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Perceptions of Turkish Preschool Teachers' about Their Roles within the Context of Inclusive Education*

Abstract

The roles and responsibilities of preschool teachers are principal factors in the success of inclusive practices. Teachers should be aware of their roles and act accordingly in order to be effective in inclusive settings. The aim of this study is to evaluate preschool teachers' perceptions of their roles within the context of inclusion education. The participants were 19 preschool teachers with students with disabilities in their inclusive classrooms. Based on semi-structured interviews with the teachers, their role perceptions are discussed under six themes. Teachers are aware of some, but not all of their roles and responsibilities required of them by the relevant special law. They have significant deficiencies in knowledge and strategies necessary to adequately fulfill their legally-defined roles.

Keywords: inclusion, preschool teachers, role perception

Introduction

Inclusive education in early childhood is a common practice nowadays, especially in developed countries (Diken et al., 2016; Odom and Wolery, 2003; Rakap, 2017a). It is seen as an important part of education both nationally and internationally (Sharma et al., 2008). Research has shown that among the factors affecting the success of inclusion practices, classroom teachers, who are the primary practitioners of inclusive education are the most important ones (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Bakkaloğlu et al., 2018; Dias and Cadime, 2016;). Numerous studies have investigated teachers' attitudes towards inclusion (Avramidis et al., 2000; Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; De Boer et al., 2011; Dias and Cadime, 2016; Hastings and Oakford, 2003; Parasuram,

2006; Rakap and Kaczmarek, 2010), their competence and efficacy in special education (Akcan and Ilgar, 2016; Weisel and Dror, 2006) which all play important roles in the success of inclusive education.

In the social behaviours of individuals, status and roles are two important concepts for sociology and social psychology. Status refers to a set of tasks and relations within the social system determined by limits accepted by the society (Güney, 2009). Roles refer to a set of behaviours that society expects from individuals in certain positions (Feldman 1995). Individuals' roles define a status that will enable them to be active in society. When the rights and obligations of individuals within the social structure are determined, their roles are also determined and individuals' behaviours within the social

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structure become predictable (Güney, 2009). The basic functions of roles are to provide a division of labour, to define the behaviours expected of individuals, to clarify individuals' tasks according to goals, and to shape individuals' self-definition (Arko-naç, 2008). Following from these definitions, teaching can be understood as an official social status. Teachers' roles refer to the behaviours expected from them. In order to realize the benefits of inclusion, preschool teachers in inclusive classrooms should exhibit behaviours in accordance with their status.

There are few studies that evaluate teachers' role perceptions within the context of inclusive education. Görgün (2013) reported preschool teachers' opinions on the roles and responsibilities of assistant teachers in special education. Teachers thought that assistant teachers should have sharing attitudes, be patient and fair, and preserve classroom privacy. Katsafanas' (2006) study with special education teachers showed that job satisfaction was the main factor for teachers to fulfil their roles and responsibilities and participate in decision-making. School counsellors who participated Goodman's (2005) study said that they saw their own roles and responsibilities within the context of inclusive education as being a consultant, partial administrator, and advocate of inclusive education. Minondo et al. (2001) showed that compared to general education teachers, special education teachers are more active in adopting roles that involve teaching, communicating, supporting and paying attention to students with disabilities. Smith and Smith (2000) showed that factors negatively affecting teachers' perceptions of inclusive education were classrooms with in appropriate physical conditions and lack of cooperation with other educators or administrators.

Inclusive Practices and Preschool Teacher Roles in Turkey

Although inclusion as an education model in Turkey was first described in 1983 (Turkish Ministry of National Education [MEB], 1983), inclusive practices in Turkey were legally secured in 1997 (MEB, 1997). Studies on inclusive preschool practices in Turkey are limited. These studies have examined opinions, attitudes and competences of preschool teachers or teacher candidates about inclusion practices (Altun and Gülsen, 2009; Rakap et al., 2016; Sucuoğlu et al., 2014). They have addressed the behaviours of children with special needs in the classroom, their behavioural differences from children without special needs and peer relations (Demir, 2016; Demirkaya and Bakkaloğlu, 2015), parents' opinions of inclusion, relations or differences in families with and without children with special needs, levels of involvement (Sucuoğlu and Bakkaloğlu, 2018) and effectiveness of teaching methods and intervention programs (Aldemir and Gürsel, 2014; Odluyurt and Batu, 2010; Rakap, 2017b; Rakap, 2019). Recently, there has been a significant increase in the number of children with special needs who were placed in inclusive preschool classrooms. The number of students participating in inclusive education was 304 in the 2014–2015 academic year (MEB, 2015a), which increased ten-fold to 3585 in the 2016–2017 academic year (MEB, 2017). The roles and responsibilities of preschool teachers in Turkey were determined by the MEB (see Table 1). Teachers should know these roles and responsibilities and perceive them as their own roles in order to exhibit the behaviours expected from them.

