

TEACHERS' THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS WITHIN GENERAL EDUCATION SETTINGS REGARDING INCLUSION IN TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

Even though Turkish Ministry of Education (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 2006) accept the philosophy of inclusion and made huge shift in terms of this philosophy, inclusion has still not common yet in Turkey and that the required and expected levels of individual and social benefits have not been obtained (Sari, Celikoz, & Secer, 2009). Therefore, teachers' concern about inclusion is wondered. The purpose of this case study is to describe the attitudes of general education teachers' towards inclusion for students with disabilities and to understand the effectiveness of inclusion in classroom settings, in Turkey. Qualitative research method was used in this study. The research was done as a Case Study. Participants of this study are four general education teachers, two of them are working at elementary and other two are at secondary level. Even though inclusion is promising benefit for all students, the research showed that indeed, inclusion in Turkey is not working effectively because of several reasons, such as lack of professional development programs and inefficacy of existing programs for general education teachers and psychologist working in Guidance Research Center (RAM), lack of resource, lack of collaboration between teachers-psychologists, and teachers-family. Most critical finding is violation of inclusion rules.

Keywords: Teachers, Education, Turkey

Introduction

Although inclusion has long history in many countries, such as the United States, the word of inclusion and the implementation of it entered to Turkish Education system almost a decade ago. The inclusion phenomenon has been become popular across the country, nowadays. As literature comes from outside of the country show high benefits for students with disabilities, and students without disabilities as well, for instance, it is believed all students do or do not have a disability benefit from inclusion; including students with a disability in general education setting helps them to be socialized with their peers without a disability and this is critical for the success in their life (Rakap and Kazcmarek, 2009). In addition, it is underlined that the greatest benefits are gained only if professionals in school hold positive attitudes toward the inclusion of children with disabilities (Combs, Elliott, & Whipple, 2010; Sari, Celikoz, & Secer, 2009; Casale-Giannola, 2012). As a service provider for students with disabilities, teachers' or professionals' role and thought about inclusion of students with disabilities have critical importance.

It is claimed that "some researchers have assumed that attitudes and behaviors were closely related and that attitudes could be useful in predicting behavior," however, many teachers have negative attitudes as a reason of ill preparation, because they feel incompetence to provide high quality instruction depends on the needs of students (Combs, Elliott, & Whipple, 2010, p. 114). National Center for Education Statistics (1999) states only one out of five students feels prepare to deliver core curriculum for linguistically, racially and academically diverse students. It is also claimed teachers' previous experience determine their current positions (Alquraini, 2012).

Even though Turkish Ministry of Education (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 2006) accept the philosophy of inclusion and made huge shift in terms of this philosophy, inclusion has still not common yet in Turkey and that the required and expected levels of individual and social benefits have not been obtained (Sari,



Celikoz, & Secer, 2009). Therefore, teachers' concern about inclusion is wondered. The purpose of this case study is to describe the attitudes of general education teachers' towards inclusion for students with disabilities and to understand the effectiveness of inclusion in classroom settings, in Turkey. At this stage in the research, inclusion is defined as "a term which expresses commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend" (Wisconsin Education Association Council, 2007).

Qualitative research method was used in this study. The research was done as a Case Study. Participants of this study are four general education teachers, two of them are working at elementary and other two are at secondary level.

Even though inclusion is promising benefit for all students, the research showed that indeed, inclusion in Turkey is not working effectively because of several reasons, such as lack of professional development programs and inefficacy of existing programs for general education teachers and psychologist working in Guidance Research Center (RAM), lack of resource, lack of collaboration between teachers-psychologists, and teachers-family. Most critical finding is violation of inclusion rules. Although Turkish Ministry of Education requires schools and responsible people to collaborate with special education teacher, school psychologist, classroom teachers, family members, and students while preparing Individualized Education Program (BEP) based on the article 72 (MEB Mevzuat, 2012), data shows there is no collaboration.

Big shift for professional development programs and one hour planning session are suggested to lessen the problem. Teachers Thoughts and Acts towards Inclusion within General Education Settings in Turkey
Introduction

All students with or without disabilities have the right to receive education in a least restrictive environment. In terms of this idea, to provide education regarding students' needs is one of the discussion topics in education settings, and this philosophy (inclusion) has been accepted for two decades in developed countries such as The United States of America. Recently, inclusion has also been used in developing countries. However, there are several critical factors to implementing the philosophy of inclusion successfully. Teacher attitudes and thought towards inclusion is one of them, and this is mostly considered as a key factor of successful implementation of inclusion.

