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MEETING THE PAST IN THE CITY: PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES WITH HISTORICAL SITES IN IZMIR, TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood is marked by an active, continuous effort to interpret and make sense of the people, spaces, and material objects that populate children's daily environments. By intentionally scaffolding their interactions with the historical and cultural landmarks around them, educators can help young learners cultivate a deeper sense of place and a more grounded understanding of their wider community. To explore this dynamic, the current study was carried out within a public kindergarten situated in İzmir, Turkey, spanning the 2018–2019 academic year. The research involved eleven preschool teachers who participated in focus group interviews concerning historical education in early childhood, and eleven children aged 48–66 months who took part in six visits to local heritage sites, including the Smyrna Mound, the Ancient Agora, and the Asansör. These visits were supported through storytelling, drama activities, guided discussions, and play-based experiences. The teachers reported that although outdoor activities were a regular part of their practice, historical heritage and urban history were rarely addressed as educational topics. Many also stated that they lacked the knowledge and resources needed to plan heritage-based learning experiences. Observations and interviews with the children indicated that participation in the site visits contributed to their understanding of the city's past. The children were able to discuss changes over time, explain the possible purposes of historical structures, and relate elements of İzmir's history to places and experiences familiar to them. The findings suggest that heritage-focused experiences can be meaningfully incorporated into early childhood education and highlight the need for greater attention to urban history and cultural heritage in teacher preparation and curriculum development.

Keywords: early childhood education, historical consciousness, place-based learning, urban heritage, citizenship education, qualitative research, Turkey

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INTRODUCTION

Children begin to explore and interpret their surroundings from an early age. Through everyday interactions with people, places, and objects, they gradually develop ideas about how their environment functions and how they relate to it. In addition to supporting cognitive development, these experiences contribute to children's understanding of the communities in which they live. Learning about the historical and cultural characteristics of local environments may help children develop a sense of belonging and an awareness of their place within a wider social context (Mindes 2005; Seefeldt, Castle, and Falconer 2014).

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to the role of history, geography, and citizenship-related learning in early childhood education. In the United States, multiple state early childhood frameworks—most notably those implemented in Massachusetts, California, and North Carolina—actively integrate competencies tied to concepts of time, historical continuity, societal change, community, and place (Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework [MHSSCF] 2003). By contrast, the preschool curriculum outlined by the Ministry of National Education in Turkey (2013) allocates minimal attention to outcomes associated with historical learning. Consequently, explicit structural pathways enabling young learners to systematically investigate the history of their immediate city or region remain notably absent from this national overarching framework (Aktin and Dilek 2014).

Academic inquiries across varied educational landscapes indicate that early childhood learners possess the cognitive capacity to interpret historical concepts when these are introduced via developmentally tailored experiences. Research centered on museum pedagogy (Aktin 2017), sociocultural instructional activities (Coşkun Keskin and Daysal Ersay 2012; Coşkun Keskin, Keskin, and Kirtel 2019), and place-based educational models (Huang and Chang 2017) consistently demonstrates that children can discern distinctions between the past and present, deliberate on historical evolution, and forge meaningful attachments to heritage structures and cultural spaces. Collectively, these insights directly contest the traditional assumption that historical education should be strictly deferred to older age groups.

The urban fabric of İzmir offers an exceptionally fertile ground for investigating these developmental dynamics. Boasting an expansive and multicultural lineage, the city preserves tangible cultural and historical vestiges spanning the Bronze Age, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman eras. Because many of these historic locales are embedded directly within the modern cityscape, they provide prime avenues for experiential, direct learning. Yet, despite this immense regional potential, documented evidence of systematic, heritage-focused pedagogical initiatives tailored for preschool cohorts remains scarce both within İzmir and across the broader Turkish educational sector.

Positioned within this context, this investigation examined the ways in which early childhood educators and their students interface with historical learning inside an urban environment. Two central questions guided the inquiry:

What current practices and underlying perspectives do preschool teachers maintain regarding outdoor learning, urban consciousness, and the integration of history within early childhood education?

How do preschool children conceptualize and articulate their interpretations of İzmir's historical landmarks following their participation in a structured, place-based learning initiative?

Literature Review

History and Social Studies in Early Childhood Education

For many years, researchers questioned whether young children could understand historical concepts. Because history involves ideas such as time, past events, and evidence from sources that are no longer directly observable, it was often assumed that meaningful historical thinking would emerge only after the beginning of formal schooling. Mindes (2005), however, argued that young children continuously seek to understand the social and physical worlds around them. From an early age, they develop ideas about people, places, communities, and change over time, laying the foundations for later social studies learning.

