PEER ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION AMONG PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN THE CONTEXT OF CLASSROOM AND PEER CULTURE

SINIF VE AKRAN KÜLTÜRÜ BAĞLAMINDA OKUL ÖNCESİ ÇOCUKLAR ARASINDA KABUL VE RET

Mustafa YAŞAR, Tuba ÇAY SAĞLAM

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to trace peer acceptance and rejection behaviors among preschool children in two intertwined contexts of classroom and peer culture in Turkey. Participants consisted of 23 children (13 boys and 10 girls, aged 5-6) attending in the classroom of one of the researchers who worked as a preschool teacher. In addition to these children, the research group included three other kids who came to class at various times. Participant observation, interviews, researcher diaries, and document analysis were all used as data collection techniques. In this study, the data were analyzed through the Theoretical Matrix Method (Groenland, 2016), which involves using some theoretical concepts as a base in the process of uncovering categorical structures and underlying meanings. The results revealed that the exclusion behaviors in this classroom were mostly contextual and influenced by friendships dynamics. From the perspective of peer culture, pretend play was at the centre of children's interaction. Leadership among children was fluid, and certain shared values acquired among children regulated their peer interactions in the classroom, despite the presence of specific peer groups in the classroom. The classroom had functional rules and hierarchical structure, while semi-permeable interpersonal boundaries contributed to an atmosphere focused on social inclusion.

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de sınıf ve akran kültürünün iç içe geçtiği iki bağlamda okul öncesi çocuklar arasında kabul ve ret davranışlarını izlemeyi amaçlamıştır. Katılımcılar, araştırmacılardan birinin okul öncesi öğretmeni olarak görev yaptığı sınıfa devam eden 23 çocuktan (13 erkek ve 10 kız, 5-6 yaş) oluşmuştur. Bu çocuklara ek olarak, araştırma grubuna çeşitli zamanlarda sınıfa gelen üç çocuk daha dahil edilmiştir. Çalışmada veri toplama teknikleri olarak katılımcı gözlem, mülakatlar, araştırmacı günlükleri ve doküman analizi kullanılmıştır. Veriler, kategorik yapıları ve altta yatan anlamları ortaya çıkarmada bazı teorik kavramları temel alan Teorik Matris Yöntemi (Groenland, 2016) ile analiz edilmiştir. Sonuçlar, bu sınıfta dışlama davranışlarının büyük ölçüde bağlamsal olduğunu ve arkadaşlık ilişkilerinden etkilendiğini ortaya koymuştur. Akran kültürü açısından bakıldığında, çocukların etkileşiminde hayali oyunların merkezde olduğu görülmüştür. Çocuklar arasındaki liderlik geçişken bir yapı sergilemiş ve sınıfta belirli akran grupları bulunmasına rağmen, çocuklar arasında edinilen bazı değerler akran etkileşimlerini düzenlemiştir. Sınıfta işlevsel kurallar ve bir hiyerarşi mevcut olup, yarı geçirgen kişilerarası sınırlar sınıfın kabul odaklı atmosferine katkı sağlamıştır.

INTRODUCTION

Peer acceptance plays a critical role in children's social and academic development, beginning in early childhood and continuing through the school years. Peer acceptance has been shown to foster positive emotions in children, particularly toward school and friendships, and to enhance school adjustment (Johnson, et al, 2000). Children with strong social skills and broader friendship networks experience smoother transitions from preschool to kindergarten, and their social behaviors and peer relationships in early educational settings further influence their adjustment to primary school (Johnson et al., 2000, Yanık Özger & Yaşar, 20023). Similarly, Gülay and Erten (2011) found that preschool children who were accepted by their peers developed positive attitudes toward school, cooperative participation, and self-regulation skills.

Beyond early childhood, consistent peer acceptance continues to serve as a protective factor against academic difficulties. Peer acceptance has been widely recognized as a key factor in children's development, significantly impacting their social adjustment, self-esteem, academic achievement, and mental well-being (e.g., Asher & Coie, 1990; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Popular children—those accepted by their peers—are more likely to participate in group play and maintain extended social interactions (Walker, 2009). Liem and Fredericks (2025) found that perceived peer acceptance early in the school year played a crucial role in the changes in academic and non-academic outcomes later in the school year, through achievement goals at both time points.

