EVERY CHILD COUNTS: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON IN-CLUSIVE EDUCATION'S EFFECTS IN PRESCHOOL

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Abstract: *Preschool education, which is known as critical years and where development is rapid, is an important education for children with special needs as well as for normal children. The quality of the education services to be provided in these years will significantly affect the development of the child with special needs. Individuals with special needs are individuals who have different needs from their peers in terms of their physical, mental, emotional, and social characteristics. The issue in which environments the education of these individuals should be met has been handled in different ways in parallel with the developments observed in the field of special education. For this reason, it is important to examine the social development of preschool children who receive inclusive education and to examine their interaction with other developmental areas. This research aims to examine the effects of inclusive education on the social development of children who receive inclusive education in the preschool period, according to the views of preschool teachers. The study group research consists of 2 kindergartens located in Konya city center and providing Special Education under the Ministry of National Education, and 20 preschool teachers in this school. A qualitative research method was used in this study.*

Keywords: Inclusive education, preschool, teachers, qualitative study, interview

Introduction

In recent years, inclusive education has emerged as a pivotal concept in the field of education, emphasizing the importance of providing equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Like every healthy person, disabled individuals want to establish social relationships with other people. He wants to be cared for, loved, and accepted. Moreover, he wants to live his life without depending on others. This desire is not only the most natural right of disabled individuals but also a human need. This desire and need are also the basis of social integrity and development (Kargın, 2004; Lindsay, 2007; Yazıcıoğlu, 2018). The Inclusive Education Accord has been a guiding framework, promoting practices that foster diversity and create a learning environment that accommodates every learner. To meet the educational and social needs of individuals with special needs, the necessary support services are provided in environments suitable for their developmental characteristics, based on the individual competencies of individuals in need of special education, with specially trained personnel, improved education programs and methods, and maintained on a full or part-time basis, and for children with special needs at least education in normal education classes with a restrictive education environment (Kırcaali-İftar, 1992; Batu, 2004; Eren, 2012; Metin 2013). It is an individual who differs from his peers in terms of individual characteristics and competence due to reasons that may occur before, during, and after birth (Baykoç Dönmez, 2010). Individuals with diverse developmental trajectories deserve access to education and the opportunities it affords, akin to their typically developing peers. Their capacity to lead independent and productive lives in society hinges on their proficiency in daily life skills (Gürsoy, Durukan, 2022). The heart of the practice in inclusive education is the teacher (Ashman, 2015). In his study, Saloviita (2020) examined educators' perspectives on inclusion, surveying 824 classroom teachers, 575 branch teachers, and 365 special education teachers. The study revealed a weak correlation between teachers' professional orientation, self-efficacy, and their attitudes toward inclusion. To foster successful inclusive education, teachers must not only possess pedagogical and subject expertise but also maintain a positive attitude toward individuals with special needs (İnceler and Özder, 2020). According to Kandemir et al. (2021), integrating theoretical and practical aspects of inclusive education into all departments of edu-

cation faculties can enhance teachers' understanding and preparation for inclusive classrooms. During preschool years, children, including those with special needs and typically developing children, develop fundamental communication skills through inclusive education. This facilitates their societal integration, accelerates their overall development, and potentially promotes future integration between the two groups (Metin, 1992, 1997a; Yavuz, 2005). The goal of inclusive education is to offer equal learning opportunities to every child, ensuring that education is accessible within the same environment for all individuals (Ekşi, 2010). In an inclusive setting, the language development of children with special needs improves, and their skill enhancement accelerates (Ersoy & Avcı, 2000; Metin, 1992). Inclusion serves as an educational movement aimed at enhancing the social acceptance of children with special needs and fostering their sense of belonging in society (Acarlar, 2013; Salend, 1998). Studies have explored strategies employed by preschool teachers to support children's social-emotional development and mitigate problem behaviors (Rakap, Balıkcı, Kalkan, & Aydın, 2018). These investigations have revealed the effectiveness of programs designed to enhance the social skills of children with special needs and address their behavioral challenges. One of the primary benefits of inclusive education, as emphasized by educators, is the positive influence of a supportive and nurturing learning environment on academic and social growth. Inclusive classrooms serve as platforms for students to embrace diversity, fostering empathy, understanding, and a culture of respect. Additionally, inclusive education underscores the importance of social skill development and emotional intelligence, preparing students for integration beyond the classroom. Consequently, inclusive education shapes students into global citizens who value inclusivity and equality. To ensure the success of inclusive education, teachers must possess not only subject expertise but also a positive attitude toward individuals with special needs (İnceler and Özder, 2020). Teachers are expected to acquire these competencies through resources provided by experts in the field, academic training, and ongoing professional development (Battal, 2007). In this article, we explore the contributions of inclusive education, drawing from insights shared by teachers who play pivotal roles in implementing and shaping inclusive practices.

