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Chapter 35

The Dream Concepts and Contents of Turkish Preschool Children*

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INTRODUCTION

At early ages, children cannot exactly explain what a dream is, yet they all experience the phenomenon of dreaming just as adults do. Children, who initially think that their dream is real, begin in line with their cognitive development progress to understand that it is actually a dream and not exist in reality. In the early childhood period, children's perception of the dreams and their dream contents provide a rich source of children's development of mind (Woolley & Wellman, 1992).

Children are fairly curious about dreams they recalled with vivid images and intensive emotions (Clark, 1999). Although the prevailing thought was that the content of a dream is influenced by the emotional experiences in previous-day, psychological state, health condition, diets and sleeping conditions of the individual (Foster & Anderson 1936), recently, it is claimed that just like adults' dreams, 3 to 5-year-old children's dreams are not merely a simple repetition of their waking-life experiences but of a combination of various complex mental processes (Foulkes, 1990). As the main components of dreams are personal memories and comprehensive forms of knowledge, a person's dream is limited to one's cognitive structure and the developmental state of its content (Foulkes, Hollifield, Sullivan, Bradley & Terry, 1990). Foulkes (1990) argues that dreaming is a cognitive synthesis process that is based on a set of mnemonic elements which are active and parallel to one another but not consistent with each other at all.

In early studies by Piaget, who first became famous for his Cognitive Development Theory, the researcher examined childhood dreams. According to Piaget, children follow a special system of sequential steps to understand the dream just as they begin to perceive the life. At early ages, children perceive dreams to be real but then realize that dreams are unreal and that everyone dreams just like them. In addition, children gradually understand that a dream is an invisible intrinsic process specific to the person (Crain, 2000). Although it is pointed out that just like

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adults, a 4-year-old child recognizes that dreams are personal imaginations (Woolley & Wellman, 1992). Piaget claims that the child fully discovers dreams at the age of six or seven (as cited in Crain, 2000). Foulkes, who studied on children's dreams for long years, points out that dreaming is a complex activity based on image representation and narration skills which involve a great change between the ages of three and seven (as cited in Meyer & Shore, 2001). Children's capacity to dream develops most probably in line with the maturation of consciousness and symbolic structures (Foulkes et al., 1990). Therefore, asking children to share their dreams could help them understand and develop their intrinsic experiences (Honig & Nealiss, 2012).

Children's dream reporting rates and having similar qualities with adult dreams are not related to their psychosocial or emotional states but to their cognitive competencies (Foulkes, 1990). While reporting their dreams, children use shorter and simpler statements than adults. However, they are likely to use longer and more complex sentences when reporting their dreams at older ages (Helminen & Punamaki, 2008). Piaget (1947/2010), claims that in the cognitive development process of the children, they find the dream realistic since they cannot figure either the distinction between the subject and the object or the nature of thought. Thus, it should be regarded as a normal situation if children inadequately define the dream concept, which is a quite subjective phenomenon, at early ages.

Studies demonstrate that the quality and content of childhood dreams are examined in different dimensions. In a five-year longitudinal study carried out by Foulkes in a sleep laboratory, 14 children (7 girls and 7 boys aged 2 years 9 months - 4 years 8 months) were recorded by electronic imaging devices in nine nights of sleep each year and awakened three times in the night and were asked to report their dreams. Foulkes (1990), concluded that children's dreams at early ages differ qualitatively from their dreams in the following years and as well as from adults' dreams. For example, between the ages 3-5, the dream reports of children were brief, lacked a plot or storyline and contained limited number of characters and actions. But from the age of five, the dream reports improved in length and complexity: more physical activities, social interactions and self-representations. In another study, Wooley and Wellman (1992) concluded that 3-4-year-old children begin to figure out the fictional nature of dreams and regard dreams as fictional things that did not exist in real life. Resnick, Stickgold, Rittenhouse and Hobson (1994), found that dreams recorded by parents at home would reveal a more realistic and natural results than the laboratory environment, suggesting that children starting from the age of four, had dreams involving core elements existed in adults' dreams. In another study conducted with children between 3-7-years-old, Meyer and Shore (2001) reported that as children aged, they considered dreams as an unrealistic, personal and intrinsic psychological state. Recently, Honig and Nealis (2012) investigated the dreams reported by 2 to 5-year-old children in a class environment and collected by their teachers, and found that children reported longer dreams from the young age to the older age and the contents of the dreams differed depending on their gender.

