

Mothers' experiences with a mother–child education programme in five countries

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Although previous quantitative studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of the mother–child education programme (MOCEP) that originated in Turkey in 1993, the study reported here uses a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of mothers' views of the outcomes of the programme. The study was conducted with 100 mothers from five different countries (Turkey, Belgium, Switzerland, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia) and designed to investigate their perceptions of the effects of the programme, and the essential factors in its effectiveness. In-depth interviews were used for data collection. The findings revealed that participant mothers perceived changes in their child's overall development and in the mother–child relationship, and indirect effects in their relationship with the child's father and the father's relationship with the child. Mothers also reported that the group meetings attended by all the mothers, the characteristics of the teacher and the curriculum of the cognitive education programme were important factors in the effectiveness of the programme. The results of the study regarding what mothers experienced and perceived as changes in children and in themselves were similar to the results obtained from previous quantitative research carried out to evaluate MOCEP. The present study, however, provides new information about how the programme works, why the mothers attended the programme and their experiences with their environment regarding the programme.

Keywords: early childhood education; early intervention programme; mother education

Introduction

As is now well understood, the basic building blocks for the child's physical, cognitive, social and emotional development are set in the early years of life, and the family is the principal context in which this development takes place (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Sameroff 1975). A stimulating environment (Coleman 1990), involvement in educationally enhancing activities such as reading and exposure to written materials (Bradley et al. 1994; Pfannenstiel, Seitz, and Zigler 2003) and use of language that is complex in structure and elaborated in content (Hart and Risley 1995) are all considered to be important positive features of family environments that enable children's development. There is ample evidence, however, regarding the negative effects on children's development and educational outcomes of risk factors in the family environment (Engle

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and Black 2008; Murnane 2007). Where family environments lack the positive features identified above, children tend to lag far behind their peers in their overall development (Lamb et al. 2005) and, as exposure to environmental risk factors is cumulative, (Evans 2004), this developmental gap expands in later years (Schweinhart et al. 2005).

The cognitive and social development of children from at-risk environments can be enhanced, and the developmental gap reduced through increased intellectual stimulation and by strengthening the developmentally appropriate characteristics of the environment through intervention programmes (Campbell and Ramey 1994). The shared goal of early intervention programmes for children from at-risk environments is to promote a healthy overall development, which will enable a successful transition to school, and in the long run, to contribute to school adjustment and success. In this article, we discuss new research on mothers' perceptions of a long-standing intervention programme, the mother-child education programme (MOCEP) that has been designed to minimise potential risk factors.

In Turkey in recent years, a consensus has emerged concerning the benefits of early intervention. Numerous studies have demonstrated that at-risk children are more successful at school and adapt better to the society as a result of intervention programmes undertaken in Turkey (Bekman 2007; Kagıtcıbası, Sunar, and Bekman 2001; Kagıtcıbası et al. 2009). In the USA, evaluations of programmes such as High Scope (Schweinhart et al. 2005), the Chicago Longitudinal Study (Reynolds and Ou 2004), the Infant Health and Development Program (McCormick et al. 2006) and the Abecedarian Project (Campbell et al. 2002), also underline the effectiveness of early intervention on later school success and adaptation to school (Blok et al. 2005).

As a result of increased awareness of the impact the environmental context has on development, early childhood intervention programmes now adopt an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Rather than focusing exclusively on the child, the emphasis is on the interrelationships between the child, the family and social support systems (Reynolds 1999). Transactional interpretations of development (Sameroff, 1975) and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) view of the family as a system embedded in a larger ecological framework of systems, constitute the underlying philosophy of intervention programmes, where the goal is to give equal attention to the child and to his/her environment.

Understanding the parents' role in attaining positive child outcomes in the intervention process needs attention, and can be approached from three different aspects: parenting, the home-school relationship and responsibility for learning outcomes (Harvard Family Research Project 2006). A number of studies have examined the contribution of traditional parental involvement activities to the academic development and achievement of children from socially and educationally at-risk groups (Bohon, Macpherson, and Atilas 2005; St Clair and Jackson 2006). Children whose parents were involved in their education were found to perform better in reading and writing (Reutzal, Fawson, and Smith 2006; Senechal 2006) and were better supported in terms of their learning and achievement (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, and Doan Holbein 2005). Chang et al. (2009) studied the effects on children's cognitive outcomes of three different types of parental involvement: parenting classes, group socialisation and parental support groups. All three activities led to increase in parental involvement in language and cognitive stimulation at home, in parental supportiveness and to decrease in parental intrusiveness.

Involvement in intervention programmes can also lead to positive changes for parents as well as children, such as increases in consistent maternal behaviour and maternal

sensitivity (Asscher, Hermanns, and Deković 2008), and a reduction in maternal stress (Conners, Edwards, and Grant 2007). Intervention programmes are known to have positive effects on maternal employment, maternal education, mother–child interaction (Benasich, Brooks-Gunn, and Chu Clewell 1992), maternal competence and parental attitudes and behaviour more generally (Pehrson and Robinson 1990). To date, however, researchers have seldom considered how parents themselves perceive the impact of these programmes on their children’s development, on their own personal growth and family relationships. In this article, we present the findings from a recent study that attempts to address this gap. We present mothers’ narrative accounts of their experiences of the MOCEP in order to understand their perceptions of the programme’s impact and how the programme worked from their point of view.