Subsequent research has provided further support for this view. Cooper (2018) found that children as young as three and four years of age can engage with historical artefacts and discuss aspects of the past when learning experiences are carefully planned and supported. Similarly, Seefeldt, Castle, and Falconer (2014) emphasised the importance of introducing concepts related to time, continuity, and change during the early years. According to these authors, opportunities to explore personal histories, family experiences, and changes within communities can help children develop an emerging understanding of the relationship between past and present. In the Turkish context, Aktın and Dilek (2014) conducted a comparative analysis of preschool social studies curricula in three US states and concluded that the Turkish curriculum fell well short of international comparators. Coşkun Keskin and Daysal Ersay (2012) similarly concluded, on the basis of a classroom investigation using Mimar Sinan as a focal figure, that young children were capable of grasping sociocultural and historical concepts. A later study by Coşkun Keskin, Keskin, and Kirtel (2019), focusing on the Gallipoli campaign, found that six-year-olds could demonstrate historical empathy, temporal understanding, and imaginative engagement with past events.

Place-Based Education and Heritage Learning Place-based education (PBE) holds that the local environment – in all its physical, social, cultural, and historical dimensions – constitutes a primary site of learning (Gruenewald 2003; Sobel 2004). Rather than treating knowledge as something to be imported into the classroom, PBE positions the learner's surroundings as curriculum resource and local engagement as pedagogical method. Heritage sites provide opportunities for children to encounter the physical remains of the past within their everyday environment. Unlike photographs, books, or classroom discussions, these places allow children to

observe historical structures, objects, and spaces directly. Such experiences may help children connect abstract historical concepts with tangible features of the environment and support their understanding of continuity and change over time.

Research has highlighted the educational value of heritage-based learning. Huang and Chang (2017), for example, found that place-based activities conducted in a historic town in Taiwan were effective in strengthening children's sense of place and increasing their awareness of local communities. Similar findings have been reported in studies involving younger children. Aktın (2017) showed that museum visits designed for five- and six-year-old children contributed to the development of early historical understanding. In Turkey, the project Journey to Our Cultural Heritage in Small Steps implemented by the İzmir Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism (2015) sought to introduce young children to local museums and cultural heritage resources. Such initiatives reflect a growing interest in heritage education during the preschool years.

Place, Play, and Pedagogy

One of the main challenges in early childhood historical education is helping children engage with people, events, and places that belong to the past. For this reason, researchers have emphasised the importance of active and play-based learning approaches. The concept of edutainment, which combines educational goals with enjoyable learning experiences (Anikina and Yakimenko 2015), has been identified as particularly relevant for young children. Rusman, Ismail, and Jaafar (2019) suggested that location-based edutainment can increase children's participation and engagement in learning activities.

Drama, storytelling, role-play, and imaginative play are frequently recommended as effective approaches for introducing historical concepts in early childhood settings. These methods allow children to explore different perspectives, make connections between past and present, and engage with historical content in developmentally appropriate ways (Cooper 2018).

Within the Turkish context, Sönmez, Ertaş, and Sadıklar (2018) emphasised that learning about the history and architecture of the city in which children live may contribute to both personal development and civic awareness. Despite the historical and cultural richness of many Turkish cities, opportunities for preschool children to participate in structured heritage-based learning experiences remain limited. The present study was developed in response to this need and examined how a place-based educational programme could support preschool children's engagement with the historical heritage of İzmir.

Methodology

Research Design and Theoretical Framework

This study was conducted within a qualitative interpretive framework (Creswell and Poth 2018; Denzin and Lincoln 2018). The research consisted of two interconnected components. The first focused on preschool teachers and used focus group interviews to explore their experiences, practices, and views regarding outdoor

learning, historical education, and urban awareness. Focus groups were selected because they allow participants to discuss ideas collectively and to respond to one another's experiences (Kitzinger 1995; Morgan 1997).

The second component focused on children and was informed by principles of participatory action research (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). Researchers and teachers worked together to plan and implement a series of heritage-based learning experiences. At the same time, children's responses, interactions, and developing understandings were documented throughout the process. The study aimed to generate an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences rather than findings intended for statistical generalisation.