Rejection by peers can be a socially, emotionally, and academically challenging experience for children (DeRosier et al., 1994; Ladd, 1990; Parker & Asher, 1987). Rejected children tend to exhibit higher levels of aggression and spend less time engaging in positive peer interactions (Johnson et al., 2000). One of the key predictors of behavioral issues and social maladjustment in adolescence and adulthood is the inability to form healthy peer relationships and interactions during childhood (Parker & Asher, 1987). Studies show that children who are exposed to long-term exclusion experience many social and emotional stresses, such as loneliness, depression, low motivation, and withdrawal (Asher & Wheeler, 1985; Sanderson & Siegal, 1995). Moreover, rejected children often have more difficulties adapting to schools (Johnson et al., 2000), more discipline problems, and a higher dropout rate than their accepted peers (Parker & Asher, 1987). Children who are rejected by their peers are academically at a higher risk (DeRosier et al., 1994; Ladd, 1990), develop a negative view of school, and perform poorly throughout the school year (Ladd, 1990). Longitudinal studies have revealed that peer rejection also has long-term negative consequences, such as mental health impairment and child delinquency (Harrist & Bradley, 2003).

Since the foundations of personality are laid in early childhood, peer exclusion during this period can damage both children's development and their relationships in the following years. Although peer rejection has deleterious consequences on early development (Ladd, 1990), research has mainly concentrated on elementary school and beyond (Martín-Antón et al, 2024; O'Neil et al., 1997). When the literature is examined, studies on peer relations and peer violence in Turkey are limited (Salı, 2014). However, children experience social life outside the family for the first time in pre-school, where they are exposed to rules that are distinct from those at home (Yanık Özger& Yaşar, 2022). In this process, children first meet the school and classroom cultures. School culture refers to a shared collection of activities, routines, values, concerns, and attitudes that teachers and students created together within a specific school environment. From a systemic point of view, classroom has always hierarchy and boundaries among its members, and everything in a classroom is organized through overt or covert rules (Yaşar, 2017). As children adapt to the preschool environment, they need to build and understand their student role that comprises a complex mix of appropriate expectations, knowledge, and actions that are essential for their active and successful involvement in classroom life (Fernie et al. 1988). Therefore, classroom structure shapes the relationships among children and their behaviors. On the other hand, children also create interactional patterns and relationship structures with their peers, which Corsaro (2014) describes as peer culture. Contrary to classroom culture, children construct peer culture distinct from the world of adults

(Fernie et al. 1988). For Corsaro (2014), children are not passive recipients of adult culture. Throug play and other forms of interaction children internalize adult culture but at the same time challenge it by creating their own unique culture. It is at the intersection of these two cultures that the classroom atmosphere is shaped, resulting in either acceptance or rejection.

Intervention programs to eliminate peer rejection and reduce the social exclusion in schools and classrooms often rely on the claim that there is a deficiency in rejected children and their families. These programs are often implemented in the form of social skills training, socio-cognitive education, and peer-mediated interventions. Although they produce positive outcomes, their effects often disappear once the intervention is completed (Harrist & Bradley, 2003). Although these interventions targeting children's social skills, competence and resilience improve the developmental outcomes of rejected children, they often fail to change the context of exclusion (Cooley et al., 2016). Social skills training programs to decrease interpersonal victimization and prevent the cycle of abuse are often focused on either the individual traits of a victim or bully (Killen & Malti, 2015), and mostly ignore the role of peers and the social context of exclusion (Harrist & Bradley, 2003).

Peer rejection is, by definition, a relational situation between an individual child and their peers (Coie & Cillessen, 1993). However, early studies approached peer rejection and social issues as separate lines of inquiry and focused on the features of rejected children (Beazidou & Botsoglou, 2016). Salı (2014), for instance, found that the sex, age, and way of education of children accounted for a statistically significant difference in peer rejection and violence. In a related study, Demirtaş-Zorbaz et al. (2022) explored how preschool children's prosocial and aggressive behaviors, as well as their relationships with teachers in the Turkish preschool setting, predicted their likelihood of being rejected by their peers. In another study, Gülay (2009) found that there was a significant negative relationship between children's social position and hyperactivity and exposure to peer violence. Similarly, Yıldırım Hacıibrahimoğlu and Ustaoğlu (2020) focused their investigation on the acceptance of Turkish

kindergarten children toward children with disabilities.

Because children form friendships voluntarily through cooperation and trust, acceptance and rejection mostly reflect the perspective of their peer group (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Beazidou and Botsoglou (2023) found that higher scores in 'cooperation', 'social collaborative game' and 'social skills for sustaining friends' are positively associated with peer acceptance and friendship. Paley (1992) defined social exclusion as a group phenomenon and argued that teachers allow peer rejection despite the inhibition of the learning environment in their classrooms. Therefore, it is important to consider both the group dynamics and the personal traits of rejected children while understanding the phenomena of exclusion (Coie & Cillessen, 1993).