Aim of the research

The objective of this study is to investigate both the favorable and unfavorable impacts of inclusive education on the social development of preschool children, as perceived by preschool teachers. The aim is to assess the social development status of children in inclusive educational settings, facilitate their positive socialization, and raise awareness regarding inclusive practices.

Model of the research

In this study, a qualitative research approach was employed, which involves the utilization of qualitative data collection methods such as observation, interviews, and document analysis. The qualitative process aims to depict facts and events in a natural and comprehensive manner within their environment. This method involves analyzing data collected systematically according to predetermined themes and frameworks (Aydın, 2018). Data are qualitatively examined, and relationships between them are determined through frequencies, percentages, averages, or other statistical analyses (Nassaji, 2015).

Working group

The study group of the research consists of 20 people in total, 2 kindergartens, and 20 preschool teachers in this school, located in the city center of Konya in the 2020-2021 academic year and provides Special Education under the Ministry of National Education.

Data collection tools

During the data collection phase, a semi-structured interview form was created by the researchers. Interviewing is to get detailed and in-depth information about a subject by asking detailed, qualitative questions to the interviewee. In the study, an unstructured interview with questions form prepared by the researchers was used to obtain the study data.

RESULTS

In the 2020-2021 academic year, primary schools affiliated with the Ministry of National Education in Konya and having a kindergarten and 20 preschool teachers working in

these schools participated in the research. All of the teachers are women. The effects of inclusive education in preschool education on social development were examined. The opinions of the teachers were taken with the semi-structured interview technique.

In this context, according to the data obtained from the interviews with the preschool teachers, the opinions of the teachers were analyzed and explained below.

1. What is the use of inclusive education in pre-school?

While 40% of the teachers believed that inclusive education benefits the mental development of children, 30% stated that they exhibited positive behaviors and social development, 16% stated that it benefited motor development and 14% benefited language development. Although the teachers answered by considering its benefits in many areas of development, they mostly mentioned its benefits in one area of development.

S1: "It has a great impact on the mental development of children. For example, intellectual activities such as imagination, creativity, and problem-solving skills develop remarkably. Although it affects other areas of development, it contributes more to their mental development."

2) Are there negative sides to the education given to the children who take inclusive education in pre-school? what are they?

51% of the teachers stated that the children who received inclusive education in the preschool period did not have negative aspects of the education they received, 19% stated that they had adaptation problems, and 30% stated that the children had negative behaviors that they acquired from the environment of friends.

S8: "I do not think that inclusive education harms the child because the education provided supports development very much."

3) What are the differences between children who take inclusive education compared to preschool children who do not take inclusive education?

29% of the teachers stated that there were differences in social-emotional development such as self-expression skills, positive self-perception, and self-care skills, 36% of them said that there were differences in socialization, 35% of them stated that there were differences such as children's school preparation, self-development, and effective use of their cognitive capacities.

S9: "I think children are active in the process of self-control and interpersonal harmony with the rules at school. They get to know themselves, their teachers, and their friends, and they develop socially."

4) What are the challenges and their effects during the training given?

46% of the teachers stated that they had difficulties in adapting to the rules, 23% stated that they had difficulties in adapting to the school, and 31% stated that they did not experience any difficulties.

S5: "When they first start school, they have adjustment problems like other children. But then they get used to it."

5) What differences are there in the social development areas of children with inclusive education?

50% of the teachers evaluated the improvement in their behaviors and attitudes towards their friends and teachers, 40% evaluated their communication with their families, and 10% evaluated the increase in their social acceptance rates.

S4: "Children try to participate in the game, have the right to speak and express their thoughts, and try to be in harmony with their friends or teachers. For example, when they first come to school and a little later, their families even point out the difference.

6) What challenges are there in the adaptation process in inclusive education?

Teachers should assess the difficulties, usually at the time of first starting school. According to this, 60% of the teachers said that they had problems with their friends, 30% of them said that they had problems with the teacher and the rules, and 10% of them said that they had problems with their stability in the activities.

S7: There were problems such as not being a partner with friends in general, not following the given instructions, leaving the activity unfinished, wanting to leave the classroom, not answering the questions asked, and not sharing toys. Then there has been progress.

7) What changes are there in the attitudes of students against their peers and teachers?

94% of the teachers stated that they exhibited negative and maladaptive behaviors at first and then developed positive attitudes and behaviors, while 6% stated that they were inconsistent. However, no one thought that there were students who consistently exhibited negative attitudes.

S18: "There is inconsistency in attitudes. Sometimes the children approach it very well, and sometimes the opposite happens. This is because the child has special needs. Since their interests and needs are slightly different and the class size is large, there may inevitably be problems in such cases.

8) What applications or activities can be done to support inclusive education?

35% of the teachers included activities based on clues, such as large group activities, and following group directions, 30% small group activities based on attention and solving simple problems prepared by considering individual differences, and 35% language and mental activities based on appropriate reinforcements. They thought that activities including developmental activities should be done.