Piaget argues that not only the frequency of experiencing the dream

phenomena but also the quantity and variety of dream experiencing are restricted by the cognitive maturation of children in waking-life (as cited in Foulkes 1990). Even the dreams experienced passively or mindlessly, the dreams created by the mindful intelligence of the person (Foulkes, 1990). From this point of view, it is worth to examine the contents of childhood dreams that contain numerous details of children's cognitive development. Although children's dreams provide a unique source of information about the structural development of dream, and the psychological and cognitive aspects of child development, very few studies focused on this issue (Resnick et al., 1994). Moreover, there are limited studies investigating that how children perceive the dream phenomena and the content of children dreams collected in their natural environments such as home or school. Currently, no studies have been found regarding the dream concepts and contents of Turkish children. The research questions were sought in the current study: "How do the 5 to 6-year-old preschool children explain the dream phenomenon and what the dream contents of 5 to 6-year-old preschool children are?

METHOD

In this qualitative study conducted on children's dreams, the phenomenological research design was used. Children's dreams were taken as a phenomenon. Phenomenology focuses on how people experience and give meaning to a phenomenon (Patton, 2002), and it is an approach that allows studying on effective, emotional and intense human experiences (Merriam, 2009). Because of the diverse and the person-specific nature of dreams, and to reach the data saturation, the study group consisted of a large group of children from different backgrounds.

Study Group: This study was carried out with the convenience sampling method, one approach to qualitative research sampling. The study group was selected among those living in three biggest municipalities of Adana, a city located in the southern part of Turkey, where the researchers were also living at the time of the study. The participants were 158 children registered to three different preschools (two of them belonged to the Ministry of National Education, and one of them was in the body of a state university). All the children participated in the study on voluntary basis. In addition, when they were asked to explain what the dream is and report one of their dreams, they were not forced to talk about it if they failed to explain what the dream is, recall their dream or just avoided talking about it. In the study, a total of 30 children who did not explain the dream concept, could not remember any dream or who were reluctant to talk about it were not included in the study group. Consequently, the study group was made up of 128 students with an average age of 65 months (N= 65 girls, N=63 boys). The age-related criterion for including the children in the study group was that they all turned five. According to the related literature, starting from the age of four, children recognize that dreams are personal imaginations, just like adults (Woolley & Wellman, 1992), and after the age of six, they fully discover what the dream is (Crain, 2000). Therefore, only those children who were older than 60 months were included in the study. These children had families with moderate and high socio-economic status, and none of them have any chronical diseases or handicaps.

Data Collection Tools and Data Collection Process: Phenomenological interview is the primary method of data collection tool to reveal the basic structure or reality underlying an experience (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, preschool children's dreams were gathered through the interviews audio-recorded in a quiet and appropriate room at each school (teachers' room, the deputy principal's room, counseling service office). Before the interviews, the researcher participated in the activities carried out in the class for two days and spent time with the children to let them know more about the researcher. The children in the study group were taken one by one into the interview room by the researcher. When the child sat on the chair in front of the researcher, the interview started with "May I ask you something? What does dream mean?" questions. After responding to the first question, "Well, have you ever had a dream?", "Would you tell me a dream you remember?" were asked to the child. The definitions and reports of the children were audio-recorded. The interviews lasted about five minutes in average.

Data Analysis Process: The audio-recorded descriptions of the dream reports were first transcribed and subjected to thematic content analysis by the researcher and categorized with respect to the definition of dream, and characters, the main actions and the place and time in the dreams. A systematic process to find patterns and categories within the dream reports; the raw data were coded and then codes were compared and grouped into meaningful categories. The categories obtained via content analysis and the frequencies of these categories are presented in the findings accompanied by direct quotations from the children's dream reports. For these direct quotations, 128 children participating in the study were assigned name-codes from C1 to C128.