The mother–child education program

Aim and content

MOCEP targets the child and the child’s immediate environment, especially the mother, rather than the child alone. It reaches out to children of 5- to 6-year olds and their parents. The programme has two main elements: the cognitive education program (CEP) and the mother support program (MSP).

The primary aim of the CEP is to prepare children for school by stimulating pre-literacy and numeracy skills, eye-hand coordination, sensory discrimination, language development, classification, seriation, concept formation (direction, size and place), learning of colours and shapes, problem solving skills and general ability. Eight picture storybooks are used to develop listening comprehension, verbal expression, vocabulary, question–answer activities and reasoning skills. There are 25 workbooks, 20–25 pages each. The workbooks for each week contain various daily exercises that mothers and children will carry over five days. It takes about 15–20 minutes per day to complete the exercises.

The MSP aims to increase the mother’s sensitivity to the child’s cognitive, social and emotional development and to assist her in preparing a home environment that will support the child’s development. It also has the purpose of supporting parents to create a consistent and positive mother–child interaction.

Process

Mothers attend weekly group meetings for 25 weeks in adult education centres, community centres and primary schools. The week’s topic of the MSP is determined in advance, so that teachers are prepared, and discussed during the first hour and a half of each meeting. Some meetings are devoted to discussing the mother’s feelings about being a woman and a mother. Group dynamic techniques are used to support mothers’ active participation. Mothers are encouraged to ask questions, express their opinions and share ideas and experiences.

In the second part of the meeting, mothers are asked to form groups of five or six, and using ‘role play’, they learn the CEP exercises that they will later carry out with their children at home. The whole meeting lasts about three hours and each group consists of 20–25 mothers.

MOCEP is now an international programme and operates in Europe (Belgium, France, Germany and Switzerland), in Saudi Arabia where it employs Turkish with

Turkish immigrant mothers and Arabic with native mothers in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Lebanon. Before its implementation in a particular country, the programme is modified to meet local needs. To date MOCEP has reached about 8000 children and mothers outside Turkey. Mothers with children who meet the age requirement can enrol in the programme by applying to the programme centre in their country.

Staff

The qualifications of staff members who lead the programme show differences within countries. Some are paraprofessionals at a local Non Governmental Organization (NGO), some are Turkish social sciences and psychological guidance teachers sent abroad by the Turkish government and some are adult education teachers. Except in Bahrain, local staff are trained by the Mother-Child Education Foundation (ACEV). In Bahrain, the local partner institution trains the staff.

Previous research to evaluate MOCEP – A longitudinal study taking place over 24 years has been the main quantitative evaluation of the programme to date. This investigation used an experimental design that randomly selected and assigned mothers and children to an intervention or a control group. The immediate effects of the intervention on children were measured just before the termination of the programme. The first follow-up effects were measured seven years after the termination of the programme.

The immediate and the follow-up effects indicated substantial differences between the children and mothers who had and had not attended MOCEP. The performance of children in the trained group exceeded that of the control group on all measures of cognitive, social and emotional development (Bekman 2007; Kagitcibasi, Sunar, and Bekman 2001). Furthermore, mothers who attended the programme formed closer relations with their children and provided a more stimulating environment. There were differences in child-rearing attitudes of the mothers in the control and intervention groups and for mothers in the intervention group their status as the woman within the family improved, as did their powers of decision-making. They also had a more optimistic outlook for their future life (Bekman 2007; Kagitcibasi et al. 2009).

A second follow-up study, carried out 19 years later when the original child participants had reached adulthood, indicated that adults whose parents had attended the programme had more years of education, worked in higher-quality jobs and used computers and credit cards more than adults whose parents had not attended the programme (Kagitcibasi et al. 2009).

A separate evaluation using a quasi-experimental design took place when the programme was implemented at scale throughout Turkey. This measured outcomes immediately after the end of the programme, and one year later, when the children completed their first year of formal schooling (Bekman 1998). The findings of this study were similar to those reported for the longitudinal research.

The five-country study

In this article, we report the first qualitative evaluation of MOCEP and the first evaluation of its international implementation across all five countries where MOCEP was in operation at the time of the study (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Belgium and Bahrain). This new evaluation makes a significant contribution to the knowledge obtained from the previous quantitative evaluations as it allows the voices of the mothers to be

heard. In addition, the evaluation provides new evidence about the transferability of a programme to different contexts in other countries.

Aim and method

The aim of this study was to answer the questions: ‘What are the perceived effects of the programme as reported by the mothers?’ and ‘What are the mothers’ perspectives on what makes the programme work?’ A narrative inquiry method using structured, in-depth interviews was used to explore these questions with mothers who had taken part in the programme.

Participants

One hundred mothers, 20 from each of the five countries, took part in this study. Mothers in Turkey and Bahrain were living in their own country; the mothers in Belgium, Switzerland and Saudi Arabia were Turkish emigrants. Mothers who had completed the programme were invited to attend local meetings that outlined the aims of the research and what was expected out of volunteers. To be included in the sample, mothers had to have participated in and completed MOCEP during the previous two years. Research participants were chosen randomly from mothers who volunteered and who met this criterion. The demographic characteristics of these volunteers were similar to those of the original population.