At this stage in the research, the inclusion is generally defined as "a term which expresses commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend" (Wisconsin Education Association Council, 2007). The purpose of this study is to describe the attitudes and thoughts of general education teachers towards inclusion for students with disabilities at urban schools in Turkey. The qualitative research method has been used for the research and it is designed as a case study. The data are collected from the elementary and secondary school teachers by doing semi-structured interviews.

Literature Review

It was stated that all students who do or do not have a disability benefit from inclusion, for instance, including students with a disability in a general education setting helps them to be socialized with their peers without a disability and this is critical for the success in their life (Combs, Elliott & Whipple, 2010; Rakap and Kazcmarek, 2009). In addition, in the literature, it was underlined that the greatest benefits are gained only if professionals in school hold positive attitudes toward the inclusion of children with



disabilities (Combs, Elliott, & Whipple, 2010; Rakap and Kaczmarek, 2009; Sari, Celikoz, & Secer, 2009; Casale-Giannola, 2012). As service providers for students with disabilities, Teachers' or professionals' roles and thoughts about inclusion of students with disabilities have critical importance. Moreover, Combs, Elliott and Whipple (2010) claimed "some researchers have assumed that attitudes and behaviors were closely related and that attitudes could be useful in predicting behavior" (p.114). On the other hand, it must also be considered that "teachers who feel ill prepared for including students with disabilities, lead to feelings of incompetence that in turn leads to negative attitudes toward students with disabilities" (Combs, Elliott & Whipple, 2010). Moreover, there is a noteworthy statistic: "only one of five general education teachers feel well prepared to work in classrooms that included students who were culturally, linguistically, racially, or academically diverse" (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). For these issues, it was stated that teachers' previous experience, and their current positions, play critical roles (Alquraini, 2012).

Despite the Turkish Ministry of National Education's main concern that the children with special education needs continue their education together with their non-handicapped peers in grades kindergarten through eighth and informal education and where support services are offered (MilliEğitimBakanlığı [MEB], 2006), inclusion has still not been common in Turkey, and the required and expected levels of individual and social benefits have not been reached (Sari, Celikoz, & Secer, 2009). Therefore, teachers' concerns about inclusion are believed to determine their effects on successful implementation of the inclusion philosophy in general education settings.

In these studies (Brownell, Sindela, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010; Darling-Hammond, & Youngs, 2002; Grigorenko, 2008; Rowan, Correnti, & Miller, 2002), it is clearly seen that there was high correlation between students' success and teacher qualities. Significant relationship was found between linguistic knowledge or abilities of teachers and the success of students in linguistic activities (Brownell, Ross, Colon & McCallum, 2005; Brownell, Sindela, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010; Grigorenko, 2008; Moats & Foorman, 2003). Therefore, teachers who have insufficient knowledge most likely become ineffective no matter how perfect the curriculum and materials they are using (Rosenfield & Berninger, 2009). However, it was highlighted that "many teachers' knowledge of speech sounds, their identity in words, the correspondence between sounds and symbols, concepts of language, and the presence of morphemic units in words is not typically well developed" (p. 585).

Methods

A qualitative research method was used in this study. The research was done as a case study. According to Yin (2002), case study allows for investigation of multiple factors in naturally occurring events; therefore, this methodology was selected. The goal of the study was to investigate how effectively inclusive classroom settings are working for students with disabilities and to see current teachers' thoughts and concerns about inclusion for them. Research questions were determined as what are the teachers' general perceptions of including students with disabilities or at risk in general education settings, and how do their perceptions affect the implementation of inclusion philosophy?

Participants

Participants in this study have been working in Turkey, as elementary and secondary school teachers. Two participants were chosen from elementary schools in Bingol, which is located in the east part of Turkey. In one classroom, there was a student with hearing impairment, and in another classroom, there was a student with minimal brain injury. The other two participants were from Nevsehir, which is located in the middle



part of Turkey, and one of the participants had ten years of teaching experience in social sciences. The other one had 7 years of teaching experience in Math. Both of them had a student with a learning disability in their classrooms.

Four participants were specifically chosen, in an effort to investigate the specific experience of teachers in general education settings in Turkey. For deep understanding, the research team decided that the selection of four participants produced four interviews through the research. The semi-structured interview method was used, and it required at least 30 minutes of interview for one participant. Even though the semi-structured interview model is used, the concept of the interviews was closer to the neo-positivist approach (Paulston, 1991).

The interviews were made one on one using Skype. Before starting the interview, the aim of this interview and the study was introduced by the researchers, and verbal and written consents were requested from the participants. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. After that, all transcript data were translated from Turkish to English.

To support qualitative methodology, interviews were used based on participants' experiences, attitudes and concerns about inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings.