Three theoretical perspectives informed the design of the study. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory guided the planning of adult support and learning activities during site visits, particularly through the concepts of mediated learning and the zone of proximal development. Place-based education (Gruenewald 2003; Sobel 2004) provided the rationale for using local historical sites as learning environments. In addition, frameworks related to historical thinking in early childhood (Cooper 2018; Seixas and Morton 2013) informed the analysis of children's developing understandings of time, change, continuity, and the past.

METHOD

Fieldwork for this investigation spanned the 2018–2019 academic year, centered within a state-funded independent kindergarten (*bağımsız anaokulu*) in İzmir, Turkey. Operating under the guidelines of the Turkish Ministry of National Education Preschool Education Curriculum (2013), the institution accommodated a socioeconomically diverse student body. The campus infrastructure featured a playground, dedicated green outdoor areas, and a mud kitchen-assets that teachers routinely leveraged to imbed outdoor activities into the daily educational curriculum. These unique institutional traits provided an ideal environment for operationalizing a study anchored in place-based learning principles.

The choice of İzmir as the overarching research setting was dictated by its exceptionally dense historical and cultural fabric. The modern city encapsulates visible archaeological and historical landmarks originating from multiple successive epochs, spanning the Bronze Age, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman eras. Both the physical accessibility and structural diversity of these urban heritage locations created optimal conditions for young children to experience unmediated, direct contact with local history through a structured educational framework.

Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who could provide relevant insights into preschool education practices and experiences related to the focus of the study (Patton 2015). The teacher sample consisted of eleven certified preschool teachers ($n = 11$) employed at the participating kindergarten. All teachers took part in the focus group discussions. All held undergraduate qualifications in early childhood education. A single reception class of 24 children aged 48–66 months was designated as the intervention group. Following

distribution of consent forms to families, eleven children (n = 11, six girls and five boys) whose guardians provided written authorisation were enrolled. This sample size is commensurate with the norms of qualitative inquiry with young children, where relational depth and richness of individual data are prioritised over numerical breadth (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Merriam and Tisdell 2016). Across the six site visits, thematic saturation was reached, with later sessions generating no substantially new conceptual material. Participants are identified using alphanumeric codes (K1–K11 for teachers; Ç1–Ç11 for children) throughout.

Table 1: Profile of Teacher Participants (n = 11)

Code	Shift	Qualification	Experience	Age Group
K1	Morning	B.Sc. Early Childhood Education	6-10 years	48-66 months
K2-K6	Morning	B.Sc. Early Childhood Education	Varied	48-66 months
K7-K11	Afternoon	B.Sc. Early Childhood Education	Varied	48-66 months

Note. All codes are pseudonyms assigned to protect confidentiality. Precise years-of-experience data were not systematically collected.

Educational Intervention

Prior to the child data-collection phase, the research team developed a structured programme entitled ‘A Journey Through the Urban History of İzmir’, aligned with the MoNE 2013 curriculum and grounded in place-based education principles, developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC 2009), and an edutainment orientation (Anikina and Yakimenko 2015; Rusman, Ismail, and Jaafar 2019). Six visits to heritage sites were arranged in broadly chronological order to support temporal coherence. Each visit lasted approximately 90 minutes and was facilitated by the classroom teacher (K4) and members of the research team. One researcher, who had previously studied the history of the sites included in the programme, provided information and guided the activities conducted during the visits. Drama, storytelling, and structured play were integrated into each session.

Table 2.Heritage Site Visit Programme

Visit	Site	Historical period	Core pedagogical activities
1	Smyrna Mound (Bayraklı Höyük)	Bronze Age–Archaic	Guided exploration, dramatic role-play, representational drawing
2	Ancient Agora	Hellenistic–Roman	Dramatisation of marketplace activity, artefact observation
3	Kadifekale (Pagos Hill)	Hellenistic–Ottoman	Rampart observation, narrative storytelling; informal mapping
4	Kızlaragiası Hanı	Ottoman (18th c.)	Role-play, sensory exploration, guided questioning
5	Hisar Mosque	Ottoman (17th c.)	Architectural observation, comparative discussion
6	Historic Elevator (Asansör)	Late Ottoman (1907)	Historical narrative, post-visit drawing, group evaluation

Note. Each visit lasted approximately 90 minutes, during which pedagogical activities were continuously embedded within the planned experiences.