Characteristics of the participants

Mothers were between 22 and 48 years of age, (mean age, 33 years). Forty-four were high school graduates, 21 were working at the time of the study and 26 had previously worked, but were no longer working. Among the working mothers, 12 were skilled and 9 were unskilled workers.

Fathers’ ages ranged from 28 to 52 years (mean age, 38 years). Forty-seven were high school graduates. Eighty-two were working; 59 were skilled workers and 15 were unskilled and 8 owned their own business. Only two of the families consisted of divorced parents. The children from these families were all seven years old. Forty-five were girls and 55 were boys.

Between country differences in participants’ characteristics

In terms of educational level, the majority of the mothers in Bahrain (65%) and Turkey (60%) were high school graduates, whereas the majority of the mothers in Saudi Arabia (60%) had graduated from primary school (see [Table 1](#)). As [Table 1](#) illustrates, the household size was largest in Bahrain, followed by Saudi Arabia. Most of the mothers in Turkey and Saudi Arabia did not have any work experience.

Procedure

Trained interviewers carried out structured, in-depth interviews in the mothers’ first language, usually in the mother’s home. The interview schedule consisted of 73 open-ended questions designed to investigate mothers’ experiences before joining the MOCEP as well as their experiences during its implementation. Interviews lasted between one-

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants.

Characteristics	Belgium		Switzerland		Bahrain		Turkey		Saudi Arabia	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Can read and write	1	5.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	5.0
Primary school	9	45.0	7	35.0	0	0.0	5	25.0	12	60.0
Middle school	3	15.0	3	15.0	4	20.0	2	10.0	3	15.0
High school	7	35.0	8	40.0	13	65.0	12	60.0	4	20.0
University	0	0.0	2	10.0	3	15.0	1	5.0	0	0.0
Household size	4	20.0	4	20.0	8	40.0	4	20.0	5-6	30.0
Number of children in family	2	10.0	2	10.0	3	15.0	2	10.0	3	15.0
With work experience	11	55.0	12	60.0	12	60.0	7	35.0	5	25.0
No work experience	9	45.0	8	40.0	8	40.0	13	65.0	15	75.0

and-a-half to two hours. Mothers' views on the programme, their experiences of the group process with the teacher and CEP implementations and their views about the information provided were also interrogated. Finally, for mothers living outside Turkey, the interview included questions about the benefits of the programme that were specific to them. The questions were neutral and were designed to elicit accounts of both negative and positive experiences. All interviews were transcribed for analysis. The interviews in Bahrain were translated from Arabic into Turkish. Examples of the interview questions are as follows:

- Do you think that this programme (MOCEP) has affected your life?
- How do you feel about having attended such a programme when you consider all your experiences after participating in the programme?
- Do you believe that your participation in the programme affected your relationship with your child? (If yes) How?
- Have there been differences in your behaviour towards your child after attending the programme?
- If you were able to change certain things in the programme to make it a better one, what would you change?
- You discussed many things in the programme such as how to talk to a child, discipline, nutrition, health, play, toilet training, women's health. What was the topic/information from which you benefited the most?
- What was the topic/information from which you benefited the least?
- What could have been omitted?

Interviewers also kept detailed field notes of observations they made during their interviews with the mothers.

Analysis

Both researchers analysed the interview data using the method of constant comparison and each transcript was read many times until first familiarity was established. Next, significant statements that could answer the research questions were extracted and statements on similar topics were grouped into categories and subcategories (see Table 2). All interview data were then classified according to these categories. Simultaneously, we

Table 2. List of categories and subcategories in the study.

Categories	Subcategories
Perceived direct effects on children	<p>Cognitive development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learned new concepts ● Improved concentration <p>Social development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More social ● Higher self-confidence ● Better organised <p>Physical development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Better small muscle use
Perceived direct effects on mothers	<p>Self-perception</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Perception of motherhood changed ● Felt more conscious about child-rearing practices ● Felt more valuable ● Had more self-confidence ● Felt beneficial <p>Mother-child relationship</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More knowledgeable about child development ● Decreased use of negative discipline methods ● More tolerant and understanding ● Spent more time with the child ● Better communication ● Acted with more awareness ● Spent more time and had closer relationship with the target child ● Had closer relationship with other children
Perceived changes in the father-child relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Had closer relationship with other children
What makes the programme work according to the mothers	<p>The group process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Felt a sense of belonging ● Felt relief and psychological support ● Learned from other people's experiences ● Felt that she was not the only one experiencing problems ● Felt valuable as she was listened to <p>Cognitive education program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Contributed to the child's development ● Helped the child to be more responsible ● Better mother-child relationship ● Mother felt proud of herself <p>Teacher</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Her mastery in implementing the content ● Her personality

also built the analytical framework. This allowed the categories and the subcategories to be further refined.

Finally, a comparative analysis of the data from the five countries was carried out using this framework. Before coding the complete data-set, a sample of 30 interviews was coded independently by two people. Cronbach's alpha measured inter-coder reliability: for all categories and subcategories alphas were greater than 0.80.

Results

The results of the study are presented in response to the main research questions. The 'perceived effects' of the programme are reported first. Perceived *direct* effects are those in line with the original aims and purposes of this programme; perceived *indirect* effects are those that fall outside these aims and purposes. Later in this article, we present the findings concerning 'How and why the programme works'. Mothers' statements are specified by their individual code number and by country (Turkey-tur, Belgium-bel, Switzerland-sw, Saudi Arabia-sar, Bahrain-bah).

