How Do Early Childhood Leaders Perceive Inclusion of Young Children with Disabilities in General Education Classrooms?

Erken Çocukluk Eğitimi Liderleri, Özel Gereksinimli Küçük Çocukların Genel Eğitim Sınıflarına Dahil Edilmesini Nasıl Algılıyor?

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Abstract

Leaders of early childhood programs play a critical role in fostering inclusion and ensuring teachers effectively implement inclusive practices to provide meaningful and enriching learning experiences for all children. However, limited research exists on perspectives about inclusion. This study examined the perceptions of early childhood leaders about the inclusion of young children with disabilities. A total of 168 leaders (directors and assistant directors) participated in the study. Findings revealed moderately favorable perceptions of inclusion. Gender, age, administrative role, and community type were found to predict leaders' perceptions, while professional and personal experience did not show significant associations. These results highlight the need for further research and have implications for inclusive practices in early childhood settings.

Keywords: *Early childhood education, leader, perceptions, inclusion, children with disabilities, general education.*

Öz

Erken çocukluk programlarının liderleri, kapsayıcılığı teşvik etmek ve öğretmenlerin tüm çocuklar için zenginleştirici öğrenme deneyimleri sunmasını sağlamak konusunda önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Ancak, kapsayıcılık ile ilgili lider perspektiflerine dair sınırlı araştırma bulunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, erken çocukluk liderlerinin engelli küçük çocukların genel eğitim sınıflarına kaynaştırılması konusundaki bakış açılarını incelemiştir. Çalışmaya toplamda 168 lider (müdür ve müdür yardımcısı) katılmıştır. Bulgular, kapsayıcı eğitime yönelik orta düzeyde olumlu algılar ortaya koymuştur. Cinsiyet, yaş, idari rol ve topluluk türü, liderlerin algılarını etkileyen faktörler olarak belirlenmiştir; ancak mesleki ve kişisel deneyimler anlamlı bir ilişki göstermemiştir. Bu sonuçlar, kapsayıcılık üzerine daha fazla araştırma yapılması gerektiğini vurgulamakta ve erken çocukluk ortamlarında kapsayıcı uygulamalar için önemli çıkarımlar sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Erken çocukluk eğitimi, lider, algılar, kapsayıcı eğitim, engelli çocuklar, genel eğitim.*

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Introduction

The practice of inclusion has been recognized for over 40 years as a means to support the development and learning of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. However, it was only after the passage of Decree Law 573 in 1997 that inclusive education in early childhood settings began to gain significant momentum. Since then, there has been a gradual increase in the number of young children with disabilities who receive developmental and educational services in inclusive early childhood settings (Diken et al., 2016). Early childhood inclusion is characterized by three defining features: access, participant, and support (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Access refers to providing young children with disabilities with opportunities to engage in a wide range of learning activities, settings, and environments. It emphasizes the importance of removing barriers and ensuring equal opportunities for all children. The participation feature highlights the use of naturalistic teaching strategies aimed at supporting the engagement and learning of children with disabilities in their everyday activities, settings, and environments. This approach encourages the integration of children with disabilities into their natural peer groups and promotes their active involvement in age-appropriate activities. The support feature recognizes the significance of having a comprehensive system in place to assist practitioners in implementing inclusive services for young children with disabilities and their families. This support can take various forms, such as providing incentives for inclusion, adjusting the staff-to-child ratio to ensure that each child receives individualized care from practitioners, and offering ongoing professional development opportunities for practitioners. These professional development activities are essential for equipping practitioners with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to effectively implement inclusive practices that lead to positive learning outcomes for young children with disabilities (Rakap & Balikci, 2023).

Leaders have an indispensable responsibility in fostering inclusion (Steed et al., 2023) and making sure that teachers effectively implement inclusive practices to provide meaningful and enriching learning experiences for all children. Their responsibilities encompass various aspects of inclusion, starting with facilitating the initial enrollment of children with disabilities and ensuring that the physical environment and space environment are appropriate and accessible to all children regardless of their abilities. In terms of participation feature of inclusion, leaders actively participate in identifying curriculum materials and instructional strategies that uphold inclusive practices. They also provide support to enrich involvement of families into their children's education, recognizing the importance of collaboration and engagement with families in the educational journey of children with disabilities.