Data Collection

Teacher focus group interviews

Two separate focus group sessions were scheduled on alternate days, splitting participants into a morning cohort (K1–K6) and an afternoon cohort (K7–K11). Conducted within private meeting rooms on the school grounds, each session spanned roughly 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the explicit consent of those involved. The underlying protocol relied on twelve open-ended questions mapped across four distinct thematic areas: the routine deployment of outdoor and off-site learning; how educators perceive the value of out-of-classroom experiences; professional insights into fostering urban awareness among young learners; and current versus envisioned practices tying historical dimensions to urban education. Throughout the discussions, the researcher utilized verbal summaries and targeted probes to prompt deeper elaboration and validate interpretations of the participants' input (Morgan 1997). Every recording was subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Child interviews and drawing elicitation

Data collection involving the children relied on a two-tiered interview framework, conducted either individually or within small, collaborative groupings of two or three peers. Executed before the field trip, Phase One utilized unstructured, conversational prompts to chart the children's existing baseline knowledge of the selected site. Once the excursion concluded, Phase Two turned its attention toward capturing raw experiential recollections, immediate emotional responses, and budding historical insights. Every interaction was audio-recorded and subsequently underwent full verbatim transcription. Upon concluding each site visit, the participants were prompted to produce an illustrative drawing representing their personal experience. Prioritizing artwork as a core data medium stems from its role as a developmentally optimized mode of expression, revealing young children's cognitive structures and affective outlooks in ways that conventional verbal exchanges frequently overlook (Ainsworth and Eaton 2010; Dockett and Perry 2005). As soon as the drawings were finalized, the children provided oral narrations of their work, allowing researchers to link these spoken descriptions directly to the corresponding images. Simultaneously, a designated research team member maintained structured observational field notes throughout the duration of each field excursion.

Data Analysis

Data Analysis and Interpretive Framework

The dataset-comprising interview transcripts, children's drawing narrations, and observational field notes-was interrogated using the reflexive thematic analysis methodology articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This interpretive tool was adopted specifically for its adaptability when handling heterogeneous data streams and its capacity to construct analyst-driven themes derived from the empirical material as a whole. Rather than executing a rigid linear progression, the analytical journey moved dynamically through six established phases: deep immersion for data familiarization, systematic initial coding, candidate theme generation, recursive

evaluation of thematic clusters, and the final definition and naming of core themes. This sequence culminated in the creation of comprehensive analytical narratives that seamlessly embedded illustrative participant excerpts. Concurrently, the children's drawings were evaluated through a hybridized framework merging formal content analysis-targeting scale, architectural accuracy, spatial configuration, color choices, and human presence-with a narrative analysis of the children's corresponding oral accounts. Each visual artifact was systematically cross-referenced with a coding matrix rooted in historical thinking scholarship (Cooper 2018; Seixas and Morton 2013), tracking four primary domains: material and structural representation, temporal framing, socio-cultural dimensions, and affective resonance.

Analytical Rigor and Reliability

To fortify the trustworthiness of these qualitative findings, an external researcher blindly coded a randomized 20% sub-sample of the complete dataset. The initial baseline for inter-coder agreement was computed using Cohen's kappa (κ), demonstrating a substantial alignment of $\kappa = 0.71$ based on Landis and Koch's (1977) conventional criteria. Divergent interpretations were subsequently unpacked and reconciled through deliberative consensus dialogues. This iterative peer debriefing ultimately elevated the final inter-coder reliability metric to $\kappa = 0.84$, a score that sits well above the standard empirical thresholds established for robust interpretive consensus.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

The study aligned its validation strategies with the four foundational criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure overall trustworthiness. Credibility was reinforced through sustained field presence across six site visits, methodological triangulation, and informal member-checking conducted during post-visit group discussions with the children. Transferability relies on the thick contextual descriptions provided throughout the text. For dependability, the study utilized a comprehensive audit trail paired with the rigorous intercoder reliability protocol outlined above. Confirmability was systematically addressed by collecting reflexivity statements from the entire research team and maintaining a deliberate focus on contradictory or negative cases during analysis.

This research was conducted with support from Ege University's Scientific Research Projects Coordination Unit (Project No: SGA2019-20300). Prior to initiating data collection, the research team obtained written informed consent from the school principal, the district education authority, all involved teachers, and the children's legal guardians. Before starting any session, the team also gathered verbal assent from the children using accessible, age-appropriate explanations. All raw data was stripped of identifying information and converted into alphanumeric codes before analysis. Lastly, any photographs printed in this study have been systematically cropped or masked to safeguard the children's identities.