Mothers clearly stated that they attended the programme mainly for two reasons: either they wanted to have better parenting skills and be knowledgeable in parenting or they were not happy with how they had been reared.

I thought I might have shortcomings. I realized that thinking 'what I know is enough for me' was wrong. I participated to see my mistakes. to be a better mother and wanted to see what more I could do for my child. (16.sw)

We were raised up in quite different conditions than our kids. However, I want to be a better mother and an understanding mother; I always want to be by their side. Let's help them learn and develop, we have not improved ourselves, we have deficiencies. (1. sar)

Perceived direct effects

Mothers reported that as a result of their participation in MOCEP, they experienced many changes in their children, themselves and the mother-child relationship.

Perceived effects on children

The mothers' statements indicated that they had noticed changes in the social, physical and cognitive development of their child and that he or she had acquired basic cognitive skills that are necessary preparation for starting school. Mothers attributed changes in their child's cognitive functioning, (especially the learning of new concepts and improvements in concentration), to carrying out the CEP activities every day.

Below, above, same, different, he tells the differences himself. He says, 'We are boys, you are girls'. When having dinner, if there is a different glass on the table, he talks about it. These attracted my attention. (5. bah)

The mothers also referred to changes in the social development of the child. They reported that the socio-emotional activities in CEP and the story books improved their child's understanding of other people's emotions and ideas. They reported that their children were more social, had greater self-confidence, and were better organised in their daily lives.

Before the program, when we went somewhere he didn't know, he would cling to me, he would get bored and cry from boredom. Now it is different. When we go somewhere, he sits and talks comfortably, his relationship with his friends is better. He wants to play with his friends. When we go to the park, he asks others to be friends with him. (9.tur)

He learned how to tidy up his toys and sometimes he makes his bed himself. He started to look for a similar responsibility from his sister after realizing his own. (4.sw)

Mothers' statements clearly indicate that the children also underwent some physical changes. For example, by using pencil and scissors in CEP activities, the children developed better control over to their small muscles.

She wouldn't completely color inside the shapes, she learned that. Her eye-hand coordination, so it is called, improved. Drawing properly over the dots and drawing and matching got better. (12. bel)

When all the positive effects on the child were compared across the five countries, Saudi Arabian mothers generated the highest percentage (33.5%), while those in Belgium (9%) had the lowest percentage (see [Table 3](#)). Taking the whole sample into account, the positive effects mentioned most frequently were the subcategories 'learned new concepts' (36%) and 'better small muscle use' (23.5%).

It is evident that mothers felt that they played a vital role in the changes the children experienced. They stated that they paid particular attention to taking the child out, or creating environments where the child could spend time with peers in order to enhance his or her social development and understanding of social rules. Mothers said that as a result of the programme, they read more books to their children, bought more educational games and toys, and gave more importance to activities like theatres and cinemas. Their statements also revealed that they tried to spend more time with their children. They also mentioned being more tolerant of their child's play both inside the home and outside. They believed that the changes they reported in their own behaviour towards their children had an important role in attaining the perceived effects on children.

I used to read him books and ask questions about the book. I asked him questions to understand whether he was listening to me or whether he got the story. I made him think. (8.sar)

We empty the dishwasher together. I believe that he learns while doing that because he separates the forks and the spoons. and tries to figure out how many plates, spoons or napkins he should put. (11.tur)

Perceived effects on mother's self-perception

The most significant change mothers reported related to their perception of motherhood. They considered that they developed greater conscious awareness of the child-rearing practices they implemented with their children after the programme. They reported feeling more valued and more self-confident as women because they were able to contribute to their child's development. These changes were reflected in their future plans, such as the desire to continue their education and to start working.

I now know what to do. I can now make a decision when I am stuck instead of asking for my mother's advice about what to do with my child. (18.tur)

I was very nervous and didn't have any self-confidence. My self-confidence increased. I remembered that I'm also an individual. that I'm me. I can say that I am present. I have learned to value myself. (1.bel)

For example, I wouldn't dare to go to the doctor's at first, fearing about what I would do if something happened, but now I'm more courageous in that matter. (17.sw)

As indicated in [Table 3](#), the category 'Felt more conscious' as a mother of child-rearing practises was mentioned most frequently (36.2%) across the sample. Comparing the five countries, positive effects on the mothers themselves were identified most frequently by mothers in Belgium (23.5%) and Turkey (23%).

Perceived effects on mother-child relationship

Mothers also reported changes in the way they behaved towards their children. They felt that these changes mostly came about as a result of being more knowledgeable about child development after the programme. In particular, mothers mentioned that their use of negative discipline had decreased and said that they had adopted more tolerant and understanding behaviours. Their statements also indicated that they spent more time and had better communication with their children. Mothers stated that these changes in their own behaviour and attitudes created a more harmonious, close and peaceful mother-child relationship.

