

RESEARCH/PRACTICE ARTICLE

THESIS SYNOPSIS

# Investigating the impact of professional development on Turkish early childhood teachers' professional growth about education for sustainable development through critical media literacy

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## Thesis Synopsis

Although critical media literacy (CML) and EfS/ESD<sup>1</sup> seem to be contrasting disciplines, the final goal of both is *literacy* that promotes children to become critically media literate and environmentally literate citizens into the future (Willis, Weiser & Kirkwood, 2014). In common with CML, EfS/ESD is constructed on the values of 'critical inquiry, empowerment, participation, democratic decision making, action taking' which foster sustainable lifestyles and social change, which also denotes transformative education (Davis, 2015, p. 37). Additionally, CML and ESD have been underpinned by critical theory, which, when implemented in education presents tools for educational and pedagogical change and social transformation (Kemmis & Carr, 1986). Despite these similarities, however, there are no current studies of approaching EfS/ESD via CML that are targeted at early childhood teachers (ECTs). The broad aim of this study was to support ECTs' transformational role in their early childhood (EC) classrooms through action research focused on combining these two disciplines, CML and EfS/ESD. One of the main reasons for working with ECTs and enhancing their practices in their own classrooms was because these educators were not aware of sustainability issues and educational practices, and how they might integrate ESD and CML into the Turkish Early Childhood Education Curriculum. This outcome-based curriculum has been implemented throughout the country to support 3–5.5-year-old children's development and learning since 2013. Although there are 63 objectives and 240 indicators outlined in the curriculum to foster children's holistic development, only 7 objectives and 18 indicators have some relationship to ESD's environmental aspect. Additionally, most of the objectives and indicators are connected with knowledge and much fewer with skills, attitude and behaviour.

A more targeted aim for this study, after the implementation of a specifically designed professional development training (PDT) using action research, was to determine changes in ECTs'

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ESD awareness and CML levels, their pedagogical practices targeting ESD through CML and the teachers' reflections drawn from their changed practices. The following research question and sub-questions guided the overall study:

- (1) To what extent have ECTs' CML levels changed as a result of PDT aimed at improving the effectiveness of their ESD practices?
  - (a) What were ECTs' awareness of ESD before and after PDT?
  - (b) What was the level of ECTs' CML before and after PDT?
  - (c) What changes occurred in ECTs' implementation of ESD through CML in their EC learning environments after PDT?
  - (d) What changes occurred after the PDT in ECTs' outcomes derived from their implementation of ESD through CML in their EC learning environments?

To answer these questions, a case study design based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory and modified by McCrea & Littlellyke (2015) to reflect ideas emerging out of ECEfS field was carried out. In Bronfenbrenner's theory, the child is located at the centre of the 'ecological' system — a set of nested structures — and his/her development is influenced by five distinct sub-systems. From innermost level to the outside, there are five layers, namely microsystem (covering family, school and peer group settings), mesosystem (encompassing the relationships shaped between people and places within microsystem, e.g., the relation between school and home), exosystem (including the relationships among the house and the parent's workplace, mass media), macrosystem (containing the belief systems, bodies of knowledge, material resources and customs) and chronosystem (comprising changes throughout the life route in family structure, socioeconomic status, employment and, place of residents). The main difference between this and the ECEfS adaptation is that EfS can impact the chronosystem (reflecting change through time) on a child's development, thus potentially altering the life course of a child. As this is a two-directional relationship, children can be both influencers and influenced.

In this research, the Interconnected Model of Professional Growth (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002) was also used to explain teachers' professional growth related to ESD and CML. This points out the sophistication of professional growth by explaining multi-dimensional growth between various educational domains. The external domain (the PDT for this study) is a stimulus that emerged from outside the teachers' world. Domain practice, one of the key components of the model, is about teachers' experimentations in their own classes (teachers' implementations related to ESD through CML for this study). Domain consequences and relevant outcomes (resource use, teaching strategies, etc. for this study) are related to teachers' values and experiences coming from their classroom practices. The last domain, the personal domain, indicates teacher's practical knowledge (for this study, this included teachers' ESD awareness and CML level) (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002).

The participants of this study were four ECTs working at public preschools in Ankara, Turkey. The PDT focused on ESD and CML was constructed by the researcher using analyse, design, develop, implement and evaluate approach (Branch, 2009) to create an efficient and effective in-service action research training programme.

The PDT's five sessions comprised approximately 2-h training modules per session. These sessions generally encompassed the notions of ESD, types of media, CML, how to promote children to be media literate, the relationship between media and ESD and how to integrate CML into ESD while constructing and conducting learning activities.

Rich data were collected from a range of sources, including interviews, stimulated recall interviews, teacher documentation and researcher field notes. The findings of this study indicated that after the PDT there were positive changes in teachers' awareness of ESD and CML levels. The teachers started to design and implement learning activities focusing on ESD through CML. Further, most of the teachers believed that ESD should start in the

early years, whereas prior to the PDT, they were either neutral on this matter or did not think young children were able to learn about sustainability. They then became advocates who believed that CML and ESD should have a place in early childhood education in Turkey. Also, they shared their observations about changes in children's awareness of ESD issues (e.g., animal breeding, gender equity) and children's CML competencies to access, analyse and evaluate, and create media.

In conclusion, the study identified that, if educators know how to conduct learning activities to reach specific outcomes related to ESD and CML, and experts/researchers encourage them to experience new ideas and ways of teaching, educators have the potential to change not only their own lives but also children's lives positively into the future. These educators can then take some responsibility to contribute to raising environmentally and sustainably responsible citizens who are also media literate.

## Endnote

1 This term is used for Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS)/EFS in Australia and New Zealand while ESD term is utilized in European countries.

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## Publications arising from the thesis:

### Conference Papers:

- Alici, S., & Sahin, V. (2017). Exploring early childhood learning environments in terms of ESD and media literacy: A needs assessment study of the Turkish context. In 9<sup>th</sup> *World Environmental Education Congress*.
- Alici, S., & Sahin, V. (2018). Interdisciplinary approaches in ESD: Researching professional development for early childhood teachers in Turkey in ESD through critical media literacy. In *AAEE 20<sup>th</sup> Conference*.

### Book Chapters:

- Alici, S. (2020). The place of ECEfS in the Turkish teacher education system. In S. Elliott, E. Årlemalm-Hagsér & J. Davis, *Researching early childhood education for sustainability: Challenging assumptions and orthodoxies* (pp.192–204). Routledge.
- Alici, S. (in press). Slog through thoughts and find the right way with candle light: Ph.D. In M. Xypaki, M.A. Mejia-Caceres, E. Sinakou, & A. Schwambach (Eds.), *Research journeys of PhD students* (pp. 89–100). Springer.

**Dr. Alici** was awarded her PhD degree in ESD in early childhood education at Middle East Technical University in September 2018. She is currently working as a lecturer in the Elementary and Early Childhood Education Department at Kirsehir Ahi Evran University in Turkey. She has been a creative drama leader since 2016. She conducted several sessions with different participants, from children to adults. She is both co-convenors and social media coordinator of sustainability SIG of European Early Childhood Education Research Association. Her research areas include ESD in ECE, Critical/Media Literacy in ECE, Creative Drama in ECE and Teacher Education in ESD.

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