

An Investigation on the Opinions of Special Education Teachers Regarding Inclusion/Integration

Özel Eğitim Kurumlarında Görev Yapan Eğitimcilerin Kaynaştırma/Bütünleştirme ile İlgili Görüşlerinin Belirlenmesi

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This study was presented by Minho University as a poster at Teacher Education Policy in Europe (TEPE) Congress, 17-19 May 2018, Portekiz.

ABSTRACT: Objective: This study aimed to investigate the opinions of special education teachers on inclusion. Teachers who were employed at special education schools in Ankara and who agreed to participate voluntarily were included in the study. **Material and Methods:** The study adopted the interview technique, a qualitative research method. The semi-structured "Interview Form for Determining Opinions on Inclusive Practices" developed by the researchers with peer debriefing was used to gather information on the special education teachers. **Results:** The study results revealed that the special education teachers mainly provided individual instruction to children by utilizing materials, that they organized parent-teacher meetings for the families and participated in school meetings on inclusive practices with classroom teachers, that they were unable to intervene in some situations and experienced problems due to the negative perception of school staff, administrators and parents toward inclusion. In addition to decreasing the number of included students in classes, providing in-service training to classroom teachers, increasing the number of class hours, organizing parent-teacher meetings and educational support for students, the special teachers also said they would maintain the existing inclusive activities without modification and discontinue inclusive education if they were authorized. Furthermore, the special education teachers emphasized that the children with special needs were subjected to exclusion from diagnosis to inclusive education, that these children compared themselves with normally developing children, experienced anxiety and were traumatized throughout the process, and that parents greatly struggled with acceptance. **Conclusion:** The results of the study aimed to investigate the opinions of teachers working at special schools on inclusive practices showed that the participants mainly provided individual instruction to children by utilizing materials and organized parent-teacher meetings for the families.

ÖZET: Amaç: Araştırmada özel eğitim kurumlarında görev yapan eğitimcilerin kaynaştırma uygulamalarına ilişkin düşüncelerinin incelenmesi amaçlanmıştır. **Gereç ve Yöntemler:** Araştırmaya Ankara ilinde özel eğitim kurumlarında görev yapan ve araştırmaya gönüllü katılan eğitimciler dahil edilmiştir. Nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden görüşme tekniği kullanılmıştır. Eğitimcilere ilişkin bilgi elde etmek amacıyla araştırmacılar tarafından uzman görüşü alınarak geliştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış "Kaynaştırma Uygulamaları ile İlgili Düşünceleri Belirlemeye Yönelik Görüşme Formu" kullanılmıştır. **Bulgular:** Çalışma sonucunda eğitimcilerin; çocukların gelişimlerini desteklemek için çocuklara yönelik daha çok materyallerden destek alarak bireysel eğitim verdikleri, ailelere yönelik olarak veli görüşmesi yaptıkları, kaynaştırma uygulamaları ile ilgili okuldaki toplantılara katılarak sınıf öğretmenleri ile görüşme yaptıkları, bazı durumlarda ise müdahale edemedikleri, okuldaki çalışan, yöneticiler ve velilerin kaynaştırmaya ilişkin olumsuz bakış açısı nedeniyle sorun yaşadıkları saptanmıştır. Eğitimciler kaynaştırma uygulamaları ile ilgili kendilerine bir yetki verildiğinde sınıflarda kaynaştırma öğrencilerinin sayısını azaltmak, sınıf öğretmenlerine hizmet içi eğitim vermek, ders saatini arttırmak, veli görüşmesi yapmak, toplantılar düzenlemek, çocuklara destek eğitim vermek gibi önerilerin yanında kaynaştırma ile ilgili çalışmalarını değiştirmeden aynı şekilde uygulamaya devam etmek ve kaynaştırmayı kaldırmak gibi çözüm önerileri de getirmiştir. Eğitimciler; özel gereksinimli olan çocukların tanıdan kaynaştırmaya kadar olan süreçte dışlandığını, kendini normal gelişim gösteren çocuklarla kıyasladığını, kaygı yaşadıklarını, süreç boyunca yıprandıklarını ya da farkında olmadıklarını belirtmiş, ailelerin ise kabullenme sürecinde büyük sorun yaşadığını ifade etmiştir. **Sonuç:** Özel eğitim kurumlarında görev yapan eğitimcilerin kaynaştırma uygulamalarına ilişkin düşüncelerinin incelenmesi amacıyla yapılan araştırmanın sonucunda araştırmaya dahil edilen eğitimcilerin çocukların gelişimlerini desteklemek için çocuklara yönelik daha çok materyallerden destek alarak bireysel eğitim verdikleri, ailelere yönelik olarak ise veli görüşmesi yapmakta oldukları saptanmıştır.