I am aware that I don't beat them anymore as I used to. My behaviour has changed somewhat. I am still nervous, but not as much as before. I used to beat a lot, but now I talk to them. Before the program, I would beat without asking them anything. (11.bah)

I learned that things could be solved through talking, not through getting angry. I learned the 'I language'. There were disputes with the children. Now we settle things talking and in agreement so he doesn't get angry. I don't get angry. There is no fatigue. The most valuable thing is that your way of speaking changes; you don't resort to violence or punishment anymore. This, in turn, has quite an influence on kids. (11.tur)

I listen so they come and tell me about anything, their sorrow and happiness. We have stronger communication. I guess he was telling me but I wasn't listening. I wasn't paying attention. Now I know about his problems, about who he likes or dislikes. (4.bel)

'Being more tolerant and understanding' and having 'better communication' were mentioned most frequently (25% and 25%, respectively) across the five countries. Saudi Arabia generated the highest percentage of positive perceived effects on the mother-child relationship with 28% (see [Table 3](#)).

Perceived indirect effects

The reported indirect effects of the programme reflect changes that mothers perceived in their behaviour towards their husbands, towards other children in the family and towards the people around them. Changes in their behaviour towards their husbands were reported as causing a difference in marital relationships. 'Better communication and fewer arguments with their husbands' had the most mention in the whole sample (60%).

Table 3. Frequencies and percentage of mothers' responses regarding the subcategories.

	Saudi Arabia		Bahrain		Belgium		Switzerland		Turkey		Total	
	<i>n</i> ^a	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
The child												
Learned new concepts	13	8.7	7	4.7	9	6.0	14	9.4	10	6.7	53	35.6
Improved concentration	1	0.7	3	2.0	1	0.7	4	2.7	1	0.7	10	6.7
More social	7	4.7	4	2.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	1.3	13	8.7
Higher self-confidence	7	4.7	6	4.0	1	0.7	5	3.4	7	4.7	26	17.5
Better organised	6	4.0	1	0.7	1	0.7	1	0.7	3	2.0	12	8.0
Better small muscle use	16	10.7	2	1.3	2	1.3	8	5.4	7	4.7	35	23.5
Total	50	33.5	23	15.4	14	9.4	32	21.6	30	20.1	149	100
Mother's self-perception												
Perception of motherhood changed	7	3.3	4	1.9	9	4.2	7	3.3	8	3.8	35	16.4
Felt more conscious	15	7.0	15	7.0	20	9.4	17	8.0	10	4.7	77	36.2
Felt more valuable	11	5.2	9	4.2	8	3.8	1	0.5	13	6.1	42	19.7
Had more self-confidence	6	2.8	6	2.8	12	5.6	6	2.8	15	7.0	45	21.1
Felt beneficial	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.5	10	4.7	3	1.4	14	6.6
Total	39	18.3	34	15.9	50	23.5	41	19.3	49	23	213	100
Mother-child relationship												
More knowledgeable about child development	10	3.9	5	2	9	3.5	10	3.9	4	1.6	38	15.0
Decreased use of negative discipline methods	13	5.1	12	4.7	8	3.1	7	2.8	8	3.1	48	18.9
More tolerant and understanding	20	7.9	13	5.1	5	2.0	14	5.5	12	4.7	64	25.2
Spent more time	11	4.3	7	2.8	6	2.4	12	4.7	5	2.0	41	16.1
Better communication	18	7.1	8	3.1	12	4.7	11	4.3	14	5.5	63	24.8
Total	72	28.3	45	17.7	40	15.7	54	21.2	43	16.9	254	100
Father-child relationship												
Acted with more awareness	7	9.2	4	5.3	4	5.3	7	9.2	8	10.5	30	39.5
Spent more time and had closer relationship with the target child	11	14.5	9	11.8	7	9.2	7	9.2	8	10.5	42	55.3
Had closer relationship with other children	1	1.3	0	0.0	1	1.3	0	0.0	2	2.6	4	5.2
Total	19	25	13	17.1	12	15.8	14	18.4	18	23.6	76	100
Group process												
Felt a sense of belonging	17	7.9	14	6.5	13	6.0	5	2.3	10	4.6	59	27.3

Table 3 (Continued)

	Saudi Arabia		Bahrain		Belgium		Switzerland		Turkey		Total	
	<i>n</i> ^a	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Felt relief and psychological support	7	3.2	7	3.2	8	3.7	7	3.2	6	2.8	35	16.2
Learned from other people's experiences	18	8.3	18	8.3	18	8.3	17	7.9	14	6.5	85	39.3
Felt that she was not the only one	8	3.7	5	2.3	5	2.3	6	2.8	5	2.3	29	13.5
Felt valuable as she was listened to	1	0.5	0	0.0	3	1.4	1	0.5	3	1.4	8	3.7
Total	51	23.6	44	20.3	47	21.7	36	16.7	38	17.6	216	100
Cognitive education programme												
Contributed to the child's development	9	5.7	5	3.2	7	4.4	9	5.7	13	8.2	43	27.2
Helped the child to be more responsible	3	1.9	2	1.3	3	1.9	5	3.2	8	5.1	21	13.3
Better mother-child relationship	18	11.4	16	10.1	17	10.8	15	9.5	7	4.4	73	46.2
Mother felt proud of herself	14	8.8	0	0.0	7	4.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	21	13.3
Total	44	27.8	23	14.6	34	21.5	29	18.4	28	17.7	158	100
Teacher												
Her mastery in implementing the content	19	13.1	17	11.7	19	13.1	2	1.4	7	4.8	64	44.1
Her personality	20	13.8	17	11.7	19	13.1	16	11.0	9	6.2	81	55.9
Total	39	26.9	34	23.4	38	26.2	18	12.4	16	.0	145	100

^aAs 20 mothers in each country were interviewed, '*n*' equals the number of times a particular subcategory was mentioned in the interviews rather than the number of mothers, as some mothers mentioned more than one subcategory in any one main category. Thus, column totals for each country represent the number of times a category was mentioned, summed across its subcategories. Row totals represent the number of times each subcategory was mentioned, summed across countries. Overall column percentages were calculated by dividing the total number of mentions per category by each country by the total number of mentions category summed across all countries. Row percentages were calculated by dividing the total number of mentions for each subcategory, summed across countries, by the total number of mentions per category.