Validity and Reliability: In the study, referential adequacy was obtained by audio-recording the research data in all the research environments. In order to increase transferability, the children's own statements were provided, and these descriptions were presented in their natural forms. In addition, for the purpose of increasing reliability, the decision phases, the processes and the methods used to conduct the study were recorded and reported in detail as suggested by Merriam (2009). Lastly, for confirmability, the process of peer debriefing was conducted. Peer debriefing is defined by Merriam (2009) holding interviews and making discussions with expert colleagues in relation to the consistency of the findings obtained via the raw data in the research process. In this respect, the researchers examined the analysis process via discussions when necessary in the process.

FINDINGS

In line with the research questions of the present study, this section presents the findings obtained via the analysis results regarding the dreams of the children who were asked to explain the concept of dream and to report a dream they recalled.

Children's Definitions of the Dream Concept

When the children were asked to state the meaning of dream, 120 of all the 128 children in the study group provided a definition of dream. When the children's definitions of dream were examined, it was seen that they defined it as seeing

something while sleeping /sleep, as something real-unreal and imaginary/nightmare; and as a good-beautiful experience. Some of the definitions belonged to more than one category. Below is the table of the categories and related quotations of the children's definitions of the dream phenomena.

Table 1: Categories and quotations of the children's dream definitions

Categories	Sample Quotations
Seeing Something While Sleeping	*"We have dreams during our sleep; I mean it is as if we watch something while sleeping" (C22).* *"We have dreams when we sleep. But when we get up, they disappear" (C93)*
Reality and Unreality	*"You see something in your sleep. You think it is real, but it is not" (C70)* *"It means seeing something at night though it doesn't exist in reality" (C109)*
Imagination	*"It is something like imagination" (C3)* *"It is something imaginary that people sometimes see" (C52)*
Fear and Nightmare	*"For example, you see a dream, and it is a nightmare. I mean it means having a nightmare in your sleep" (C59)* *You may have different dreams, but they may sometimes be scary. For example, you may see yourself dead in your dream" (C131)*
A Good and Beautiful Experience	*"It is something good. When you have a dream in your sleep, you see everything is good. I sometimes have dreams in my sleep" (C125)* *"It is very beautiful. You see wonderful things in your sleep. If you don't see the whole dream, then you develop it in your brain" (C41)*
Metaphors	"We see something during our sleep. There is a computer in our heads. I tell my mother that I am afraid, but she says she is near me" (C87) "It means filming something in our brain. It is like a video. We watch something in our dreams" (C57)

As seen in Table 1, children at 5-6 years-old (average 65 months) can describe the dream. Generally they tended to describe the dream phenomena as its functional meaning such as seeing something or reality-unreality contrast, while some children defined dream with good feelings and metaphors some others preferred to explain by associating the fear and nightmares. These findings provide a clue as to how young children can

perceive the dream phenomenon in different ways.

The Content of Children Dreams

The contents of the children's dream reports were examined in terms of characters, main actions, time and space in their dreams. These elements are derived directly from children's natural dream narrations through the content analysis. The figure 1 shows the contents of children's dreams.

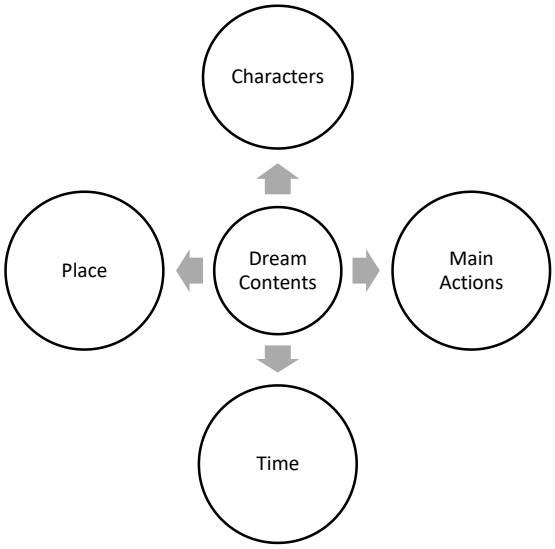


Figure 1: Children's dream content elements

Characters in Children's Dreams

It is found that children report people, animals and unreal characters in their dreams. In the study, it was found that the human character was more frequent in children's dreams when compared to other characters. Almost all the children whose dreams were examined (f=120) reported the human character in their dreams at least once, while more than half of the children (f=75) reported two human characters. In addition, very few children (f=10) reported more than two human characters in their dreams.