Keywords: Special education; inclusion; special school

Anahtar Kelimeler: Özel eğitim; kaynaştırma; özel eğitim kurumu

The prerequisite to the provision of individualized education to children is attention to individual differences during the education process.¹ Children

with special educational needs have significantly different individual characteristics and educational competencies from their peers. Therefore, in order to

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facilitate social integration and development into independent individuals, they should be included with normally developing peers in the least restrictive environment and with suitable educational programs and adjustments.^{1,2} A series of integrated activities are needed in order to provide children with special needs to integrate into social life. Inclusion/integration of children with special needs allows the realization of these goals, promotes social development for a positive self-concept and personality, helps them to become independent and effective members of society, and positively contributes to the adaptation of mothers with children with special needs as well as, to their emotions, thoughts, perceptions, expectations and hopes of the future.²⁻⁴ Today, the term inclusion is commonly used in place of integration but it should be noted that integration has some features that are different from inclusion. Whereas inclusion involves the part-time or full-time education of individuals with special needs along with normal peers assisted by support services; integration is full time education carried out in mainstream classrooms in which support services are provided within the classrooms.⁵ It is known that in parallel with those aims some problems are experienced, teachers have difficulty in classroom management and controlling those students, there are problems in educational assessment, identification and placing, individuals are not informed sufficiently during the process, parents do not accept their children's special cases, children, who develop normally, exhibit negative attitude and behaviors against the students with special needs.⁵⁻¹⁰ It is also stressed that, children with special needs, who receive inclusive education, have problems with their teachers and friends at most, and teachers do not have sufficient information about children with special needs and inclusion.¹¹⁻¹³

Successful and effective inclusion can only be achieved through adopting the correct approach to inclusion at special schools, developing effective inclusive programs and active participation of all educators involved with the special needs child's education and inclusion.¹⁴ This encompasses the teachers working at the special schools which the special needs individual attends. The education pro-

gram should be developed and implemented based on the type and degree of the needs under the responsibility of both normal and special education staff. Although a review of past research on inclusion yielded numerous studies aimed at examining opinion on inclusion/integration among students at various levels of education, classroom teachers, preschool teachers, science teachers, music teachers, administrators and parents, there were no in-depth studies on the opinions of teachers working at special schools, and master's theses and doctoral dissertations mostly adopted the quantitative approach.^{3,7,15-24} In this regard, it is critical to determine the opinions of special education teachers on inclusion/integration. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the opinions of teachers employed at special schools concerning inclusion/integration.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study adopted the interview technique, a qualitative research method, and criterion sampling, a purposive sampling method, in the investigation of the opinions of teachers employed at special schools on inclusion/integration. Criterion sampling basically involves selecting cases that meet a set of predetermined criteria.²⁵ Thirteen teachers who were employed at special schools in Ankara, had a four-year undergraduate degree and at least five years of experience, and agreed to participate voluntarily were included in the study. Of the participants, 12 were female and one participant was male.

A review of literature was conducted, and a draft interview form was developed by the researchers to gather information about the teachers. After peer debriefing, the "Interview Form for Determining Opinions on Inclusive Practices" was finalized. The interview form comprised questions on what the teachers did to promote the development of the child, facilitate the inclusion of the child and to provide support to the parents, the implementation of inclusion, the problems the teachers experienced during inclusion, and the difficulties the child and the parents experienced from diagnosis until inclusion. The study data were evaluated with descriptive analysis. The study was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki

Declaration Principles. Verbal informed consent was obtained from the participants included in the study.

RESULTS

The results of the study on the opinions of special education teachers on inclusive practices are presented below:

The teachers were inquired as to what they did for the children and the parents to support the development of the children with special needs. Six of the teachers reported utilizing educational materials to promote development. On the subject, T1 said “I teach using the materials suitable for the child’s needs.” Some of the teachers stated that they provided individual and group instruction. Teachers also reported organizing drama and cinema activities and playing games with the children.^{1,5}

All the teachers declared conducting meetings with the parents to support the children’s development. T5 reported meeting with the parents and ensuring they observed individual instruction (the child’s lesson) to support the child at home.¹³ She said “I meet with the parents. I invite the mother to the classroom 10 minutes before class and show her how I teach. I ask her to support the child’s development the same way at home.”