I used to hesitate to talk, to express myself. But now I feel comfortable telling what I like and what I don't like. It is like a routine. You could be working, but I am tired, as well. I have my own responsibilities as much as you. So, I tell him that he is responsible for that. (15.sar)

I have become more patient as a spouse. For example, I would quarrel a lot with my husband because of the children's stress, we used to dispute all the time. He was nervous, I was nervous, but it has changed. For example, I am more relaxed toward him. (12.tur)

I am sure that love and respect between me and my husband increased. The more you explain things to the other person, the more he respects you. (9.sw)

Mothers also indicated that their behaviour towards relatives and friends had changed and they had become more tolerant and more understanding. They were able to express themselves better and to state their demands and ideas. In addition, mothers said that they discussed what they had learned in the programme with the people around them and made photocopies of the handouts and distributed them to friends, neighbours and relatives. Sometimes they found solutions to their friends' problems by applying what they had learned in the programme.

I am talking about patience; your attitude toward people changes, it can be your child, your spouse or others around. (12.sw)

When my friends wanted to come over and when my child had to study, I couldn't tell them that I wasn't available, thinking that they might be hurt. Now, I tell them that my child has an exam or has to study so I am not available that day. (9.sar)

In addition, mothers also perceived changes in the fathers' behaviour and attitudes that brought about changes in family relationships. Fathers were reported to have closer relationships both with the target child and with other children in the family.

He didn't use to share much with the kids. When he came from work, he used to watch television, a football match or a program he liked and didn't spend much time with the children. But now he can turn off the television when necessary and take care of them. (2.sar)

He has started showing more of what he has done to his father, the pictures or his writings. He has been sharing more with his father. Now he can show whatever he has done easily to his father, talk to him about his problems. The program has a part in that. (4.sw)

Having a better relationship with the target child had higher mention (55%) than a better relationship with other children (5%) in the category, 'Perceived positive effects on the father-child relationship'. Across the five countries, the percentage of positive perceived effects on fathers was highest in Turkey (24%) and Saudi Arabia (25%) (see [Table 3](#)).

In their interviews, mothers revealed that a change in the fathers was possible when they shared and applied what they had learned with their husbands. Specifically, they mentioned that sharing handouts distributed during the programme with their husbands made a major contribution to change in fathers.

I kept talking to my husband in the 'I' language. I kept talking and telling him about what we did at the meetings. He also read the handouts and was influenced by them. (13.tur)

Mothers' views on what makes the programme work

A major question for this study was 'What are the mothers' perspectives on what makes the programme work?' in other words, what did they attribute as causing positive changes to their children and themselves? Accordingly, the interview data were analysed further to identify what brought about the reported changes.

Mothers mentioned components of MOCEP, the MSP group process, the CEP and the teacher as the main factors contributing to positive change. The content of the information given and the successful implementation of the programme were also perceived to have a positive influence.

Group process

The mothers reported that during the group process they felt a sense of belonging to the group, felt relief and psychological support through sharing, and that they learned from other people's experiences.

We used to talk about children, everything about ourselves as women, even sexuality. We started talking about things that we couldn't with others because there was no shame here. You can't go and tell a psychologist you don't know about everything; they wouldn't understand because they are foreigners. This program has been such a relief for me. (18.bel)

During the meetings, everyone had experiences, they coped with stubborn children, and that affected me. I heard and benefited from their comments and points of view. I tried to practice what I had learned. We were sitting and talking about our problems. Solutions came up; everyone implemented those and commented on them. We benefited; it had a positive effect on us. (10.bah)

The mother's statement below revealed that when she listened to other mothers in the group meetings, she felt that she was not alone and realised that she was not the only one experiencing these problems.

You see that it's not only between you and your child; you are not alone in that. There are others and they try out different methods to solve this problem. As I said before, you find a new way for the things you can do about education and so you return home more satisfied. This becomes a new reason to attend the program. (8.sw)

In addition, mothers also indicated that they felt valued as all the other mothers listened to them and that equal importance was given to each participant in the group. Their statements clearly indicated that this helped them enjoy the group process.

Our teacher was letting all of us talk, we were all telling our opinions and you feel that you are valued there. (4.bel)

If we hadn't had that environment, if it had been like a seminar where the teacher did all the talking, it wouldn't have meant anything for me. When I talk and share about a topic, I can internalize it. That's how I believe, I should talk, I should think as well. Just talking and letting people go without thinking is not useful. (15.sar)

When the contribution of the group process to the perceived effects was examined across the whole sample, 'Learned from other people's experiences' was the most pronounced (39%) subcategory. Saudi Arabia (24%) and Belgium (22%) mentioned the contribution

of the group process to the perceived positive effects to a greater extent than other countries.