When the human characters in children's dreams was explored, it was seen that they most frequently saw themselves and their family members, which were followed by TV cartoon characters, strangers/bad men/thieves, their friends, and their teachers, respectively. The direct quotations from the children regarding the human characters in their dreams were as follows in Table 2.

Table 2: Human characters and sample quotations in children's dreams

Human Characters	Sample Quotations
Self-representation	*"I was swimming in the pool, and the fish were just about to bite me, my leg. I was in the sea. I mean I felt myself as if I were in the sea. I was happy, but it was freezing when I came out of the sea. I became sick." (C12)*
Family members	*"I saw my mom and dad in my dream. My brother was little. My mother said <Would you like to be the elder brother?>. I said no. My mom and dad wrapped me in something and took me out. It was dark outside, and we turned back into the house. It was really terrifying because it was as if it were real. When I woke up, I understood that it was not real" (C4).*
Tv-Cartoon Characters	*"There was a flower. I was turning around it with other Winxes. I mean I was a Winx." (C25)* *"I was a cartoon hero in my dream. I was a princess. We were sitting there eating something. We were in the dining hall of the Kingdom. Then, we were sleeping. When we got up, we had a breakfast. Also, there was a prince. My dream ended when the prince grew up" (C75)*
Strangers (bad men/ thieves)	*"One day, I was going to the supermarket in my dream. A man and a woman said <Would you like to be our son?>. Well, I was sleeping actually, but I thought it was real. I start crying every time I sleep." (C88)*
Friends	*"We were in a forest. I was walking with my friend. We got lost, and my friend Arda saved me." (C124)*
Teachers	*"I saw my teacher. She went to the beach. She was swimming in the sea, and I was sitting at home and watching TV. I wanted to go near my teacher. It was really strange" (C85).*

Another character represented by the children in their dreams was animals. Of all the dreams analyzed, 27,3% of them included at least one animal, while there were more than one animal in 6,3% of the dreams. In their dream reportings, the children most frequently mentioned wild animals such as shark, lion, tiger, bear, wolf and giraffe; pets like dog, fish, rabbit, bird and cat; fantastic animals like the dinosaur and unicorn; and such farm animals as the lamb and chicken, respectively.

The quotations from the children regarding the animal characters in their dreams were as follows in Table 3.

Table 3: Animal characters and sample quotations in children's dreams

Animal Characters	Sample Quotations
Wild Animals	*"I caught a shark in the sea. We became friends, and she took me to her house. She had foods there. She caught little fishes. Also, she had a TV set in her house." (C44)*
Pets	*"There was a rabbit. I liked him and gave him a carrot. I was going into the forest alone." (C102)*
Fantastic Animals	*"I saw unicorns in my dream. They were flying towards the stars. I saw a sky eagle. I also saw a big wave taking me away. It grasped everyone. It sent them all to a very beautiful place." (C2)* *"I saw dinosaurs in my dream. T-rex came while the two dinosaurs were fighting with each other. Then another dinosaur appeared. It was flying, and it was eating fish."(C95)*
Farm Animals	*"People were feeding the animals there. They were feeding the sheep with milk. The chickens were giving eggs, and I was just there. I grew carrots. It was a very beautiful place." (C91)*

It was revealed that besides the human and animal characters, the children saw such fiction characters as ghosts, monsters, zombies and aliens in their dreams. The children who saw unreal characters in their dreams reported that;

I sometimes see unreal things in my dream; for example, ghosts. They always appear to me. The say 'come on, we'll take you home, and I say 'no' (C99)

"Once, I saw a monster when I slept. It had red eyes. I was with my mom and dad, and my aunt. The red-eye monster came near us, and someone else came and killed him with a sword." (C147)

"I see zombies. They are walking and attacking me. I am really afraid of them" (C13)

Following the analysis of the characters in the children's dreams, the main actions of the characters in the children's dreams were explored.

Main Actions in Children's Dreams

When the dreams of the children in the study group were explored, it was found that many of the actions experienced, observed or imagined by the children in their daily lives existed in their dreams as well. It was revealed that almost every dream included at least one action and that some of the dreams even included a series of actions or more than one independent action. However, the main actions

which were prominent in the child's dream and which reflected the theme of the dream were reflected in findings, and among 128 dream reports, 40 different main actions were determined.