S9: "Children learn more easily by following simple instructions in a large group and adapting to the group on the go. For example, gains can be obtained by following the instructions given with the drama method as a large group activity."

9) What outside activities should be given to support social development in inclusive education?

40% of the teachers thought those outdoor games, 35% trips, and 25% thought that activities such as theater, cinema, and exhibitions were supportive.

S4: "Children love trips very much. In addition, out-of-school activities within the scope of certain days and weeks are beneficial."

S13: "Garden motor skills and social development are supported in outdoor games."

10) What is the importance of family participation in inclusive education?

50% of the teachers take measures such as ensuring the integrity of education, getting to know each other better with the family and the child, and stronger communication, 38% the social-emotional importance of the child such as developing self-confidence and positive attitudes and behaviors, 12% the positive self in the child. They said it creates a perception.

S9: "The child approaches himself and his environment more positively. Family support is very important in terms of encouraging the child. A child who knows that his family is with him and taking care of him will always be more confident."

11) How does the change in the field of social development and inclusive education affect other development areas?

All of the participants said that inclusive education positively affects other development areas of social development in preschool children who receive this education. 35% of the teachers said that they support language development, 40% support cognitive development, and 35% support social-emotional development. In general, teachers considered the positive effects of social development on emotional, language, and mental development.

S19: "I think that it affects all development areas of children positively because development is a whole."

12) What contributions does inclusive education contribute to the child's realization of themselves?

35% of the teachers pointed out the increase in academic achievement, 45% to positive changes in self-confidence and self-perception, and 20% that they got to know life and were prepared.

S7: "Because the personality development of children is largely shaped in this period, positive self-perception and self-confidence develop.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the effects of the education received by the children who receive inclusive education in the pre-school period and the effects of this education on social development as well as other development areas were examined. Attention was drawn to the importance of inclusive education. The differences between preschool children who received inclusive education and those who did not receive inclusive education were discussed by the relevant people within the scope of both social development and other development areas. Inclusion students are children with special needs and they are individuals who should be brought into society instead of being isolated from society. In the study, inclusive education, the importance of this education, and its effects on social development were examined and discussed by scanning the relevant literature. Within the scope of the research, teachers emphasized the positive effects of inclusive education in pre-school education on social development. He thinks that children's academic achievement is maximized by inclusive education in language, cognitive, social-emotional, motor, personality, and other development areas. Teachers believe that inclu-

sive education provides benefits in the development of children's attitudes and behaviors towards school, friends, family, teachers, and the environment, that is, social life in general. Teachers think that children can learn social roles in social environments, daily routines, classroom, and school rules, interpersonal relations, empathy skills, understanding the other side by using language for communication purposes, and being understood are among the benefits of education as a means of socialization. They believe that they have improved in terms of positive self-perception, self-care, and self-confidence. In the research, it has been revealed that inclusive education has a positive effect on social development. In conclusion, the contributions of inclusive education, as perceived by teachers, extend far beyond the confines of the classroom. As educators continue to navigate the complexities of inclusive practices, it is evident that the Inclusive Education Accord serves as a guiding light, inspiring positive change and creating a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape.

Recommendations

By implementing the recommendations below, schools can create inclusive environments where every child feels valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential in preschool and beyond in general.

Continuous Professional Development: Provide ongoing training and workshops for teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills in inclusive education practices. This includes strategies for differentiation, behavior management, and creating inclusive learning environments.

Collaborative Planning and Teamwork: Encourage collaboration among teachers, special education professionals, and support staff to develop individualized plans for students with diverse needs. Foster an inclusive culture where all team members contribute their expertise and insights.

Flexible Curriculum and Instruction: Design a curriculum that accommodates diverse learning styles, abilities, and interests. Implement flexible instructional strategies that allow for personalized learning experiences tailored to each child's needs.

Promotion of Social-Emotional Learning: Integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) activities into the curriculum to foster empathy, self-awareness, and positive relation-

ships among students. Provide opportunities for cooperative play, peer interaction, and conflict resolution.

Parental Involvement and Communication: Establish open lines of communication with parents and caregivers to discuss their child's progress, challenges, and goals. Involve parents in decision-making processes and seek their input on strategies for supporting their child's development at home and school.

Resource Allocation and Support Services: Ensure adequate resources, materials, and assistive technology is available to support inclusive practices in preschool classrooms. Advocate for additional support services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and counseling, to address the diverse needs of students.

Promotion of Positive Attitudes and Beliefs: Foster a school culture that celebrates diversity, promotes acceptance, and values the contributions of all students. Encourage teachers and students to challenge stereotypes, address biases, and promote inclusive attitudes within the school community.

Evaluation and Reflection: Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive practices through classroom observations, student assessments, and feedback from stakeholders. Reflect on successes and challenges to make informed decisions and adjustments to support ongoing improvement.

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