The literature on assessing peer rejection has mostly focused on sociometric methods and is carried out through behavior rating scales filled by teachers and parents (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003; Gülay & Erten, 2011; Leung & Silberling, 2006; Walker, 2009). The direct observation of exclusion behaviors has been partially neglected (Arnold et al., 1999). Sociometric peer rejection, which focuses on the level of dislike of children by their peers, does not provide sufficient information about how rejection occurs among children (Arnold et al., 1999). Vygotsky (1978) states that the way to understand a behavior is to examine it in its sociocultural context and through its formation process. Brown et al. (1996) argue that observational evaluation of acceptance and rejection interpersonal behaviors will reveal new insights.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study was to examine acceptance and rejection behaviors among preschool children in the context of classroom and peer culture in Turkey. In this study, instead of labeling some children as "rejected," acceptance and rejection were assumed to be contextually emerging communicative behaviors. Therefore, this study aimed to trace rejection behaviors in these two intertwined cultural contexts.

For this purpose, answers the following questions were sought.

(1) How do classroom culture elements (classroom rules, interpersonal boundaries, and hierarchy) affect acceptance and rejection behaviors among preschool children?

(2) How does a peer culture element (children's play, toys and other materials, products created together, and shared beliefs and values) affect acceptance and rejection behaviors among preschool children?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The district of the school was relatively far from the city center of Adana, Turkey. This was a multicultural district with families from different sects (Shafi, Alevi, and Sunni), ethnic groups (Turk, Kurd), and socioeconomic levels. The classroom structure reflected the characteristics of the district and incorporated cultural diversity. Because inquiring about ethnic and religious backgrounds is considered inappropriate in Turkey, the study did not provide data on families' sectarian and ethnic backgrounds.

In this qualitative case study, participants were chosen through purposeful sampling. The teacher researcher was also a natural participant in this study. The researcher/ preschool teacher had 10 years of experience in teaching preschoolers, and it was her 7th year at the school where the research was conducted. In her class, there were a total of 23 children, consisting of 13 boys and 10 girls. The children's ages ranged between five and six years old. In addition, three other children who were in the classroom at different times were included in the research process. One of these children was the classroom teacher/researcher's son (Ekrem). Although Ekrem attended another class, he participated in free-play activities with other children, especially at the end of the day. The second child was the assistant teacher's son, Emir, who came to the school with his mother every day and spent time with other children. These two children were not initially planned as participants, but the study progressed they became a natural part of classroom environments. Another child was an inclusion student (Sude Naz) diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, who attended the class at regular intervals. The children were given pseudonyms to preserve their qualitative texture and to ensure confidentiality.

Data collection process

The data collection process began in early March and lasted until the end of May 2017. All parents were informed about the study and a written agreement was obtained along with a university ethics committee decision (E-19337145-929-91094). Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, researcher diaries, and document analysis. The fact that the researcher was also teaching in the classroom while conducting the study provided a more intimate ethnographic view and a deeper understanding of the lives of the participants. Thus, as Glesne (2014) stated, the researcher increased her awareness of the interactions that took place around her, and as her participation increased, she began to experience what others saw, thought, and felt, thus closing her distance from the participants.

The researcher spent 15 days observing how children interacted through various activities and in various locations within the school and classroom. The observation started when the children arrived in the morning and finished as they left around lunchtime. The observation process was organized around free play, scheduled activity, mealtime, and personal cleaning time. The goal of these observations was to identify the aspects of peer relationships and classroom culture that might impact the development and persistence of rejection and acceptance behaviors in children's everyday contexts.

The researcher conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with all children individually, while the rest of the class was busy with a task or play to reveal how the children accepted or excluded other children. Children's original artwork, unique games, materials they developed, toys they brought from home, and photos of them participating in educational activities were collected to examine peer culture. From the beginning of the study, the researcher kept a diary by taking notes in and out of the classroom (such as the cafeteria and playground), where the children interacted. In this researcher diary, she not only documented the interpersonal exchanges that occurred in the classroom but also her thoughts and unstructured observations.