In relation to the support feature, leaders have the responsibility to provide professional development training and opportunities to teachers, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to implement inclusive practices effectively. They also collaborate with community organizations to foster partnerships and resources that support inclusion. Additionally, leaders are tasked with managing the budget to provide material support, ensuring that adequate resources are available to meet the diverse needs of children with disabilities. Furthermore, leaders play a crucial role in developing a shared vision among staff, stakeholders, and the broader community to facilitate the successful implementation of inclusion practices. Their leadership and guidance are instrumental in creating an inclusive culture and fostering a supportive and welcoming environments for all children. It is worth noting that leaders' beliefs and perspectives significantly influence their decisions and actions concerning the inclusion of young children with disabilities in their schools.

While numerous studies in the existing literature have focused on teachers' (Rakap & Kaczmarek, 2010) or primary school leaders' perceptions about inclusion (Lindner et al., 2023), very small number of studies have specifically focused on leaders of early childhood programs (Purcell et al., 2007; Rakap, 2024; Steed et al., 2023). Early studies indicated that school leaders were cautious about the inclusion of children with disabilities (Wigle & Wilcox, 1997), while more recent research has shown a shift towards positive perceptions among school leaders regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities in their schools (Hess et al., 2016; Urton et al., 2014). However, it is important to note that various factors can influence their perspectives. One significant factor is the severity of the disability (Avissar et al., 2003; Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998; Steed et al., 2023). Studies have found that leaders may be less inclined to support the inclusion of children with significant support needs.

Similarly, the presence of significant behavior problems can also impact leaders' perceptions (Wood et al., 2014). Additionally, the availability of resources in schools, such as educational materials and trained staff, plays a role in shaping leaders' perceptions about inclusion (D'Agostino & Douglas, 2021; Rakap, 2024; Steed et al., 2023). Limited resources, including staffing and funding, may lead to less support for inclusive practices. Furthermore, studies have explored predictors of school leaders' perceptions about inclusion. Some research has found that demographic variables, such as gender, age, years of experience as a leader or teacher, or experience with children with disabilities, do not consistently predict leaders' perceptions (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998; Rakap, 2024; Wood et al., 2014). However, other studies have reported that perceptions can differ based on variables such as teaching experience (Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus, 2021), special education training (Nguluma et al., 2017; Praisner, 2003), or personal experience with children with disabilities (Praisner, 2003).

Empirical studies examining the perceptions of early childhood school leaders towards the inclusion of young children with disabilities are notably scarce (e.g., D'Agostino & Douglas, 2021; Rakap, 2024; Steed et al., 2023). One study conducted by Steed et al. (2023) sheds light on this subject by investigating the perspectives of 23 preschool leaders through qualitative interviews. The findings revealed that while leaders generally held positive perceptions about inclusion, they also expressed several concerns that influenced their perception of full inclusion. These concerns encompassed factors such as the severity of children's disabilities or support needs, as well as the necessity for additional financial and personnel support to effectively implement inclusive practices. Given the limited amount of research in this specific area, Steed et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of future studies that delve into the perspectives of early childhood leaders regarding inclusion. Interestingly, no research studies were found in the Turkish literature that specifically examined leaders' perspectives or attitudes towards inclusion in early childhood settings.

The scarcity of empirical research in this are highlights the need for further investigation into the attitudes and perceptions of early childhood leaders when it comes to the inclusion of young children with disabilities. This type of research is vital in developing a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing leaders' attitudes and perceptions, which can ultimately inform the development of effective strategies and supports to promote successful inclusive practices in early childhood settings. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of early childhood leaders towards the inclusion of young children with disabilities. By examining their perspectives, this research aims to provide insights into leaders' general attitudes and perceptions regarding inclusive practices in early childhood education. Additionally, this study seeks

to identify and explore the factors that are associated with early childhood school leaders' perceptions about inclusion. The following research questions were addressed in the present study: (1) What are the perceptions of early childhood school leaders about the inclusion of young children with disabilities in preschool settings? (2) What factors are associated with early childhood school leaders' perceptions about inclusion?