CEP

Although the activities of the CEP focused directly on the child's development, mothers' statements indicated that working on the CEP together with their child contributed to personal change. The CEP was perceived as a context that not only allows the mother to work with her child, but also to follow her child and find out what she/he knows or needs to know.

I had great pleasure while studying the CEPs with him because I was teaching him something. I did it myself; we did it together with my husband. There was a lot of effort and the more the effort, the more the love. (8.sar)

It was clear from their statements that the implementation of these activities taught mothers new methods to use with their children. This had given them more confidence in themselves as the CEP activities also provided guidance about how to help their children in the future.

After attending the program, I learned about what was given and what could be taught to the child and how they were taught actually, so that I should teach it the same way. (13.sar)

The mothers reported that they felt proud, as they had contributed to their child's development through the CEP activities. They also commented that their children now perceived them differently and had more confidence in their mother as they realised that she was more knowledgeable and could also teach them.

She has more confidence in me, her perspective has changed. She thinks, 'My mom can do it'. It has been so gratifying, we have come closer. (14.tur)

Considering the contribution of subcategories in the CEP category, 'CEP affected the mother-child relationship positively' received the most mention (46%) across the five countries. As [Table 3](#) illustrates, between the five countries, the perceived benefits of the CEP was highest in Saudi Arabia (28%) and Belgium (21.5%), and lowest in Bahrain (15%).

Teacher

Mothers reported that interaction and communication with their MSP teacher was an important change factor.

She did not act like a teacher; she was more like a sincere, true friend. She created confidence in herself at first because she gave examples of herself and she criticized herself. She listened to you and tried to find a solution accordingly. You felt that she wanted the best for you and that you could trust her. (17.sw)

Mothers reported that their teacher's competency and mastery of the content and delivery of the programme, her personal characteristics, her communication style and being a good

role model led to an effective group process and motivated them to use their new knowledge.

She described things well; her explanations were clear. I could really understand her explanations. There is one thing I am certain, she was very knowledgeable. She was sincere. (14.sar)

Her patience and punctuality affected me considerably. She was my role model. (1.bah)

In this category, the majority of mothers mentioned the two subcategories, ‘teacher’s personality and her communication style’ (56%) and ‘the teacher’s mastery in implementing the content’ (44%) as one of the most important contributions of the programme (see [Table 3](#)).

Finally, both before the programme and during its implementation, mothers said that they had received both positive and negative feedbacks from their spouses and other acquaintances. When asked about how much they were influenced by other people’s negative reactions, mothers indicated that these had not had a negative effect. Their own decisions were more important to them than other people’s reactions, as they believed that what they were doing would be beneficial for their child.

I did not take them seriously; my decision was important. I didn’t care about what they thought. I was thinking. ‘I will continue going there no matter what they think’. (3.bel)

Negative reactions did not affect me much because I knew that MOCEP would be good for my children. I continued despite negative reactions. (20.sw)

Mothers clearly indicated that the instrumental and emotional support they received from their spouse and other people around was important for the success of the programme. There were, however, mothers who reported that they had not received any sort of support during the programme either from their spouse or their friends. Nevertheless, these mothers stated that they had continued the programme.

Discussion

The findings reported above describe how mothers perceived the effects of the programme on their children’s social, cognitive and physical development. The mothers we interviewed believe that they have brought about a substantial change in their child’s development by creating a developmentally supportive environment. The perceived changes they observed in their children’s development as a result of the programme were similar to those identified in evaluations of other intervention programmes (Blok et al. 2005; Campbell et al. 2002; Reynolds and Ou 2004; Schweinhart et al. 2005). The study’s findings offer additional confirmation of the contribution made by mother’s involvement in intervention programmes to the development of their children (Bohon, Macpherson, and Atilas 2005; Senechal 2006; St Clair and Jackson 2006).

The changes the mothers mentioned concerning their self-perceptions were also similar to those obtained by other researchers (Asscher, Hermanns, and Deković 2008; Conners, Edwards, and Grant 2007). Such changes deserve more attention than they get currently as they indicate how a change in the immediate context of a child can play a crucial role in his/her development. Concerning why mothers were motivated to enter the programme, our findings indicated that they entered because they wanted to raise their

children differently and become better equipped for parenting. Their self-reports indicated that despite receiving negative reactions and feedback from others both before and during their participation in the programme, they continued to attend and remained motivated.

Our analysis also indicated that there were perceived indirect effects on both mothers and fathers. The mothers stated that they had better communication and fewer arguments with their husbands after attending the programme. This was reported as a mutual change. Fathers were also reported to have closer relationships especially with the target child as well as other children in the family. We identified these as indirect effects because the programme did not aim to change the relationship between mothers and fathers or between fathers and children. The mother seemed to play a key role in promoting these indirect changes. A reasonable explanation of these indirect effects might be that the changes taking place in the mother led her to influence the father to change.

Mothers considered the group context to be the most influential factor in promoting the changes they perceived in themselves. They stated that the group process allowed them to appreciate that they had a lot in common with other mothers in the group, and that they were not alone in experiencing certain problems. The group process allowed mothers to experience collective decision-making and solution generation through group discussion. They experienced being treated as equals as well as being listened to and deemed valuable. They were able to share stories about their lives and make friends. For these mothers, the group process was perceived as becoming a part of a social milieu. These various experiences led to a sense of belonging and a sense of being valued that lessened the mothers' feelings of being alone. Finally, the group process was perceived as providing relief and psychological support.