Data analysis

In this study, data were analyzed through the theoretical Matrix Method (Groenland, 2016). The researchers used theoretical definitions of key concepts to guide the categorization of empirical data and to uncover underlying categorical structures and meanings. The theoretical foundations and base categories employed in the study were drawn from two primary sources: General Systems Theory (Yaşar, 2017) and Corsaro's conceptualization of peer culture (Corsaro, 2014). General Systems Theory was used as a framework to analyze the structural and contextual dimensions of classroom culture. Within this framework, classroom rules, interpersonal boundaries, and hierarchical relationships were identified as pre-defined categories. In parallel, Corsaro's (2014) definition of peer culture—as "a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers" (p. 19)—provided a basis for understanding how children construct shared meanings and norms through their interactions. The table below presents a summary of the theoretical sources, key concepts, pre-categories, and their specific roles within the study:

Table 1: Theoretical Matrix Table			
Theoretical Sources	**Key Concepts**	**Pre-Categories**	**Function in Study**
General Systems Theory (Yaşar, 2017)	Classroom Culture	Classroom rules Interpersonal Boundaries Hierarchy	Framework for analyzing classroom context
Peer Culture (Corsaro, 2014)	Peer Culture	Activities Routines Artifacts Values Concerns	Definitions of shared peer interactions and norms

As Table 1 provides, this matrix helped operationalize the theoretical concepts and served as a tool for researchers to explore whether participants' responses aligned with the defined categories. Where alignment occurred, the empirical data supported the theoretical framework. In cases where alignment was absent, new categories were formulated, allowing the theory to evolve in response to the data.

Two researchers worked independently to test each of the category structures as specified earlier to place the responses of the respondents in these category structures. If the researchers succeeded, the empirical data provided support for the theory, and theoretical notions, as put forward in the study. However, if certain data segments did not align with the designated theoretical categories, the researchers had to formulate new category structures and amend the theory accordingly. Both options were considered in the discussion section of the report. The refinement and crystallization of themes and categories occurred through continuous negotiation between the two researchers during the iterative process of writing and rewriting the report.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study revealed that exclusion behaviors among children occur contextually, and friendship and classroom culture play a major role in shaping acceptance and rejection behaviors. Children occasionally engaged in exclusionary behaviors that varied depending on the activity in the classroom, their play, and their social interactions. Children excluded their peers from their peer groups or their activities by using negative verbal and physical responses or by simply ignoring them. Negative verbal reactions manifested as insulting, ridiculing, humiliating, mocking, name calling, angering, accusing them of incompetence, and condescending expressions. Some examples would include, "You wouldn't understand this," "You are playing like dummy," "Silly". Negative physical responses included aggressive responses such as pushing, hitting, and pulling. They also ignored other children by refusing to play with them, turning their backs on them, or walking away from them.

Children exposed to rejection from their peers appeared to possess certain social and personality features. These children demonstrated a lack of social skills, tended to isolate themselves, and displayed either aggressive or excessively shy behavior. Some children were also more susceptible to exclusion due to their own circumstances, such as inclusion or joining the class later. Children primarily engage in play both in the classroom and playground; therefore, the play process is often linked to

issues of acceptance and rejection. Children who did not comply with the rules of play were often excluded from the group during playtime. Children expected their peers to improve the play scenarios and advance the conversations; hence, those who were too silent or passive were also excluded.

Peer Acceptance and Rejection Behaviors within the Classroom Culture

The analysis revealed that children exhibited accepting behaviors toward one another and that there was a general acceptance environment in the classroom. Children in the classroom freely communicated with one another, enjoyed doing activities and spending time together, freely expressed their ideas and suggestions, and participated in planning the day. Data analysis showed that rules, rituals, functional hierarchy, and positive values in the classroom contributed to the nurturing and acceptance environment in the classroom.

The classroom rules created at the beginning of the term were kept simple within the framework of the two basic rules. These two basic rules were that children must ask permission to leave the classroom and that they should not hit other children. The children mostly obeyed these rules. Children asked permission from the teacher for almost everything, although the teacher often reminded them that there was no need to ask permission for basic needs such as drinking water. Except for the occasional display of physical aggression, the children followed the rule of not hitting.

Some rituals played a significant role in shaping the observed acceptance culture in the classroom. These rituals included greeting children, using music to organize the classroom, and engaging in pre-event and end-of-day conversations. The teacher greeted all the children at the beginning of the day and bid farewell at the end of the day with a smile, but she did not force them to do the same. Children were used to this situation and if the teacher forgot to say "good morning", they would remind her by saying "Teacher, you did not say good morning to me today."

The teacher played slow-rhythm music in the classroom to use the calming effect of music on the children. Musical and rhythmic activities such as dance and singing play an important role in the classroom. Music was also used to organize the classroom structure. With the sound of music, children realize that the free play time is over, and the toys must be collected.