Method

Participants and Procedures

This study utilized a survey methodology, wherein a web-based questionnaire including a form to collect demographic information data from the participants along with the Opinions Relative to the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities (ORI) Scale (Antonak & Larrivee, 1995) was distributed to 426 leaders of early childhood programs across 14 cities. Of these, 168 leaders (comprising 88 principals and 80 assistant principals) submitted completed questionnaires, yielding a response rate of 39.5%, and the data obtained from these questionnaires constituted the basis for analysis. Out of the 168 leaders surveyed, 53% identified as female, 63.7% held positions as assistant principals, and 60.7% were employed in schools situated in urban areas. The mean age for participants was 38.4 years (SD = 4.80; range = 27-50 years). On average, participant had 6 years (SD = 3.20; range = 1-11 years) of administrative experience, 10 years (SD = 3.37; range = 4-16 years) of teaching experience and 5.54 years (SD = 3.81; range = 0-15 years) of experience with children with disabilities.

Prior to the commencement of the study, participants completed an informed consent form, which outlined the objectives of the study, detailed the procedures to be followed, and provided clear explanations regarding confidentiality, anonymity, and data storage. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without facing any negative consequences. This study was approved by a university ethics committee (20/08/1551).

Instrument and Data Analysis

Although there are different scales evaluating attitudes towards children with disabilities in the literature, the fact that the ORI scale has strong psychometric properties is a globally accepted and widely used current measurement tool and has been effectively used in studies conducted in different cultures and contexts increases the comparability of the findings of our study with the international literature and allows them to be evaluated in a wider academic context. The ORI Scale includes 25 item score using a 6-point Likert scale from strong agreement (+3) to strong disagreement (−3). The sum of responses range between 0 and 150 as a constant of 75 is added to eliminate negative results and higher scores indicate a more positive perception (Antonak & Larrivee, 1995). Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficient was .81 for 25 item-scale in this study, indicating adequate reliability for the sample. Data were analyzed using descriptive analysis and ANOVA based on demographic characteristics of participants.

Results

As illustrated in Table 1, the overall sentiments among early childhood leaders leaned slightly favorably towards the inclusion of young children with disabilities, indicated by a mean ORI score of 90.32 (SD = 8.27). An examination using one-way ANOVA indicated statistically significant differences in mean ORI scores based on gender, age group, administrative position, and community setting. Specifically, female leaders exhibited a higher mean score compared to male counterparts ($F(1, 166) = 26.87$; $p < .001$); those

aged between 27-32 displayed a higher mean score than older age groups ($F(3, 164) = 3.67$; $p = .014$); principals demonstrated a higher mean score compared to assistant principals ($F(1, 166) = 8.97$; $p = .003$); and leaders situated in urban school settings exhibited a higher mean score compared to those in rural areas ($F(1, 166) = 4.33$; $p = .039$). Interestingly, years of administrative or teaching experience, or previous exposure to children with disabilities, did not significantly influence the perceptions of early childhood leaders.