When queried as to what they did regarding inclusive practices, the majority of the teachers reported attending school meetings with classroom teachers.⁹ T13 summarized her activities as “Schools are the primary location of inclusion, but we meet with the teachers of our included students to help achieve a more successful inclusion. I regularly attend school meetings about included students. We share our opinions about the decisions that concern the child,” and T2 said “I attend school meetings. We have to sign for attendance.” In addition, T6 declared conducting group activities at the special school and T4 characterized inclusion as adaptation to the class, explaining “We work on an individual basis. Inclusion means adapting to the class. Children initially come to us and learn taking directives. Then they attend school for inclusion. We do not implement inclusion here, but we prepare children for inclusion.” Some of the teachers participating in the study expressed their in-

ability to intervene.² On the subject, T10 said “We can’t intervene. If the child has serious challenges, we advise the parents to enroll the child in a special education class.”

When requested to relate the problems they experienced regarding inclusion, the teachers reported that staff and administrators and parents had a negative perspective toward inclusion.⁴ T13 complained about the negative attitude of staff and administrators, saying “We are upset by the negative perspective of public school teachers and administrators particularly toward inclusion.” Concerning the negative perspective of parents, T9 expressed her opinion as “The parents don’t want inclusion,” and T3 said “Other parents complain. If one child has a chronic cough, other parents believe the child has a contagious disease and complain. The unconscious attitude of other parents leads to problems.” In addition, some of the teachers emphasized the unwillingness of classroom teachers to have included students in the classrooms by saying (T2) “Classroom teachers don’t want included students. They see them as a source of disorder and paperwork.”³ One teacher stated that education was not given due importance at the school and one teacher reported not experiencing any problems.

When the teachers were inquired about what adjustments they would make if they were given authority, four teachers expressed their desire to reduce the number of included students in their classrooms and two teachers wanted to provide in-service training to classroom teachers. On decreasing the number of included students, T4 said “If there are few students, for example twenty, in the classroom, one special needs student may be included.” Other teachers reported intentions to meet with the parents, provide educational support and organize meetings.¹ In addition, T3 replied “Although we have complaints, I would continue the current practice,” stating that she would resume the current inclusive practice without modification. On the other hand, one teacher expressed her desire to terminate inclusive education. T2 emphasized her opposition to inclusion and summarized her opinion as “Look, I am a mother of a child with special needs, but I am against inclusion. We intend to include but can’t save the child. They

should be in the company of children like them. Children with specific learning disorder or physical disabilities can be included, but they should separate children with moderate disabilities. The child is traumatized.” Furthermore, T5 replied “I would increase the weekly two-hour education time at special schools,” and two of the teachers did not share their opinions.

Six of the teachers stressed the exclusion of special needs students when queried as to the difficulties special needs children and their parents experienced from diagnosis to inclusion. On the subject, T11 said “The children become unwelcome students at the school,” and T13 said “The child is labeled due to the diagnosis and is sometime ostracized by normally developing peers.” There were also teachers who stated that with special needs students were compared with normally developing students, experienced anxiety and were traumatized by inclusion, while some teachers emphasized the unawareness of the special needs child about the process. T5 expressed her opinion as “Most of the special needs children are unaware. They see the special schools as private tutoring.”

The great majority of the teachers stressed the serious problems parents experienced during the acceptance process. T12 conveyed her opinion as “It is hard to accept. In fact, they don’t accept. They take it very hard. Parents of children with mild disabilities never acknowledge,” while T5 said “Rejection and denial. They have this hope that everything will quickly improve,” and T4 said “At first, they don’t understand what’s happening. They think everything will be fine once the child begins speaking. They don’t accept.” Furthermore, there were also teachers who reported that some parents had issues with the classroom teacher or other parents, mistreated their children and compared them with normally developing children. T3 expressed her opinion as “She compares her child with other children, saying ‘Why can’t my child do it and her child can?’”

DISCUSSION

The results of the study on the opinions of special education teachers on inclusive practices are discussed below:

The teachers were inquired as to what they did for the children and the parents to support the development of the children with special needs. Six of the teachers reported utilizing educational materials to promote development. The frequent use of educational materials at special schools during individual and group instruction for promoting children’s development is commonly known. The fact that two of the teachers organized different activities and encouraged playing games indicates an emphasis on not only cognitive and academic skills but also on other developmental domains.