FINDINGS

Teachers' Perspectives on Out-of-Classroom and Historical Education

Outdoor activities in daily practice

All eleven interviewed educators verified that outdoor learning serves as a regular component of their day-to-day teaching routines. Within the school boundaries, these practices centered on the playground, a dedicated green space, and a mud kitchen, with each teacher dedicating a minimum of 30 minutes daily to at least one of these settings. Beyond the immediate school perimeter, teachers reported organized but infrequent trips to a forest school site, regional museums, and civic institutions. A full-school visit to the Smyrna Mound, which took place two years prior to this research, was singled out by multiple participants as a highly significant yet rare event. Teachers generally viewed these off-campus excursions as irregular and unstructured, emphasizing that complex administrative requirements and logistical hurdles kept such trips infrequent.

Perceived value of outdoor learning and urban consciousness

The data revealed a strong consensus among teachers regarding the underlying merits of learning outdoors. The identified benefits spanned improved focus, enhanced experiential observation, positive physical health outcomes, and the spark of creative imagination. Specifically, K6 contrasted indoor and outdoor cognitive environments, explaining that being outside releases a vital creative energy that classroom walls fundamentally restrict. In a similar vein, K5 drew upon personal childhood experiences to articulate what today's youth miss out on as a consequence of spending their formative years largely confined indoors. Benefits identified included heightened attentional focus, enhanced opportunities for observational learning, support for physical health, and the stimulation of creative capacities. K6 reflected on the qualitative difference between indoor and outdoor cognitive states, describing outdoor environments as releasing a form of creative energy that four walls inhibit. K5 drew on personal childhood recollection to emphasise what contemporary children lose by spending so much time indoors.

A consistent finding across both focus groups was that existing practice related to history was oriented primarily towards well-known national figures, significant dates in the national calendar, and broad cultural symbols – content that, while historically relevant, did not engage children specifically with the layered history of their city. K2 reflected that what the group had been discussing was, in fact, largely geographical rather than historical in character; other participants confirmed this self-assessment. K8 made the observation that practitioners' own knowledge of İzmir's heritage was limited, identifying teacher education as a prerequisite for any sustainable improvement in provision.

Children's Historical Perceptions: Drawings and Narrations

The Smyrna Möünd

Children's responses to the first visit reflected engagement with two dominant visual features of the site: the maze-like pathways defined by the remains of stone walls, and the monumental historic fountain. Eight of eleven children incorporated labyrinthine structures into their drawings using circular or curvilinear forms to represent the enclosure and complexity experienced at the site. Several drew human figures and residential structures within these forms, reflecting an understanding that the site was once a settlement.

Verbal narrations accompanying the drawings revealed a capacity to articulate temporal change with surprising specificity. Ç2 described the site as having once contained houses eventually built over by others, reflecting an accurate grasp of stratigraphic formation. A striking conceptual clarity emerged when Ç1 elaborated on the site's history, using a metaphor first introduced during the physical visit: comparing the accumulation of historical occupational layers to stacking one hat directly on top of another. In a different vein, Ç6 visualized the ancient inhabitants of Smyrna as a thriving, content community that resided in stone structures equipped with reliable water access. Meanwhile, a clear grasp of historical succession was demonstrated by Ç9, who sketched out a chronological narrative. This child observed that different civilizations had previously occupied these spaces-cooking, fighting, and going about their lives-before ultimately being succeeded by later generations.

The Historic Elevator (Asansör)

Analysis of the artwork revealed that the Asansör served as a major focal point for the children's expressions. Every single child depicted the elevator as vastly larger than the neighboring buildings, reflecting the substantial impact its physical scale had on their spatial memory. Verticality was a dominant theme, with seven children positioning the structure so that it reached toward or climbed beyond the paper's horizon line, framing it dynamically against the sky or sea. Furthermore, the functional necessity behind the landmark was accurately captured; several participants used their drawings and narrations to contrast the lift with the steep hillside staircase it replaced, expressing genuine empathy for the historical commuters who once had to ascend the cliffside by foot. Ç10 described the impossibility of reaching the upper neighbourhood without the elevator's assistance. Ç9 reflected that the structure was older than the oldest people the child knew, demonstrating spontaneous temporal comparison.

Kadifekale

Children's representations of Kadifekale were characterised by an emphasis on surveillance and protection. Five participants incorporated eye motifs into their drawings, used explicitly to represent the fortress's function as an observation point from which approaching threats could be detected. Children consistently drew the fortress as larger than its surroundings, reflecting both the physical experience of the site and its perceived symbolic significance. Ç4 described soldiers stationed in the fortress who watched over all inhabitants, including children,

and expressed personal identification with the sentinel function. Two children made observations reflecting awareness of İzmir's multi-civilisational past: Ç9 noted that the fortress flag would once have been a different one, implying recognition of historical change in political sovereignty.

