Multiculturalism Perception Scale and Ethnocultural Empathy Scale differ significantly from each other with regards to their demographic information. The results demonstrated that early childhood preservice teachers' perceptions of multiculturalism do not differ with respect to gender. This outcome is in line with prior research which similarly finds out that in terms of gender there is no significant difference between preservice teachers' perceptions of multiculturalism (Bulut & Başbay, 2015; Munroe & Pearson, 2006; Polat, 2009; Polat & Barka, 2012; Rissanen et al., 2015; Tortop, 2014; Yazıcı et al., 2009; Yılmaz & Göçen, 2013). On the other hand, there are also some findings contradicting this result, reporting that female preservice teachers score higher on the perception of multiculturalism scale than male preservice teachers (Aktoprak et al., 2017; Demircioğlu & Özdemir, 2014; Van de Vijver, Breugelmans & Schalk-Soekar, 2008). Regarding ethnocultural empathy, a study indicated that female university students demonstrated higher levels of empathy than males (Winn, 2019). Another demographic variable that is investigated in this study is age. According to the findings obtained from this study, early childhood preservice teachers' age and perception of multiculturalism and ethnocultural empathy did not differ significantly. In the study carried out by Aktoprak et al. (2017), it was found that teachers have similar mindsets about multicultural education according to their age.

Another aim of this research is to examine whether the early childhood preservice teachers' perceptions of multiculturalism and ethnocultural empathy levels differ significantly according to whether they have cross-cultural friends. The results revealed that those who have cross-cultural friends have higher mean scores on both the MPS and the SEE than those who do not have cross-cultural friends. The outcome of this study correlates with Balaban's study (2013), those who have cross-cultural friends show more tolerance to people from different ethnic groups. Consistent with previous research, in one study, found that when African American college students coupled with roommates from different ethnicities, they are exposed to more positive attitudes about anti-discrimination policies (Duncan, Boisjoly, Levy, Kremer & Eccles, 2003). Moreover, according to Chang and Le (2010), students in multicultural or diverse schools show more empathy towards other ethnic groups and less intergroup conflict. Research shows that preservice teachers' experiences of diversity in their past contribute to raising awareness of different ethnic origins (Dedeoğlu & Lamme, 2011; Demoiny, 2017; LaDuke, 2009; Rissanen et al., 2015). Again, there are studies showing that intergroup contact reduces prejudice and increases tolerance among people (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Dixon, Durrheim, Thomae, Tredoux, Kerr & Quayle, 2015).

This paper sought to investigate whether the MPS and the SEE scores among participants who prefer to take courses on multiculturalism differ significantly or not. According to the questionnaire result, while 88.7% of the early childhood preservice teachers stated that they had not taken a course on multiculturalism before, 87.2% of them stated they want to take a course on multiculturalism. The MPS and the SEE total scores of early childhood preservice teachers who want to take courses about multiculturalism were higher than those who do not want to. This suggests that willingness to take courses on multiculturalism is a sign of having more levels of multiculturalism perception and ethnocultural empathy levels. Furthermore, the fact that early childhood preservice teachers who want to take a course on multiculturalism have more ethnocultural empathy levels implies that these people show more tolerance and less hostility towards other cultures because ethnocultural empathy is linked with these behaviors. These findings might support the idea that the preservice teachers' course selection preferences are the determinants of their perceptions of multiculturalism and their ethnocultural empathy levels. Since cultural values are acquired from an early age

(Bachmann, 2006; Beqiri & Sylaj, 2021), teachers' attitudes about multiculturalism play an important role in the early childhood period (Bennett, Doolan & Moriarty, 2018). However, as Kaya and Aydın (2014) states, in Turkey, preservice teachers lack knowledge about multiculturalism since there is a limited number of courses on multiculturalism during their undergraduate education. Thus, it is crucial to integrate multiculturalism courses into education programs because universities are responsible for providing courses about multiculturalism to preservice teachers to convey their knowledge to their students in their future classrooms (Milner, 2005). According to the results, the level of empathic awareness, which is one of the subscales of the Ethnocultural Empathy Scale, of the early childhood preservice teachers who are in their freshmen and sophomore years is found to be significantly higher than the junior and senior students. These results may have been caused by Turkey's recent exposure to heavy migration.