Children accepted the teacher as an authority figure in the classroom, but they were able to express their wishes without fear or hesitation. The teacher did the majority of the planning by herself but offered different choices to the children. The teacher allowed the students to create authentic products and encouraged them to display their work. In this classroom, the children were actively involved in decision making. They took an active role in the organization of planned activities, suggested new activities and games, and evaluated their own processes and the value of their products.

In addition to classroom rules and rituals, some teacher characteristics and classroom values emerged as elements that play a role in the regulation of acceptance and rejection relations in the classroom. While talking to the children, the teacher used courtesy words such as "please", "thank you", did not engage in one-on-one arguments with the children, and never raised her voice, except in safety-related situations. Values such as trust, cooperation, communication, awareness, and respect for differences emerged in the formation of an acceptance-oriented classroom culture. The teacher stated that it was very important for her that everyone trusted each other in the classroom. The teacher intentionally selects stories that emphasize themes such as accepting differences, not judging others based on appearances, and avoiding prejudice. The teacher facilitates teacher-led discussions around these topics, encouraging children to reflect and share their thoughts. Furthermore, the teacher creates opportunities and environments that support children of different backgrounds or abilities in playing and interacting together. Although many competitive games and activities were organized throughout the school, the teacher preferred noncompetitive classroom activities. In the classroom, the children were able to ask for help from each other, from the teacher, and from the intern.

In addition to trust and cooperation, the atmosphere of conversation is another striking element of the classroom. The children often chatted among themselves, and the teacher often joined and sometimes initiated these conversations. These conversations were particularly intense at the beginning and end of the day. When the children were not busy with any activity, the teacher showed the clock on the wall and said, "Can you chat with your friends about what you did at home last night?" Furthermore, the teacher had a clear attitude toward listening, especially during large group activities. Instead of forming a single line, the children went out of the classroom (such as the cafeteria or garden) chatting and socializing among themselves.

Awareness was an important value in this classroom. Discovery of something previously unnoticed sparked curiosity and excitement in the entire class. When the children saw something different that caught their attention, it generated enthusiasm that seemed to grow in waves the entire classroom. For example, when a bird entered the classroom, Ismail noticed this and informed all the children. The children were all enthralled and stopped doing what they were doing to watch the bird. Ismail brought Sude Naz, the inclusion student, by holding her arm to the area where the bird was. This event created great excitement among the children, and the teacher devoted the rest of the day to the incident.

The children also noticed changes in the personal belongings and attire of the teacher and their classmates. For example, when the teacher came to school with a different bag, the children noticed it immediately and asked the teacher about it. Sometimes the children warned the teacher when she did not notice anything. For example, some children once warned the teacher who did not notice Ismail's new haircut.

Accepting differences was one of the most important values that the teacher consciously promoted in the classroom. The teacher preferred stories about accepting differences and facilitated discussions to encourage the students to discuss and think about these issues. Furthermore, activities such as visiting a retirement home and inviting visually impaired students appeared to play an important role in the development of an acceptance culture in the classroom. The relationship of trust and cooperation based on solidarity in the classroom seemed to reduce marginalization among children. Boys and girls played together in the classroom, and there was permeability between friendship groups. Nondiscriminatory attitudes were observed even for children who joined the class later or were not permanent members of the class.

The situation of Sude Naz, an inclusion student, sheds light on the formation process of acceptance culture in the classroom. Sude Naz entered the room each day with a cheerful smile, eagerly greeted everyone, and consistently made an effort to engage in conversation with her peers. The teacher also demonstrated accepting behaviors toward the inclusion student within the classroom. On days when Sude Naz was absent, the teacher talked to the children about accepting those who were different and asked them to share their feelings and opinions about Sude Naz. The teacher prepared an environment in which different children could play together so that Sude Naz could also be part of the classroom community. The teacher consistently displayed a warm and friendly attitude, greeting and sending off the student with the same kindness. Additionally, the teacher was noted to use encouraging language and provide support during classroom activities, fostering the student's participation and confidence.

Peer Acceptance and Rejection Behaviors within the Peer Culture

In this study, children's peer culture contributed to their interactions in the classroom through play activities, toys, and shared values. Children formed close-knit friendship networks among themselves. Although children generally played in their own groups, they occasionally combined to create collaborative play activities. Even though some children were not members of a fixed group, they did not have difficulty joining other children. It was also acceptable for children to play alone in the classroom. For example, Emir, the son of the assistant teacher, was not yet a permanent part of any group, but he played with many groups. Similarly, Ekrem, the son of the classroom teacher (who was also a researcher), preferred spending time with girls in the dramatic play center.