Children's Emergent Understanding of the City

At the conclusion of the programme, children were invited to reflect on what they had learned about İzmir as a historical city. Their definitions of 'city' were broadly consistent with formal geographical understanding: a place where many people live together, characterised by buildings, roads, and public spaces. When asked to characterise İzmir specifically as a historical city, children drew on the accumulated content of their visits. Ç8 defined a historical city as one that is old, whose age and importance are visible in its material fabric. Ç6 framed historical cities in terms of the artefacts and remains left behind by past inhabitants. These responses suggest that the children had developed a working conceptual framework for historical urbanism grounded in material and sensory experience rather than abstract definition.

CONCLUSION and DISCUSSION

The findings of this study contribute to a growing body of evidence that challenges the assumption that historical content lies beyond the developmental reach of preschool-aged children. When young children are provided with well-designed, place-anchored, and pedagogically scaffolded opportunities to engage with historical environments, they are capable of constructing historically meaningful representations: they perceive temporal change, draw connections between past and present, attribute functions and meanings to heritage structures, and develop emotional as well as cognitive relationships with urban heritage. These outcomes both align with and expand upon the foundational research established by Aktın (2017), Coşkun Keskin et al. (2012, 2019), and Cooper (2018). Crucially, the educator data provides a vital contextual lens through which to interpret these children's achievements. The practitioners involved were far from indifferent toward heritage-based pedagogy; they explicitly recognized its value, with several displaying deep enthusiasm for the methodology. Instead, the primary deficit lay in a confluence of limited substantive historical knowledge regarding their urban environment, a lack of pedagogical frameworks to adapt this history for early childhood classrooms, and insufficient curricular backing to allocate time and assets for ongoing off-site learning. This specific challenge mirrors and builds upon the observations of Öner (2018) and Aktın and Dilek (2014), who similarly highlighted teacher readiness as a major bottleneck blocking history and social studies integration within Turkish early childhood environments.

The stark discrepancy between the depth of the children's insights and the historically limited nature of their prior educational exposure brings the opportunity cost of curricular stagnation into sharp relief. Engaging in just six guided excursions within one academic year enabled these children to display advanced dimensions of historical reasoning-including temporal tracking, causal connections regarding architecture, and an appreciation of cultural diversity-that surpassed their teachers' expectations. Consequently, these findings call for a

reevaluation of not only curriculum structures but also initial teacher training, emphasizing the need to equip educators to reconceptualize how history can be meaningfully introduced to young learners.

Analytically, the study's chosen theoretical lenses offered deep explanatory power. Vygotsky's sociocultural paradigm underscored how pivotal adult mediation is in helping children transcend their independent cognitive boundaries. Here, the structured nature of the excursions, the tailored narratives delivered by the heritage educator, and the reflective post-visit dialogues served as essential scaffolding that facilitated the children's step-by-step construction of historical awareness. Concurrently, place-based education theory provided a solid framework for positioning the urban landscape as a foundational curriculum asset; the resulting evidence validates that İzmir's architectural heritage acts as a highly generative learning environment when activated with deliberate pedagogical intent.

This study found that preschool children in İzmir can engage with the historical heritage of their city in meaningful ways when supported through structured, place-based learning experiences. The children's drawings, explanations, and discussions showed different aspects of early historical understanding, including thinking about time, noticing changes between past and present, interpreting the possible uses of historical structures, and beginning to develop a sense of the city's past. These outcomes had not previously been systematically documented in this context, and the teacher data suggested that they emerged mainly through the design of the intervention rather than through prior classroom practice. This indicates that there is untapped potential for heritage-based learning in early childhood settings in Turkey.

SUGGESTIONS

Several implications can be drawn from these findings. In terms of curriculum, the results suggest that more explicit attention could be given to local history and heritage in the Turkish preschool programme. For teacher education, there is a need for professional development that supports teachers in both understanding local heritage and using it in age-appropriate learning activities. For museums and heritage institutions in İzmir and similar urban contexts, the findings highlight the value of designing programmes that specifically target young children. For future research, larger and longer-term studies would be useful to better understand how children's historical understanding develops across different social and educational settings.

Overall, the findings suggest that the city can be introduced as a meaningful learning context in the early years. With appropriate support, preschool children are able to begin making sense of the urban environment as something shaped by different historical layers, even if their interpretations remain partial and developing.

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