Data Analysis

All recorded data were transcribed and translated to English from Turkish and read by the researchers several times. Related quotes were coded and cut from the transcripts, and rearranged according to the emergent themes of a) teachers' lack of knowledge about special education, b) professionals and school psychologists, c) the violation of the law, and d) behavioral problems and physical aggression. It was considered that thematic data analysis is appropriate to shed light on the information given by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results

All participants in the research gave negative feedback about the inclusive classroom settings and they suggested a program such as individualized tutoring for the children with disabilities. All teachers in this study mentioned that they were not prepared to educate the children with disabilities. They complained about not receiving professional help from the Guidance Research Center (RAM, Turkish acronym) and not having professionals in their schools. Moreover, they stressed that the failure of students with disabilities caused some behavioral problems and physical aggressions. It was also noticed that there was a law violation in terms of preparing individualized academic plans for the children with disabilities.

a-) Teachers' lack of knowledge about special education

While analyzing data, it was realized that one of the biggest and most important key factors for successful implementation of the inclusion philosophy is teachers' knowledge. There was a lack of knowledge from two main perspectives. First, teachers have not enough knowledge about special education and what to do for children with disabilities. Second, teachers also struggle to understand the philosophy of inclusion. Therefore, even though they try to create inclusive classroom settings, they segregate the students with disabilities in the class.



All participants voiced their lack of knowledge about special education. They also stressed that they were not prepared to teach in a classroom which included linguistically, academically diverse students. For instance, one of the participants said:

T: “I took several courses during my graduate years, but they were not exactly what I need today... the courses did not include any kinds of information related to students with disabilities. I can say that I did not take a course specifically about the ways of inclusion.”

Since general education teachers are not prepared to educate students with disabilities or students who are at risk, there are negative effects on the success of the students and also teachers’ performance.

From the gathered data, it was also seen that even though children with disabilities do not really participate in the class and activities, it was called “inclusion.” Due to teachers’ lack of knowledge about the general philosophy of inclusion, students with disabilities were disregarded by the teachers. Since teachers’ success is evaluated based on average achievement of their students in the class even though the students with disabilities fail in their courses, it is not realized in the average achievement of the students. One of the participants’ comments clearly demonstrates the point of view about students with disabilities and inclusion:

T: “There are students like rotten apples (which he used for unsuccessful students) in every classroom and none of the teachers want to have a student like that. My understanding is if there is benefit for the majority in the class while disregarding one student, I prefer the majority’s benefit.”

Therefore, due to some important factors, such as curriculum and time, teachers cannot pay enough attention for every individual in their classroom and they considered average achievement; the improvement of students with disabilities was not important. It also showed that teachers did not have enough seminars, conferences, or workshops to understand the main goal of inclusion.

b) Professionals, school psychologists

Participants, many times, talked about the lack of opportunity for collaboration with other professionals, such as school psychologists. The schools in which they are working do not have school psychologists. Therefore, they could not receive help from the professionals and they needed to contact with other professionals who are working at RAM. However, there is only one RAM in their region. Moreover, even though they are supposed to help teachers to find the best available intervention to improve students’ academic success by collaborating with teachers, teachers indicated that the professionals have low expectations for students with disabilities

R: Did you learn the way of practice from any professionals, or did you find it as a result of trials?

T: When I say that I found the way of practice by trying, it may be more accurate... Without receiving help from professionals... umm... I did not find the activity I used while searching the internet... By experimenting, I decided that the way of practice is fit for my student... Currently, he is better at reading.

Not only psychologists, but also school administrators have low expectations for students with disabilities. These directly affect teachers’ performance. Teachers thought that they do not need to work hard to



improve students' academic skills because whatever they did or however students' improved was acceptable.

c) Violation of the law

All participants in the research stressed some systematical problems and the most important systematical problem that they mentioned was the violation of law. There were three different violations. The first one was that the IEP meeting does not work properly. Second, families were not informed about the process and they did not know the procedure. Finally, school teachers and professionals, such as psychologists in RAM, were not working collaboratively and IEP for the children with disabilities were not prepared by collaborating regarding the needs of students. General "packet programs" were provided to all students.

Even though the law required collaboration while preparing the IEP plans, teachers asserted that packet IEP plans were given at the head of academic years, and they were expected to deliver instruction regarding these IEP programs. However, the plans were general: there were not specific things in terms of the needs of the students. Furthermore, families did not know whether or not their children had an IEP plan, and they did not want to accept what teachers said about their students.

T: Generally, families are making us upset, because they are not accepting that their children are "kaynastirmaogrencisi" (the term was used to describe students with disabilities or at risk). When I say that the student is not able to read, they say he is reading appropriately at home. Umm... I say if he is reading correctly at home, why does he not read in class? They do not accept the issue in anyway. They do not want to believe it. Because of that, they are not supporting us.