Table 1. Mean ORI Scores and ANOVA Results by Participant Characteristics

Variable	Descriptive		ORI Results		ANOVA Results			
	n	%	Mean	SD	df	F	η^2	p
Gender								
Male	79	47	87.05	7.84	1	26.87	.139	<.001
Female	89	53	93.21	7.56				
Age								
27-32	21	12.5	95.57	12.91	3	3.67	.063	.014
33-38	66	39.3	89.61	6.44				
39-44	64	38.1	89.95	7.89				
44+	17	10.1	87.94	6.80				
Role								
Director	61	36.3	92.79	8.62	1	8.97	.051	.003
Assistant director	107	63.7	88.91	7.75				
Leader experience								
1-5	76	45.2	90.62	9.79	1	.186	.001	.667
6-11	92	54.8	90.07	6.80				
Teaching experience								
4-8	62	36.9	91.53	9.20	2	1.13	.014	.325
9-12	63	37.5	89.84	7.75				
13-16	43	25.6	89.26	7.51				
Experience with children with disabilities								
0-3	59	35.1	90.32	8.58	3	.38	.007	.767
4-6	47	28	91.26	9.71				
7-9	32	19	89.31	5.54				
10+	30	17.9	89.90	7.81				
Community type								
Urban	102	60.7	91.37	8.74	1	4.33	.025	.039
Rural	66	39.3	88.68	7.23				
Overall mean and SD	168	100	90.32	8.27				

Note. ORI = Opinions Relative to the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities Scale.

Discussion

The perceptions of early childhood leaders towards inclusion play a crucial role in determining the extent to which young children with disabilities are included and the overall success of inclusive practices. The findings of this study reveal that early childhood leaders generally hold slightly positive perceptions about inclusion. Similar patterns have been observed in studies conducted in other countries, where leaders may have certain concerns regarding the full inclusion of young children with disabilities, particularly those with severe disabilities or specific diagnoses (e.g., Steed et al., 2023).

Leaders often approach inclusion from a logistical standpoint, considering various aspects that impact their perception of inclusion. Their responsibilities encompass tasks such as hiring and training practitioners, scheduling, allocating funds for adaptive materials, organizing physical space, and ensuring an appropriate teacher-child ratio. All of these factors can significantly influence how leaders perceive inclusion and their willingness to implement inclusive practices. One recurring theme in the literature is the leaders' expressed need for increased funding, improved teacher preparation and professional development opportunities, and additional support staff to effectively implement high-quality inclusive practices (Lawrence et al., 2016; Steed et al., 2023; Weglarz-Ward et al., 2019). Insufficient support systems in terms of resources and personnel can have a direct impact on leaders' attitudes towards the inclusion of young children. When faced with limited funding or inadequate professional development opportunities, leaders may face challenges in providing the necessary accommodations and supports for inclusive education.

Regarding the relationship between leaders' perceptions and personal characteristics, the findings of this study align with previous research (e.g., Horrocks et al., 2008; Praisner, 2003), showing that professional experience as a leader or teacher, as well as personal experience with students with disabilities, does not significantly predict leaders' perceptions about inclusion. However, this study diverges from earlier findings by highlighting differences in perceptions based on gender and age. The influence of gender on attitudes toward individuals with disabilities has been inconsistently reported across studies. While cross-cultural research suggests that Western cultures generally exhibit more positive attitudes towards individuals with disabilities compared to non-Western cultures (Scior et al., 2010), it is also consistently noted that women tend to hold more positive perceptions than men across all cultural contexts (Hampton & Zhu, 2011). Despite these trends, the intersectionality of gender, culture, and culturally bound gender roles introduces complexity, making it challenging to fully understand how these factors collectively shape attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.

The differences observed in perceptions based on age may be attributed to recent shifts in educational policies that emphasize inclusion. Many educator and leader preparation programs have responded by offering more courses on diversity and inclusion, ensuring that individuals entering the profession have a foundation in inclusive practices. Additionally, educational professionals often engage in practical experience opportunities, such as student teaching or internships, where they are exposed to inclusive settings during their pre-service training (Rakap et al., 2017). This exposure to diverse disabilities and firsthand experience with inclusion, guided by mentors or supervisors, may contribute to the development of more favorable attitudes towards the inclusion of children with disabilities.