The children spent their time playing from the moment they arrived at school until it was time to clean the classroom. They engaged in different play activities, from traditional games such as hide and seek to occupational games such as doctor and police, from dramatic play (housekeeping) to sports games, and independent creative games with puppets. The teacher also introduced some traditional games such as hide-and-seek, hopscotch, and tag-of-war to the children. The teacher described these games as "things from my childhood." These traditional games became popular among children.

Children used the objects in the classroom and playground to play in different ways. In the classroom, there were different learning centers, and children often used materials in these centers to create dramatic pretend play. The dramatic play center was mostly used for housekeeping play and children used puppets to try out different roles. Children used the materials in the lego center to create their own toys and play with them. For example, one girl had fun skateboarding with a long piece of block in the classroom, while the boys made a soccer ball from a small piece of lego and continued the game with their Lego ball even though the teacher brought a ball to the classroom. Some boys played housekeeping with girls, and some girls participated in some games that were attributed to boys such as football. Girls and boys often played together themed games such as thieves and police. In the playground, the children spent their time with the sliding, swings, and other equipment in the hopscotch area or sandbox.

In addition to traditional games, children often used some traditional nursery rhymes in their classroom. Rhymes such as "O piti piti butterscotch basket," "cracked cracked round round" served as a rule for the children to enter the play. Children who did not comply with this ritual were typically either excluded from the play or given minor roles. Although children often willingly participated in their peers' play activities, some children were excluded from the peer group and from play activities when they had difficulty complying with the rules of the play, trying to enter the game by force, or failing to improve the play structure or scenario. Children sometimes acted rudely to one another while playing particular games, such as

thief-police, and there were brief disputes on occasion. In such cases, some children would get offended and stop interacting with the offending child for a certain period of time.

In this classroom, it was common for children to bring something from home. With the teacher's permission, children could bring a toy, homemade food, or an outfit featuring a superhero or princess. While girls mostly brought dolls, toy hair, and makeup materials, boys preferred toys such as dinosaurs, fidget spinners, and cars. Girls brought toys to school almost every day, whereas there were some children like Arif and Oktay who did not bring any toys to school. Girls usually removed their toys after playtime, but carried them to the playground. On the other hand, boys preferred to hold their toys in their hands all day, but they preferred to leave their toys in the classroom.

Children used the toys and other materials from home to start a play, invite their peers to play, or start a conversation. For example, a doll brought from home could become the child's daughter or sibling in the game at the dramatic play center. These toys were also used as tools by children to invite their friends to play. In addition, new clothes, new shoes, or any change, such as a hair cut, served as a conversation initiator.

Children gave some toys a symbolic meaning to invite others to play, start a game, start a conversation, and demonstrate strength. For example, a green bell pepper toy in the dramatic play center became an important playmaker for children. Almost every day, the children were trying to find this toy before the others did. When they found it, they hugged each other with laughter and cries of joy. They were saying to other children things like, "We have the bell pepper, don't look for it in vain."

Being a best friend (kanka), cooperation among friends, competition with others, leadership, and superiority were some of the values shared by children in the context of peer culture. Those children who were part of a group or, as children say "kanka," could naturally participate in their play without making any effort. Kankas did not separate much from each other and often went to the bathroom together. Close friends greeted each other differently and

enthusiastically shared their passions and interests. They shared their joy with their kankas and tried to convince them of what they believed to be right. Close friends tried to sit side by side in the classroom and during activities or meals. Bilge and Batuhan's declaration, "Teacher, we're best friends now," along with their frequent use of the term kanka to refer to each other, serves as a clear example of peer bonding. Similarly, other children's use of expressions such as "my brother" or "my big brother" to address one another further illustrates how affectionate and familial language is employed to reinforce social connections among peers.

In this peer culture, cooperation and solidarity were two main values shared by the children. Cooperation and solidarity included trying to console a friend who was low in morale and helping each other during a task. When children realized that one of their peers was sad, they invited him or her to join them in their play, and they were more accommodating to him or her during their play activity. Children's cooperation and solidarity can be seen in Dilek's protection of Ekrem, Masal's verbal response to Mehmet Ali's dismissive attitude toward his friend, and their protection of Doruk, who is thought to be oppressed. In such cases, children who showed negative behaviors started to back off and displayed harmonious behaviors. For example, after he saw the reaction from the others, Mehmet Ali, who belittled his friend, tried to alleviate the situation by saying that he was just joking.