Table 1

Preschool teachers' roles with respect to inclusive education (MEB, 2006; MEB, 2015b)

Planning and maintaining the education process according to the principles stated in the program
Planning and maintaining individualized education programs (IEPs)
Preparing or providing instructional materials according to the needs of students
Participating in and organizing family training activities
Providing support and guidance to students
Cooperating with the executive committee of guidance and psychological counselling services and the IEP development unit
Determining the educational needs and level of students educated in inclusive classrooms
Planning and managing the interaction of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms with other students
Evaluating the effectiveness of education with students with disabilities in inclusive settings

In Turkey, four-year undergraduate programs that educate preschool teachers have only two special education courses. Pre-service teachers complete teaching practice courses in preschool classrooms but they do not directly work with children with special needs. They are provided with limited professional training in inclusive education. Hence it is understandable that they do not consider themselves adequately trained to educate children with special needs (Rakap et al., 2016). When teachers have students with special needs in their classrooms, it is assumed that they are aware of their roles and will perform them adequately. Along with teachers' self-perceptions, their knowledge and awareness of the concrete tasks for each role is also important. Clarifying role perceptions will provide an opportunity to compare the roles specified for teachers and their own perceptions of those roles. This comparison will allow for planning professional development programs. The results of this study are expected to guide the preparation of content for in-service training programs for preschool teachers and pre-service teacher training programs.

The purpose of this study is to determine role perceptions of preschool teachers who have children with disabilities in their classrooms within the context of inclusive education. Knowledge and awareness levels of teachers with regard to how they perform their roles are also examined. Based on their opinions, we attempt to explain issues such as IEPs, determining priority skills to be gained, implementation and evaluation of education, implementation of behaviour change programs, social acceptance of the students, and family involvement.

Methods

Research Model

This study uses a phenomenological model, which focuses on the perceptions, experiences and thoughts of individuals in depth and explores findings with a holistic view of these components (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013). Descriptive phenomenology research attempts to determine what phenomena people have experienced or are currently experiencing (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007; Ersoy, 2016; Patton, 2002). We applied this model to our study to evaluate preschool teachers' perceptions

of their roles in relation to inclusive education. Participants in phenomenology studies can provide detailed and rich data, in accordance with the qualitative research tradition (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). In phenomenology research, the quality of participation is more important than the quantity of participants since the goal is not to generalize. Hence participants should be experienced in the study's topic (Patton, 2002).

Participants

Participants of the present study were 19 preschool teachers with experience of having children with disabilities in their classrooms. The goal of choosing these participants was to obtain the richest and most varied data possible. A purposeful sampling procedure was used to identify participants who can make the richest contributions based on the study's criteria (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2013). The criteria for participating in the present study were general professional experience at least two years, and the number of children with disabilities in their classrooms. Using these criteria, 19 female preschool teachers who worked in public preschool classrooms in the city of Eskişehir in Turkey were selected to participate in the study. Information about study participants and their classrooms is presented in Table 2.

Data Collection Tools

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to collect data in the present study. Interviews are among the fastest ways to learn about the knowledge, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours of the participants (Sharma, 2010). Interviews may be divided into different types, depending on their purpose, the characteristics of the interviewee, and the flexibility of the interview's rules. One of the most common types of interviews uses standardized open-ended questions in a specific sequence (Patton, 1987).

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the preschool teachers and semi-structured interview questions were asked in a specific order, with the goal of assessing role perceptions of preschool teachers who had children with disabilities in their classrooms.

Prior to writing interview questions, the authors conducted an in-depth review of the literature on teachers' roles. These roles were discussed with two experts in special education. This guided the interview

Table 2.
Participants.