Furthermore, the findings of the present study indicate that early childhood leaders working in schools located in urban areas exhibit more favorable attitudes towards inclusion compared to those working in rural areas. This difference may be attributed to the resource limitations often encountered in rural communities. Schools in rural areas may have fewer resources available to address the unique needs of children with disabilities, including the necessary materials, support staff, and professional development opportunities. The lack of adequate support systems and limited exposure to strategies for supporting inclusive practices in rural areas could contribute to less favorable attitudes towards the inclusion of young children with disabilities among leaders.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for practice in promoting inclusive early childhood education for children with disabilities. It is crucial to address the practical considerations and support systems that influence leaders' perceptions about inclusion. First, adequate allocation of financial resources is essential to support inclusive practices. Schools and educational authorities should prioritize funding for adaptive materials, assistive technologies, and specialized personnel to meet the diverse needs of children with disabilities. By ensuring the availability of necessary resources, leaders can be better equipped to implement inclusive practices and support positive perceptions about inclusion. Second, comprehensive and ongoing professional development opportunities are vital for leaders and practitioners. Training programs should focus on inclusive education strategies, differentiation techniques, behavior management, and collaboration with families and specialized professionals. By enhancing leaders' knowledge and skills, they can effectively support and guide practitioners in implementing inclusive practices. Third, it is important to address leaders' concerns related to the severity of disabilities, behavior challenges, and logistical aspects of inclusion. Open communication channels should be established to address these concerns and provide necessary guidance and support. Leaders should be encouraged to engage in dialogue and collaboration with stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and professionals, to develop solutions and strategies that promote successful inclusion.

This study highlights the significant influence of gender, age, and geographic location on leaders' perceptions about inclusion. Educational institutions must prioritize fostering an inclusive culture that embraces diverse perspectives and experiences. Professional development programs should integrate gender sensitivity training and promote opportunities for intergenerational collaboration, ensuring that leaders across all demographics are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to support inclusive practices effectively.

Leaders in rural areas often face unique challenges, including limited resources, fewer professional development opportunities, and restricted access to support networks. Targeted efforts are essential to address these disparities, such as providing accessible and context-specific training programs, facilitating networking opportunities with urban counterparts, and fostering partnerships with local community organizations. Additionally, addressing the economic disparities between urban and rural regions requires a more equitable distribution of resources to ensure consistent investment in programs aimed at improving inclusive attitudes and practices across all settings. By addressing these structural and cultural barriers, educational institutions and policymakers can create a more equitable and inclusive environment for young children with disabilities in early childhood education. Collaboration among leaders, teachers, families, and community stakeholders is essential to align leadership attitudes with the principles of inclusion, ultimately contributing to meaningful and lasting improvements in outcomes for all children.

Limitations and Recommendation for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into early childhood leaders' perceptions about inclusion, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the use of self-report measures in data collection introduces the possibility of social desirability bias. Participants may have provided responses that they perceived as more socially acceptable or aligned with inclusive practices. Future research could use additional methods such as interviews or

observations to complement and validate the findings obtained through questionnaires, and qualitative or mixed methods research could provide an in-depth examination of the variables that influence leaders' perceptions. Second, the study was conducted in two specific geographic regions. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to other regions or contexts. It is recommended to replicate the study in diverse regions to capture a broader representation of early childhood leaders' perceptions about inclusion. Third, the data for this study were collected using a tool that was developed approximately 30 years ago. Over the past three decades, our understanding and implementation of inclusive practices have evolved significantly. Advances in research, policy, and pedagogical strategies have reshaped how we conceptualize inclusion, emphasizing not only physical integration but also meaningful participation, equity, and individualized support within diverse educational settings. Given these advancements, future research should prioritize the utilization of tools that reflect contemporary understandings of inclusive education.

There is still a need for additional research to deepen our understanding of leaders' perspectives and perceptions about early childhood inclusion. Future studies could explore factors that influence leaders' perceptions, such as their personal beliefs, organizational support, or the specific challenges they face in implementing inclusive practices. It is important to examine the association between leaders' perspectives and perceptions about inclusion and the actual quality of inclusive practices implemented in schools. Assessing the alignment between attitudes and the provision of inclusive services, teacher support, and resources can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of leaders' perceptions about inclusive practices and outcomes for young children with disabilities. By addressing these limitations and conducting further research, we can enhance our understanding of leaders' perspectives and perceptions about inclusion in early childhood settings, allowing for more informed decision-making and the development of effective strategies to promote inclusive practices.

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