All the teachers declared conducting meetings with the parents to support the children’s development.¹³ Showing the parents how to use the methods and strategies that promote the child’s learning when they come to the special school can be an opportunity to support the child’s development.¹⁴ At the present, educators are attentive to the opinions of parents and other family members in making pedagogical decisions.²⁶ However, it can be stated that it stems from the short interviews of educators, who work in special education institutions, with the parents only during the breaks, the arrival of individual with special needs to special education institution for two course hours in a week, the educators’ only academic support on the individual in that short time and their being obliged to enter the other course for another student due to the busyness. The educators’ informing the parents for a short time during the breaks in order to support the children’s development may not be sufficient. Also, the lack of information about what can be done for families in order to support the child’s development can be the reason of that situation. Firstly, the level of information of the educators should be increased so that they can carry out effective activities aimed at families such as “giving education”.

When queried as to what they did regarding inclusive practices, the majority of the teachers reported attending school meetings with classroom teachers.^{2,9} Some of the teachers participating in the study expressed their inability to intervene. On the subject, T10 said “We can’t intervene.² If the child has serious challenges, we advise the parents to enroll the child in a special education class.”. Special teachers provide consultancy to inclusive classroom teachers to

facilitate the inclusion of children with special needs, as the formation of effective interdisciplinary teams are one of the keys to success in working with special needs children. Meeting all the complicated needs of a child with a disability requires teamwork and the parents are the most critical member of this team. Teachers and experts must attain a respectful environment based on trust and good communication to function successfully as a team, where team members must see themselves as a part of the team, be willing to work together, focus on clearly defined goals and have the opportunity to express themselves.¹⁴ The study by Esmer, Yılmaz, Güneş, Tarım and Delican also indicated the importance of collaboration of classroom teachers with other members involved in the process of inclusive education, emphasizing the significance of collaboration among parents of special needs children, school administration, counselling and research center staff, and special teachers. In special education, meetings that congregate different disciplines is critical in child development. These meetings provide an opportunity to discuss the children's with progress in attaining their developmental goals, to form teaching strategies, to find solutions to problems or to resolve existing conflicts.¹⁴ In Turkey, the staff employed at special schools are officially required to participate in the meetings at the special needs child's school. Expedient meetings, active participation and collaboration among all educators working with the child is necessary for successful inclusion and special teachers should not only attend these meetings but also contribute more time to inclusive practices.

When requested to relate the problems they experienced regarding inclusion, the teachers reported that staff and administrators and parents had a negative perspective toward inclusion. Participant answers concentrated on the negative attitude toward inclusion of administrators, classroom teachers and parents at inclusive schools. This situation can be ascribed to the problems teachers and administrators at inclusive schools experience and the negative impact of these problems on the parents due to not having been readied for inclusion, which is supported by the literature. Teachers have a positive opinion about the necessity of inclusive education but generally ex-

perience problems with implementation in their classrooms and schools and are poorly informed about inclusion.^{18,27} The study by Olçay Gül and Vuran revealed that instructional adjustments for special needs students were insufficient in inclusive classrooms, that teachers focused more on the improper behavior of the special needs students rather than their positive behavior, that disciplinary actions were imposed, that the special needs students were not encouraged to participate in social activities most of the time and that the support of their normally developing peers was not fostered. The study also showed that special needs students had decent peer relations, did not have any expectations regarding their education, had limited participation in activities and generally received support from family members when facing challenges. Lindsay, Proulx, Scott and Thomson reported that classroom teachers recommended several strategies such as ensuring teamwork, communicating with the family and building a climate of acceptance in the classroom through disability awareness and sensitivity training.²⁸ Special education process can be developed by an interdisciplinary team, of which the family is the most important member. These problems regarding inclusion may be due to several factors: Teachers do not have the opportunity to practice in inclusive classrooms during their undergraduate education, weekly hours of undergraduate courses on inclusion are insufficient and they do not attend in-service training after graduation. Furthermore, teachers are expected to be open to collaboration with specialists from different disciplines.