The results of the study were inconsistent with the expectations that early childhood preservice teachers' Multicultural Perceptions and Ethnocultural Empathy levels differ with respect to the residential areas participants live in. Furthermore, the outcomes revealed no significant difference between them. On the other hand, according to Bulut and Başbay (2015), teachers' multicultural competence differs significantly by the residential area, implying that the more cultural diversity in the residential area, the more multicultural competence in people. Again, Demircioğlu and Özdemir (2014) state that since a metropolis is more heterogeneous than the city centers, villages, and towns, people who live in the metropolis are expected to have better multicultural perception than those who do not. In light of the fact that residential areas have an effect on experiences (Umaña-Taylor, 2004), being in more ethnically diverse settings and having exposure to other ethnic groups may create occasions for cross-cultural interaction. According to Haro (2016), the diversity of the environment might increase contact with other ethnic groups, which in turn may foster or inhibit multicultural empathy toward these individuals depending on the circumstances of the environment. Therefore, it can be said that the reason behind the fact that early childhood preservice teachers' multicultural perceptions and ethnocultural empathy levels are not affected by the settlement they live in may stem from the social context of the environment.

The present study showed significant differences in the MPS and the SEE in favor of private universities; that is to say that early childhood preservice teachers from private universities have a higher perception of multiculturalism and ethnocultural empathy levels. This finding is interesting considering that according to Council of Higher Education statistics, while the number of foreign students in private universities is 50838 in the 2020-2021 academic year, this number is 173151 at state universities (YÖK, 2022). Namely, there are more students from different backgrounds in state universities than in private universities. Surprisingly, although state universities have more international students, perception of multiculturalism and ethnocultural empathy levels of participants are lower in state university students. Contrarily, research done by Alanay and Aydın (2016), undergraduate students from state universities held more positive perceptions toward multicultural education.

The final aim was to examine whether there is a relationship between early childhood preservice teacher's perception of multiculturalism and ethnocultural empathy levels. Ethnocultural empathy is a combination of general empathy, cultural empathy, and multiculturalism (Haro, 2016). Thus, unsurprisingly, findings demonstrated an association between the early childhood preservice teachers' perception of multiculturalism and ethnocultural empathy levels. The explanation of this result might be due to the fact that the

culturally heterogeneous composition of a society increases diversity, which is related to the understanding and feeling of people from various ethnic backgrounds.

To conclude, the population is becoming more ethnically and racially diverse. While this shift in population has caused changes in our demographic landscape, it has also shaped the opportunities people have through their exposure to and interactions with people of different ethnic groups. Therefore, the results of this research are significant as early childhood preservice teachers' ethnocultural empathy levels, and perception of multiculturalism are examined according to different variables in this new, transformed, and multicultural society. According to the findings, it can be said that early childhood preservice teachers' ethnocultural empathy levels and perception of multiculturalism are affected by personal experiences factors such as willingness to take courses on multiculturalism, having cross-cultural friends, and alike. Thus, this result is promising for the future careers of early childhood preservice teachers' career and education programs.

Recommendations

- This research was carried out in a quantitative research method. In future studies, pre-service teachers' views on multiculturalism and ethnocultural empathy can be examined in depth by using qualitative research methods.
- The findings showed that 87.2% of preschool teacher candidates stated that they would like to take a course on multiculturalism. Therefore, courses related to multiculturalism can be added to the curriculum of the faculty of education by the Council of Higher Education.
- The faculty of education may offer different teaching methods that support multicultural education for preservice teachers of early childhood education.
- Universities may organize various activities to promote interaction and socialization among people from different cultures (e.g., Culture Day).
- This study included only preschool teacher candidates studying in the Central Anatolia and Marmara regions. In future studies, different regions and departments can also be included.
- Preservice teachers can be supported to engage in exchange programs such as Erasmus, Fulbright, Mevlana, Farabi, and so on.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the Istanbul 29 Mayıs University (Ethics approval number: 2022/03-6).

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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