Mothers reported that their experiences with the teacher in the group were a critical factor for the effectiveness of the group process. The way the teacher implemented the programme, her personality and the role model she provided meant that mothers regarded her as playing a pivotal role in how they used the information they received, and in promoting the changes they perceived.

The implementation of the CEP allowed the mother to work and spend time with her child. Teaching him/her certain skills led her to experience a sense of responsibility and a feeling of being useful to the child. Parents reported that this experience helped them to get to know their child better and allowed them to use new, more effective learning methods with their child. The positive changes mothers observed in their child during this process, and his/her regard of the mother as a 'teacher' were also reported as important for increasing her confidence and in creating a feeling of 'I can teach'.

The findings reported above have implications for further implementations of MOCEP and for other parenting programmes as they demonstrate that such programmes need to include components both for the child and for the parents. Our results show that it is vitally important that parents should share certain activities and spend time with their children within the context of the programme. Similarly, mothers regard the group process that allows the sharing of knowledge and personal experience as centrally important for promoting the changes they perceived in themselves, underlining the necessity of including group process in such programmes. This study also revealed the importance of the teacher's skills and personality characteristics for the programme to achieve its aim and meet parents' needs. It is the teacher who makes the group process a nurturing experience for the participants.

There was a considerable similarity between the five countries regarding the subcategories of perceived direct and indirect effects that were mentioned most frequently. There were, however, some differences. For example, mothers in Saudi

Arabia were most likely to mention effects identified as important (i.e. subcategories with the highest percentages). The differences obtained across countries could be due to mothers' educational level, existing opportunities for children's education and development of children in the immediate locality, and the amount of contact the mothers have with the outside world. Our findings indicate that mothers with less education, such as those in Saudi Arabia, less contact with the outside world and fewer local opportunities for their children's development were most likely to identify perceived changes in the subcategories with the highest percentages.

The majority of the mothers in Bahrain and Belgium said that they lived with extended families and therefore had difficulties in practising the programme. Nevertheless, the group meetings were a means of social support for the mothers in Belgium as they had a strenuous home life, and for those in Bahrain the meetings helped them alleviate stress.

In all five countries, all the mothers we interviewed mentioned perceived changes related to their child's development. However, for other categories (mother's self-perception, mother-child relationship, father-child relationship, group process, teacher, CEP) one or two mothers reported no change although we did not observe any particular trends in the 'no change' responses.

Compared to mothers in other countries, those in Switzerland and Belgium raised different issues: they said that CEP implementations helped to change prejudiced feelings directed towards their children at school as the exercises supported children cognitively. Moreover, the activities were perceived to be helpful in supporting the child's mother tongue, Turkish. Mothers in Europe also mentioned that the programme helped them to understand and adopt the child-rearing practices of the country where they lived and also helped their own adaptation.

The target populations in Belgium, Saudi Arabia and Switzerland were similar to the original target population of the programme: they were all Turkish people even though they lived in different cultural contexts (Europe and Saudi Arabia). In Bahrain although there were some similarities, the mothers were native to the country and spoke Arabic.

Programme transfer can take different forms: adoption, adaptation or assembly (van de Vijver and Poortinga 2005). In most countries, transfer takes the form of 'adoption' where the programme, remains close to its original or 'adaptation' where there is a direct transfer of some programme elements with others being changed or replaced. In a very few countries, new development of major parts is undertaken resulting in 'assembly'. The form of transfer has been identified as an important element for programme success and sustainability. If transfer takes the form of assembly and the implementation is long term, (as happened with MOCEP programmes in Belgium-Gent and Bahrain), the institution which transfers and implements the programme in a country is as important as the form for a successful transfer. This institution is likely to plan and actualise the best transfer since they know the transfer culture best. The partnership between the institutions of original and transfer culture need to be close, however, in order to ensure that the programme is applied effectively.

When policy impact was considered, MOCEP has been transformational in two complementary ways in Turkey; expanding the narrow definition of formal, centre-based preschool education model to include home-based models. Parallel to this, in 2009, the Ministry of National Education initiated the development of a National Family Education Program, based largely on the methodology and approach of MOCEP, hence institutionalising MOCEP as a national policy. As such MOCEP stands as one of the most successful

examples of sustainable collaboration between a non-governmental organisation and the Turkish state, whereas in Saudi Arabia, the implementation of MOCEP with native people played an important role in introducing a new model of early childhood education in the country.

There are certain limitations to this study, which need to be mentioned. First, as interview and field notes were the only research methods, triangulation was not possible. Additional methods would have allowed us to cross-check the information and gain a more complete picture. It would have been ideal to select the sample from a larger population than the one used in the study. Finally, as the sample size and data-set was large, a standard qualitative software program would have assisted the analysis.

The findings reported here are in line with results obtained previously for quantitative evaluations of MOCEP. The present study provided important new qualitative information particularly about how the programme works for mothers, their motivations for taking part, and how they perceived the changes in themselves, their children and their environment that could be attributed to the programme. The results support the argument that intervention programmes based on an ecological approach play a key role in children's development by strengthening the immediate environment of the child and reducing potential risk factors.

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