Participants	Age	Professional experience	Class size	Number of children with disabilities
Participant 1	33	8	16	1
Participant 2	32	10	27	2
Participant 3	33	3	16	1
Participant 4	34	11	16	2
Participant 5	35	8	14	1
Participant 6	33	10	22	1
Participant 7	32	12	12	1
Participant 8	33	12	28	1
Participant 9	39	14	18	3
Participant 10	28	6	21	1
Participant 11	36	13	22	1
Participant 12	32	11	16	2
Participant 13	36	12	21	1
Participant 14	36	12	23	1
Participant 15	42	15	17	1
Participant 16	38	6	20	2
Participant 17	30	8	13	2
Participant 18	30	9	24	1
Participant 19	35	9	19	3

questions that the authors prepared. Next, we consulted a panel of three experts, finalized the questions, and conducted a pilot study.

Data Collection Process

Participants were selected from a list provided by the Province Directorate of National Education as a voluntary-basis. Interviews were conducted in an appropriate place at the schools where the teachers worked outside of the class time. Before the interviews, teachers filled out the demographic information for mas well as the informed consent forms. The duration of interviews was 17 minutes on average (range = 9 min to 30 min).

Data Analysis

Data analysis in phenomenology research focuses on describes the targeted phenomenon to reveal associated experiences and thoughts (Creswell, 2016). We followed Moustakas’s (1994) method to describe the

role perceptions of preschool teachers who had children with disabilities in their classrooms and their thoughts on the process of inclusive education. The method has three stages: pre-analysis, post-analysis, and writing results. The data consist of 154 pages and 4286 lines of text that were checked by a researcher experienced in both qualitative research and inclusive education. Statements on role perceptions were listed and grouped in the dataset to prepare it for analysis. Next, codes were determined by decreasing and eliminating these statements. These codes were grouped into six themes, which were examined by two different researchers. Both researchers agreed on the majority of themes with the reliability percentage ranging from 83.33% to 100% (mean = 94%). Intercoder agreement was calculated using the following formula: (agreement / agreement + disagreement) × 100 (Yıldırım and Şimşek). Table 3 lists the themes identified.

Table 3.
The themes identified

Themes	
1	General views on inclusion
2	Determination of the IEP and priority skills
3	Instructional practices and evaluation of children with disabilities
4	Behaviour management practices for children with disabilities
5	Peer acceptance and family involvement
6	Their role as a teacher in inclusive classrooms

Results

General Views on Inclusion

Generally, teachers stated that inclusive practices were useful in supporting the child's social development. Some teachers (n = 7) said that students who were included in inclusive practices and who had a severe intellectual disability were not suitable for inclusion. They believe that part-time inclusion is more appropriate for these students. The problems mentioned by the teachers were crowded classrooms (n = 5), the lack of a teaching assistant in the classroom (n = 7) and their lack of training on inclusion (n = 5).

Determination of the IEP and Priority Skills

More than half of the teachers (n = 10) believe that the preparation of the IEPs contributes to the development of students while the rest did not or were undecided. Many stated that IEPs should be prepared by a team (n = 14). Some teachers said that they did not think they were competent in developing IEPs (n = 5). It was stated that the objectives should be determined by a team (n=12), based on observations of the child (n=4). Teachers also stated that social skills should be taught primarily to students with special needs who participate in inclusive classrooms (n=14). After social skills, self-help skills were the most frequently mentioned as skills to be developed (n=14).

Instructional Practices and Evaluation of Children with Disabilities

Most teachers (n = 15) said that they use a variety of methods to achieve IEP objectives and that they implemented some instructional practices. These practices included encouraging children to participate in activities (n=6), adapting activities to the abilities of children (n=4), providing physical assistance (n=4), being a model (n=2), providing face-to-face interaction (n=2), and providing peer support (n=2). Four teachers stated that they did not carry out any practices. They defended this by saying that children with disabilities learned slightly more slowly than other children and that inclusive practices involve slower teaching rather than adapted techniques.

Teachers said that evaluations should be performed periodically (n = 7). They reported that they performed evaluations by monitoring the general development at the end of the period rather than evaluating

specific situations. They also reported that they used development observation forms provided by the MEB in these evaluations (n=3). One teacher reported not doing any evaluation.

Behaviour Management Practices for Children with Disabilities

Most teachers rewarded appropriate behaviour of children with disabilities (n = 15). Four participants stated that they do not. However, teacher's statements do not mention specific reinforcement methods for rewarding. The most commonly reported method for dealing with problem behaviours was verbal warnings (n=9). Other methods were enabling other children to become models (n=4), ignoring inappropriate behaviours (n=3), removing children from the classroom (n=3), withdrawing rewards (n=2) and redirecting children's attention to a different object or activity (n=2). However, in the interview notes, there is no indication that these practices were carried out systematically.