In the current study, it was found that such daily life activities as playing, wandering/walking, eating, going out and talking as well as such dramatic actions as fighting, attacking, escaping, being kidnapped, dying, being injured and falling down and fantastic actions such as flying and transforming were the main actions in children's dreams. Table 4 below presents the findings regarding the main actions revealed in the children's dreams.

Table 4: The main actions in children's dreams

Main Actions		***f***	**%**
Daily Life Actions	Playing	17	13,3
	Wandering-walking	9	7
	Eating	6	4,7
	Riding	4	3,1
	Going out	3	2,3
	Going vacation	3	2,3
	Talking	3	2,3
Dramatic Actions	Fighting	8	6,3
	Attacking	8	6,3
	Escaping	7	5,5
	Being kidnapped	6	4,7
	Dying	5	3,9
	Being Injured	4	3,1
	Falling down	3	2,3
Fantastic Actions	Flying	5	3,9
	Transforming	5	3,9
No Action		4	3,1
Other Actions		28	21,9
Total		128	100

Besides the main actions presented in Table 4, such actions with a frequency value of two or less such as sleeping, searching, collecting mushroom, swimming, loving, climbing, stealing, making friends, growing up, going to the toilet, fishing, buying presents, being hit by a car, shopping, spending time with someone, dancing, getting lost, saving someone, doing magic, arresting and emitting light were also found to be among the main actions in children's dreams labeled as other actions on the Table 4. Only four children did not mention any actions in their dream reportings.

Time and Place in Children's Dreams

As the children's dreams were taken as a story line while analyzing their dream contents, the focus was also on the time and place in the dreams as well as on the characters and actions. However, in this study exploring the dreams of children who were at the age of five to six, it was seen that most of the children did not mention any time indicators in their dreams. It was also revealed that only 10 children described the time in their dreams and that the time in most of these dreams (f=6) was day time. In addition, only three children mentioned that their dreams were at night and that one child stated that it was both day time and night.

When the places in the dreams were analyzed, it was found that 70.4% (f=90) of all the children in the study group mentioned a place in their dreams. Table 5 presents the places in children's dreams.

Table 5: The places in children's dreams

	Places	***f***	**%**
Accomodation	Child's own house	21	16,4
	House of others	8	6,3
Public Place	Park-playgroung	8	6,3
	School	7	5,5
	Market place	6	4,7
	Holiday resort	6	4,7
	Zoo	4	3,1
Nature	Forest	7	5,5
	Sea	6	4,7
	Space-Sky	4	3,1
Other		13	10,1
Total		90	70,4

The most frequent place in the children's dreams was a house. This place was mostly the child's place of accommodation. In some of the children's dreams, the place was sometimes a house of friend or sometimes a house of another family member. Besides the first 10 places presented in Table 5 with respect to their frequencies, those belonging to the category of "other" included a road (f=3), fantastic worlds (f=2), a hole, work place, farm, car, space ship, kingdom dining hall, City of Adana and guest house.

DISCUSSION

The findings obtained in current study revealed important data regarding the contents of the dreams of pre-school children aged five to six. In the study, the first finding was that the children mostly defined the concept of dream as sleep or as seeing something while sleeping. Piaget (1947/2010), points out that children perceive dream as a phenomenon depending on external factors like sleep or night. In the present study, it was found that some of the children defined the concept of dream using the phenomena of reality and imagination. Based on this finding, it could be stated that some children are better in terms of cognitive development and that they consider dreams to be unreal. According to Piaget (1947), children whose

levels of cognitive development increase in time in line with their ages believe that dreams depend on the internal factors belonging to the human body. In addition, it was found that some of the children defined dream in association with fear and nightmare. Similarly, in their study, Muris et al. (2000) reported that it was common to have frightening dreams among children aged four to six and that at older ages, especially at the age of 10 to 12, there was a decrease in the frequency of such dreams.