When the teachers were inquired about what adjustments they would make if they were given authority, four teachers expressed their desire to reduce the number of included students in their classrooms and two teachers wanted to provide in-service training to classroom teachers. It is noteworthy that the teachers participating in the study mainly expressed a desire to make chances concerning adults other than themselves, which may be an indication of problems experienced with the other parties. The teachers' recommendation for the provision of in-service training is directly parallel to the literature. Past studies reported that teachers were not adequately equipped for special education and inclusion, that they did not

have adequate knowledge and skills for inclusive education which lead to failure and problems during inclusion, that they were not sufficiently informed about instructional adjustment and that the instructional adjustments they made were limited.^{27,29-31} However, the study by Yatkın, Sevgi and Uysal revealed the unwillingness of teachers to attend a prospective training to eliminate their shortcomings regarding inclusion. They reported that teachers did not wish to have included students in their classrooms and believed included students negatively impacted the academic performance of normal students.³²

Six of the teachers stressed the exclusion of special needs students when queried as to the difficulties special needs children and their parents experienced from diagnosis to inclusion. There were also teachers who stated that special needs students were compared with normally developing students, experienced anxiety and were traumatized by inclusion, while some teachers emphasized the unawareness of the special needs child about the process.¹ The study by Olçay Gül and Vuran reported that students with special needs did not have any expectations regarding their education, had limited participation in activities and generally received support from family members when facing challenges.⁵ Ceylan and Aral found that most mothers of these children had to face numerous challenges such as inclusive classes, enrolling the child to the school or classroom and the child's transportation.²³ Additionally, Zakaria listed negative perception of the mainstream teachers and peers, peer bullying, exclusion, academic difficulties due to having to follow the regular curriculum as their normally developing peers and lack of parental support among the many challenges included students experience.³³ These problems impact the self-concept of students with special needs.

The great majority of the teachers stressed the serious problems parents experienced during the acceptance process.⁹ Getting acquainted with the family's situation during the acceptance process may provide insight into the needs of the family members.³⁴ Therefore, the opinions of teachers working at special schools would be useful in identifying the services to be provided to parents of special needs children. Parents go through various phases as they come to ac-

cept their child with special needs and experience high levels of stress.³⁴⁻³⁸ Participant answers were congruent with the literature. In the study by Töret, Özdemir, Selimoğlu and Özkubat, parents characterized their first emotion after their children's diagnosis as "shock" and some of the parents reported thinking it might be a disease that can be cured with surgery, or a treatable or temporary condition. The same study also emphasized designing and providing family-centered support in order to deliver support resources, improve problem-solving skills and promote parental competence.³⁹

CONCLUSION

The results of the study aimed to investigate the opinions of teachers working at special schools on inclusive practices showed that the participants mainly provided individual instruction to children by utilizing materials and organized parent-teacher meetings for the families. The special education teachers reported participating in school meetings on inclusive practices with classroom teachers, being unable to intervene in some situations and experiencing problems due to the negative perception of school staff, administrators and parents toward inclusion. In addition to decreasing the number of included students in classes, providing in-service training to classroom teachers, increasing the number of class hours, organizing parent-teacher meetings and providing educational support to students, the special teachers also said they would maintain the existing inclusive activities without change and discontinue inclusive education if they were given authority. In addition, the special teachers stressed that children with special needs were subjected to exclusion from diagnosis to inclusion and that special needs children compared themselves with normally developing children, experienced anxiety and were traumatized throughout the process, while parents had great difficulty with acceptance.

In line with the study results, the researchers would like to make the following recommendations:

- Providing in-service trainings to special teachers employed at special schools to help them implement effective strategies for inclusion and parental training,

■ Carrying out studies in order to correct the negative attitudes of the managers, teachers in the inclusive schools, parents, and others with whom the child communicate against the inclusion and organizing awareness activities and informing educations within this scope,

■ Making arrangements for decreasing the course-hour loads of educators working in the special education institutions in order to increase their interaction with the other personnel in the inclusion school and with the families and developing control mechanisms,

■ Conducting observational studies to support the qualitative data on inclusive practices.

Source of Finance

During this study, no financial or spiritual support was received neither from any pharmaceutical company that has a direct connection with the research subject, nor from a company that provides or produces medical instruments and materials which may negatively affect the evaluation process of this study.

Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest between the authors and / or family members of the scientific and medical committee members or members of the potential conflicts of interest, counseling, expertise, working conditions, share holding and similar situations in any firm.

Authorship Contributions

All authors contributed equally while this study preparing.

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