Peer Acceptance and Family Involvement

All teachers agreed that it was necessary to take steps so children with disabilities are accepted by their peers. The most common approach was to inform other children (n=13) and their families (n=14) about children with disabilities as well as encouraging children to help their peers with disabilities. One teacher stated that it was also important for the parents of children with disabilities and the families of typically developing children to meet. The participation of the parents of children with disabilities in classroom activities was also reported.

Teachers' Role in Inclusive Education

The most frequent response on teachers' roles was to enable inclusion students to socialize (n=10). Other roles included educating children with disabilities (n=7), guiding their families (n=5), and participating in the evaluation process of these children (n=4). In addition, three teachers stated that they saw themselves in a supportive role rather than a primary role in the education of children with disabilities. Two teachers stated that their role should be making plans for children with disabilities, which would be implemented by an assistant teacher. This would let them to pay attention to the rest of the children in the classroom.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to determine role perceptions of preschool teachers who have children with disabilities in their classrooms within the context of inclusive education. Findings of the present study generally coincide with previous studies. The findings suggest that inclusive education supports students' social development, which agrees with other studies. The literature says that the main benefit expected from inclusion is socialization and social development (Rakap, 2015; Warren et al., 2016). Avramidis and Norwich (2002) reported that teachers considered the inclusion of students with medical and physical difficulties most appropriate, followed by students with special learning difficulties and speech disorders. Lee et al. (2015) also found that teachers consented to include students with learning difficulties and speech disorders at the highest level and students with behavioural disorders at the lowest level. According to the reports of participants in the study of Rakap and Kaczmarek (2010) only 35% of the teachers who answered to the survey were eager to include students with severe learning difficulties into their classrooms. Rakap et al. (2016) expressed that pre-service teachers showed more favourable attitudes towards working with children with severe physical disabilities than those who have severe cognitive and behavioural disabilities. Akalın (2015) and Sadioğlu et al. (2013) reported that teachers recommended that inclusion should be part-time.

One of the problems raised by teachers is that classrooms are crowded, which has also been mentioned by other teachers in Turkey (Kargın et al., 2003; Sadioğlu et al., 2013; Saraç and Çolak, 2012). Kuyini et al. (2016) reported that crowded classrooms are a problem for teachers in Ghana. However, classroom sizes in this study and the number of children with disabilities in each classroom were in accordance with MEB guidelines. Complaints about crowded classrooms are more meaningful when there is no support or teaching assistant teacher in the classroom, which has also been reported previously (Kuyini, et al., 2016; Sadioğlu et al., 2013), in addition to the lack of training on inclusion (Kargın et al., 2003; Sucuoğlu et al. 2014). In the absence of support and adequate training, it

may be difficult for teachers to pay attention to inclusion and children with disabilities.

This study's findings on preparing IEPs and priority skills for students are consistent with previous studies. For example, previous studies showed that teachers believe that IEPs are beneficial (Lee et al., 2015) and that the careful preparation and implementation of IEPs at the beginning of the year enables students to participate in class throughout the year (Demirezen and Akhan, 2016). Also, in agreement with the literature, teachers do not see themselves as being competent in developing IEPs (Dikici et al., 2011; Nonis et al., 2016) and that this requires a team (Lee-Tarver, 2006). Working as a team would help teachers learn to develop IEPs, which would lead to improvements in the preparation and implementation of IEPs for children with disabilities served in inclusive classrooms.

Teachers saw social and self-help skills as priorities for children with disabilities. Teachers who are trained in inclusion focus on developing social skills of children with disabilities (Grenier, 2011). Kemp and Carter (2005) reported that primarily classroom skills and then social and self-help skills were important for successful preschool inclusion. Akalın (2015) reported that general education teachers give priority to non-academic skills in children with disabilities, and that self-help and social skills are at the forefront, followed by classroom skills. Nickerson and Broshof (2003) also emphasize the importance of teaching non-academic skills. The findings of this study suggest that preschool teachers emphasize social and developmental aspects rather than academic skills, which is similar to the findings of Galović et al. (2014). In this study, teachers emphasized the benefit of inclusion to support social development. This is reinforced by social skills and self-help skills, which increase social acceptance. However, the findings of these studies, Rakap's (2015) study shows that only 126 of the 2235 BEP aims for preschool age group focus on social-emotional development, while 232 focus on self-help adaptive skills, on the other hand, 1155 focus on cognitive/academic skills. This finding can be interpreted as the fact that what the teachers say and do is not overlapping. Boavida et al., (2010)'s study shows that self-help goals were somewhat more functional than were social, language, cognitive, and motor goals. Most teachers