Contrary to the cooperation and solidarity they displayed in the classroom, children ignored other children outside their classroom and avoided openly communicating with them. When children were together with children from other classes in collective events such as the "Nutrition-Friendly School Project" and the celebrations of April 23 National Sovereignty and Children's Day, they tried to stay close with their classmates and socialized mostly among themselves. When children spent time with the Daisies class, one of the younger age groups, in the playground, they ignored the Daisies almost completely. However, children were more open to communication with other classes at similar age levels. For example, the children in the research group sometimes joked and talked with the children from the Dombili Owls class at opposite tables during lunchtime.

Although there was some competition occasionally between the groups in the classroom, the children did not like the competitive situations that occured outside of their own play processes. Children cared much more about competition with another class and took the win-lose situation much more seriously. For example, in the game of empty chair, Mehmet Ali advanced to the finals but was eliminated at the end. When he returned to his classmates, they blamed Mehmet Ali for their defeat and began to push him around half jokingly. As a result, Mehmet Ali began to cry.

Leadership dynamics among children were observed to arise depending on the nature of the activity. Children used several sources of power in their quest for superiority and leadership over their peers. Demonstrating maturity, possessing expertise in specific subjects, and serving as a proficient playmaker were recognized as potential power sources in this context.

The children tried to increase their interactional power in peer relationships and competed for leadership by demonstrating maturity. For example, Dilek came to the class wearing sunglasses one day and started acting like an adult instead of a child throughout the day. Batuhan was also using adult expressions by constantly saying "come on guys" to his friends while they played. In addition to adult accessories and expressions, children undergo physical changes as a sign of growth. For example, Ismail came to the classroom one day with enthusiasm and told everyone "I have a new tooth; I am growing". Children became "specialized" in certain areas and turned into leaders in those activities and areas. For example, the class asked Ismail's opinion in artistic works and considered him as the leader in such activities.

Being a playmaker was an important source of power for children to impact others. Starting a game, making in-game arrangements, distributing toys and materials, and asking for ideas were all effective in being leaders. For example, Kuzey, who was successful in football, usually distributed roles for other children before a football game. Mehmet Ali and Dilek were usually responsible for setting up a play, and they decided who would play with them and what the rules were.

RESULTS/CONCLUSION

In this study, children occasionally showed negative verbal and physical reactions and excluded some children from their own groups and activities. This result is consistent with the findings of Fanger et al. (2012). They found that children used various techniques (unmitigated, mitigated, ignoring, and planning exclusion) to exclude their peers. However, in this study, acceptance situations that emerged at other times prevented children from being completely excluded and turned into scapegoats. Labeling children as excluded in many respects may lead to ignoring the differentiation in power relations among children and the social dynamics created by peers and classroom culture. If this study had started with such a classification, the findings and discussion would certainly have been shaped accordingly and some conflict situations would have had a more negative focus.

The personal characteristics of the children who were exposed to exclusion or rejection in this study had many features similar to those presented in the literature. Research shows that excluded children have weak social skills (Vollinget al., 1993), often display aggression (Arnold et al., 1999), hyperactivity, intrusiveness, and patronizing and anxious/introverted behaviors (Buhs, 2005; Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006, Coie & Cillessen, 1993; Harrist & Bradley, 2003; McDougall et al., 2001). In addition to these personal features, other individual differences such as ethnicity, religion, language, or disability may cause these children to be excluded from the group (Cooley et al., 2016; Harrist & Bradley, 2003). Furthermore, classroom environment and peer relationships were identified as important factors in peer rejection. School, classroom, and peer cultures are parts of a dynamic whole in which children socialize and create their own identities (Yanık Özger & Yaşar, 2018).

In this study, it was observed that exclusion behaviors among children occurred depending on the dynamics of the children's play, emotional relationships, and friendship levels. Studies investigating children's classroom experiences reveal that children's friendship relationships (dyadic relationships) and their social status in the group (group relationships) express two different phenomena,

and both serve overlapping but separate purposes in children's development and socialization (Ladd, 2005). Research shows that children form a group identity that includes and excludes their peers. These group identities may include peer-created norms, such as having specific possessions or stereotypes, such as gender roles (Cooley et al. 2016). Yanık Özger & Yaşar (2018) found that among preschoolers, anything can be used as a means to control who is in and out of their peer groups. For example, in one incident, the children used a water bottle to keep the researcher out of their group. In this study, the most obvious intergroup social exclusion was observed at the classroom level. Children were cautious and sometimes defensive against children from other classes. Another level of intergroup social exclusion observed in this study was against children who were not usual part of the classroom such as the children of the teachers and the child with special needs.