When the characters in the children's dreams were examined, it was found that their dreams mostly included themselves (75,8%), which was followed by family members (33,6%), friends (19,5%) and TV/cinema characters (11,7%). The finding obtained in the present study in relation to the five-to-six-year-old children's seeing themselves most in their dreams differed from the results reported by Foulkes et al. (1990), who also investigated the contents of children's dreams. In their study, Foulkes et al. (1990) reported that children younger than seven years old rarely saw themselves in their dreams. The researchers associated their finding with Piaget's cognitive development theory and claimed that children do not have enough cognitive capacity to create their own images in their dreams. However, in the current study, it was found that children at an average age of five years five months mostly saw themselves in their dreams. This difference between the findings of the two studies is thought to be due to the data collection method used by Foulkes et al. in their study. The reason is that in the Foulkes's study, the children were asked to report their dreams in laboratory conditions by awakening them during their REM sleep. Another study conducted by Resnick et al. (1994) in children's own houses revealed different results from those reported by Foulkes et al.. Similar to the results obtained in the present study, Resnick et al. (1994) found that children aged four to five years old (85%) and those aged eight to ten years old (89%) mostly saw themselves as the main character in their dreams. This finding is consistent with the one obtained in the present study. Based on these findings, it could be stated that the contents of children's dreams are influenced by the conditions where children report their dreams.

Another finding obtained via the children's dreams was the structure of the actions in their dreams. In this study, most of the children reported such actions involving movement as playing, wandering/walking, fighting, attacking, escaping, being kidnapped, eating and so on. On the other hand, Foulkes et al. (1990) found that the dreams of children younger than seven years old mostly included actions which did not include any movement (Foulkes, 1990). According to Honig and Nealis (2012), who conducted their study with children aged three to five years old, 81.2% of the children reported movement-related actions in their dreams. The fact that children see movement-related actions in their dreams is not a surprising finding as obtained both in the present study and in the one carried out by Honig and Nealis (2012). The reason is that most children, especially those at preschool age, lead quite an active life doing something constantly when they are awake. For this reason, most of their first life experiences involve movements, which cause them to see similar actions in their dreams.

The findings that the time in the dreams was not mentioned by the children at

all could be associated with the children's levels of cognitive development. Since time is an abstract and relative concept when compared to movement and action, it is quite difficult for children at the preoperational stage to understand the exact meaning of this concept (Leushina 1991, Nair and Pool, 1991 cited in Aktaş Arnas, 2006). The fact that the children did not comprehend the meaning of this concept fully was probably the reason why the children did not mention the time in their dreams.

In addition, the findings obtained in the present study in relation to the place in the children's dreams were consistent with those obtained in other studies conducted by Resnick et al. (1994) and by Honig and Nealis (2012). In these two studies or in the present one, almost half of the children did not provide any clear clue regarding the place in their dreams. However, the findings obtained in the present study, differed from others since more children gave clues regarding the place in their studies when compared to the participants in other studies.

Limitations

Among the important limitations in the present study could be the fact that the study was carried out only with children aged five to six years old. As in other studies (Foulkes, 1990; Resnick et al. 1994; Honig and Nealiss, 2012), it may be beneficial if future studies are conducted with children from different age groups to reveal the developmental differences between children. However, children from an age group of five to six years old who were assumed to understand the concept of dream and who had a certain level of language acquisition were included in the present study. In addition, the children's reporting of one dream they remembered was used to collect the research data.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The results of the present study carried out in school environment with children at the age of five and six revealed that the children described the concept of dream in association with seeing something while sleeping, reality, imagination, fear/nightmare, good/beautiful and with certain metaphors. These results demonstrate that five-year-old children can define the concept of dream. In addition, among the most frequent human characters in the children's dreams their self-representations, family members, TV-cartoon characters, strangers, friends, thieves and teachers, respectively. Animal characters and fiction characters were also main characters of some children's dreams. Moreover, it was seen that there was at least one main action in the dreams of almost all the children in the study group and that the main actions were mostly those in the children's daily lives but there were also dramatic actions and fantastic actions in dreams. Lastly, it was revealed that the children mostly mentioned the place in their dreams but only few of them stated the time for the events in their dreams.

Depending on these results, a similar study could be carried out with children from different age groups to examine their perceptions of dream and the contents and of their dreams. In addition, another study could be conducted using the quantitative research design to examine whether the contents of children's dreams differ with respect to such demographic variables as gender and socio-economic

level. Also, the relationship between the contents of children' dreams and their levels of cognitive development could be investigated. Lastly, future research could also focus on children's levels of first language acquisition by examining their language use in their dream reports.

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