stated that they implement instructional practices for children with disabilities. In a study conducted in Turkey, teachers encouraged participation in the classes, made frequent repetitions and supported these practices with homework and the preparation of additional materials (Kargın et al., 2003). Fyssa et al. (2014) reported that Greek teachers did not carry out instructional practices with proven efficacy in inclusive environments. In the current study, teachers did not use the systematic approaches suggested by Odom and Wolery (2003), environmental structuring such as engagement, communication, interaction, or play that enables the child to develop in social, language and communication areas, in addition to strategies and instructional methods based on material or play chosen or preferred by the child. Teachers in the study evaluated children with disabilities periodically with the same forms that they use for typically developed students. In the literature, it is emphasized that students should be evaluated by informal techniques at the beginning of the semester and adaptations should be made according to the characteristics of students (Avcıoğlu, 2011; Ernest et al., 2011). Zhang (2011) reported on a school in which students are evaluated three times a year based on IEP objectives. In the current study, teachers emphasized periodic evaluation but did not mention appropriate adjustments based on children's characteristics or evaluating whether student objectives were achieved. These findings suggest that participants do not have effective evaluation procedures for children with disabilities.

Teachers' behaviour management practices for children with disabilities are consistent with those in the literature (Soodak 2003) such as rewarding students (Sukbunpant, 2013), verbally warning them (Sucuoğlu et al., 2010), cooperating with other students and taking breaks (Altun and Gülben, 2009; Sukbunpant, 2013). However, these methods used are not in accordance with the principles of the applied behaviour analysis and they are not systematic. There is no evidence that rewarding systematically improves appropriate behaviour. Teachers simply stated that they rewarded students. This was also the case for reducing problem behaviours. Findings of the present study is in line with the findings of a recent study reporting that Turkish preschool teachers do not use systematic and

intentional practices to address challenging behaviours demonstrated by children with disabilities in inclusive classroom settings (Rakap et al., 2018).

Teachers stated that they inform typically developing peers and their families about children with disabilities to ensure that they are accepted by their peers, similar to other studies (Kargın et al., 2003). Kargın (2004) states that for successful inclusive practices, typically developed children in the classroom should be informed about the characteristics of peers with disabilities and emphasizes the importance of participation in learning, playing, educational and social activities. Grenier (2011) stresses the need for teachers to implement cooperative learning practices in order to increase social interaction among students. In the current study, teachers did not mention strategies other than informing. Overall, it seems that teachers may not have information about the range of strategies available for increasing peer acceptance of inclusion students.

Informing families about school activities was the most emphasized activity for ensuring family involvement. Other studies have demonstrated the efficacy of family or parent involvement in child outcomes (e.g., Fishel and Ramirez, 2005). In the case of children with special needs, it is reasonable to expect that parent involvement is more important in the presence of extra repetitions and exercises. However, teachers do not implement techniques to involve families of children with disabilities (Rakap and Kaczmarek, 2010). Kargın et al. (2003) reported that teachers are limited to provide information about the student's situation in school in cooperation with the student's family and that one fourth of the participating teachers stated that they could not cooperate with families, which is similar to the current study's findings. Even though the law says that teachers of inclusive classrooms should play a role in organizing family education and supporting the family to help their children (MEB, 2006), it appears that this role is limited to giving information about classroom activities.

Conclusion

Generally, teachers are unaware of some of their roles in relation to inclusive education assigned by relevant legislation. It appears that their methods are not comprehensive

or effective enough to perform roles that they are aware of. It can be said that teachers have a significant lack of knowledge, awareness and skills on the nature and requirements of inclusive education and teachers' roles and skills. Teachers should be informed of the roles they must fulfil in inclusive settings and the skills they need to do so.

The first limitation of this study is that all of the schools where teachers work are in the city centre. It should be considered that teachers working in rural areas may have different views. Second, it is difficult to generalize the findings because the study was carried out with a relatively small group.

It is recommended that future studies test teachers' efficacy with empirical studies. In the present study, teachers' role perceptions were examined without providing any training or another support. Future studies can be planned by presenting training and support to teachers, and comparative group experimental studies can be planned by providing support services to a group.

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The second author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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