The ability for children to move in and out of small groups, as well as for groups to merge and separate, appeared to help children and their teacher to create a more accepting classroom environment. This permeability of peer group borders allowed children who would have been excluded in another context to remain a part of the classroom community. Studies show that once a child is excluded by the group, prejudice against the excluded child causes peers to interpret the behavior of that child negatively, thus ensuring the continuation of the situation of exclusion (Coie & Cillessen, 1993). Even if the excluded child changes his/her behavior, he/she is faced with a difficult process until he/she is accepted again in the peer group (Coie & Cillessen, 1993). Therefore, creating a classroom culture in which children form flexible peer groups seems to prevent them from being completely rejected from peer groups.

In this study, the teacher/researcher consciously supported dialog among children and tried to create an accepting classroom culture. In addition, she was attentive to peer culture dynamics and intergroup interactions. Literature indicates that teachers are often overlooked in cases of peer rejection and peer victimization (Troop-Gordon, 2015). However, teachers are in a unique position not only to prevent social exclusion among children but also to create

an environment and a classroom atmosphere that fosters harmonious, supportive, and inclusive peer relationships. Teachers transmit both covert and explicit messages about the importance of inclusion in various ways (Cooley et al. 2016). Teachers do this through modeling, their interactions and relationships with children (Troop-Gordon, 2015), and organizing classroom structure and activities (Cooley et al. 2016).

The intersection between classroom culture and peer culture has critical instructional implications, particularly in the context of early childhood education. As the findings of this study suggest, classroom culture—shaped by teacher-established elements such as functional rules, semi-permeable interpersonal boundaries, and prosocial values like trust, respect, and cooperation—provides a structured foundation for social interaction. Simultaneously, peer culture is co-constructed by children through pretend play, shared symbols and materials, emergent group identities, and leadership dynamics (Corsaro, 2014; Yaşar, 2017). These two cultural spheres are not isolated; rather, they continuously interact, sometimes in harmony and other times in conflict, influencing the ways in which children experience inclusion or exclusion in the classroom setting.

This dynamic intersection necessitates intentional instructional strategies. Teachers can play a pivotal role in fostering an inclusive classroom culture by designing activities that encourage flexible group membership, monitoring peer interactions for signs of exclusion, and actively modeling inclusive behaviors. When teachers are attuned to the social norms and power dynamics that emerge within peer groups, they are better equipped to create classroom environments that promote belonging and prevent marginalization. As the data from this study indicate, such practices not only support the reintegration of previously excluded children but also enhance the overall acceptance climate within the classroom. Thus, in addition to addressing individual developmental needs, educators must also engage with the broader peer group dynamics and cultural constructions that shape children's everyday social experiences.

This study explored acceptance and rejection in the context of classroom and peer cultures. How a child becomes a

part of a classroom involves ethical and political values, ideologies, and power relations (Eidsvag & Rosell, 2021). Children use their power resources and leadership skills in various ways to influence each other in social environments (Çelik Yakar, 2019; Gündoğdu & Yaşar, 2021). Hence, understanding who will participate in which activities and to what extent is only possible in the cultural context. In this cultural context, while some individuals can access and use power sources to become privileged, some others may remain outsiders and even become the other (Çay Sağlam & Yaşar, 2017). Therefore, further research should explore the functions of rejection behavior in the context of peer relationships and the power dynamics that are present in the negotiations of children on who will be included and who will be excluded. Besides, instead of approaching conflict as a potentially harmful situation, further research should investigate conflict situations among children from a developmental perspective. Further in-depth studies is needed to explore how group identities are formed among children and the ways in which these identities may reinforce exclusionary behaviors.

Moreover, to promote more flexible social interactions among children within the group, classroom environments should allow for periodic restructuring of peer groups. This approach can facilitate the reintegration of previously excluded children and support their participation in group dynamics. Teachers should model more inclusive behaviors, focus on shaping positive social norms within the classroom and organizing the classroom structure to promote belonging and cooperation. Finally, not only for children who who tend to exclude others but for all children, specific instructional techniques targeting social skills should be implemented, and opportunities should be created to help each child build and strengthen relationships within the group.

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The contribution of the first author is 50 %, the second author's contribution is 50%. One of the researchers worked as a preschool teacher, and her classroom was chosen as the study field and her students as participants. The other researcher served as academic advisors. He was involved in the conceptualization of the study, planning, data analysis, and writing the report.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declares that there is no conflicts of interest

Informed Consent All parents were informed about the study and a written agreement was obtained along with a university ethics committee decision (E-19337145-929-91094).