In the law, it is stated that a family member is the one of the key participants of an IEP meeting. Regardless, families are even not aware of the problems which their children have. Indeed, there is no IEP meeting to discuss the needs of students with disabilities

d) Behavioral Problems and Physical Aggression

Participants reported that students considered as having disabilities showed behavioral problems and aggression. Several reasons for these problems can be counted. For example, participants reported that academic failure affects students' behaviors in a negative way. Also, the peers of the children with disabilities may sometimes demonstrate unacceptable behaviors such as teasing, abusing, or beating. It is for sure that these types of attitudes have a negative impact on children's self-confidence and behaviors.

As one of the participant mentioned:

T: To be with his peers in a classroom helps him to socialize and the student understand that he is a member of the community in which he is living. However, being an academically failure hurts the students. And it leadto increased behavior problems with their peers.

Therefore, because of these problems, these students can demonstrate physical aggression in and out of the classroom. Indeed, to include these students in regular classroom setting lead teachers to identify the students as having psychological problems instead of decreasing the academic gap between students with and without disabilities.



In addition to the students' physical aggression, students from different grade levels are teasing them by using the weakness of students' with disabilities, such as deafness and learning disabilities. Two participants especially underline the issue that teasing and related behavior most likely come from older students or other students who are not in same classroom.

Discussion

The result of the study clearly demonstrated that there is a huge problem in terms of the implementation of inclusion in general education classrooms in Turkey. Due to the result of the study, some precautions should be taken because it is alarming from many different aspects.

Based on many studies (Brownell, Sindela, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010; Darling-Hammond, & Youngs, 2002; Grigorenko, 2008; Rowan, Correnti, & Miller, 2002; Rowan, Correnti, & Miller, 2002), teacher qualities have a direct effect on students' academic success. However, both elementary school level teachers and secondary school teachers stressed that they were not prepared enough to educate the students with disabilities. Therefore, teachers' qualities affected students in a bad way. Even though teachers had received several courses in their undergrad and they attended some conferences and seminars, it is not correlated with the needs of students with disabilities and inclusive classroom settings, or it is not enough to better understand the issue. Therefore, after the research it is clearly seen that there is a lack of knowledge in terms of special education and inclusion for the teachers.

Furthermore, as many researcher, and studies stressed, professionals have an important role in inclusion and they provide huge benefits regarding positive attitudes toward the inclusion of children with disabilities (Combs, Elliott, & Whipple, 2010; Rakap and Kaczmarek, 2009; Sari, Celikoz, & Secer, 2009; Casale-Giannola, 2012). However, there are not enough school psychologists to provide help in the schools. It is clear that teacher preparation programs are insufficient and teachers need professional help, but indeed, there is a lack of professionals in that field which causes systematic problems.

Including students with disabilities in a general education classroom is critically important for their socialization with their peers without a disability (Rakap, & Kaczmarek, 2009). However, all these results and an inability for the implementation of inclusion does not help to make them socialized and causes additional problems, such as increasing behavior problems.

Recommendations for Future

Based on the participants' experiences and previous studies, it is clearly seen that the implementation of inclusion has not been working well enough and there are some problems which may be solved by taking precautions. As mentioned in the results, one of the most important things is to improve the knowledge and the awareness of teachers in general education classrooms and professionals in RAM regarding the needs of students with disabilities. Therefore, the following recommendations can be applied:

- Teacher preparation curriculum should be revised and some additional courses should be given to the pre-service teachers to prepare them to teach students with disabilities in classrooms which also include students without disabilities.
- The results are displayed that teachers not only struggle to deal with teaching students with disabilities, but also they did not understand the inclusion approach. Therefore, conferences, workshops and seminars should be organized for in-service teachers to help them to recognize teachers' role in the system and to understand what the philosophy of this inclusion is.



- There is a huge need for the school psychologists, and special education teachers. Many schools do not have any psychologists. Indeed, many regions have only one or no RAMs because of a lack of professionals in the field of special education. Therefore, there should be more recruitment for school psychologist and special education teachers. Also, to have qualified professionals, it can be considered to increase the number of university students in related departments.
- Family participation is very important, but unfortunately teachers mentioned that IEP meetings have not been done in collaboration with families. Therefore, families do not know anything about procedures and programs for their children. Most families do not know why their kids need to have different educational plans, so they are being suspicious and blame schools and teachers. Thus, it is very necessary to inform families about what has been done and what is going to be done.

Conclusion

Inclusion still can be considered as new phenomena in Turkey. Because of that there are several problems which can be seen in the implementation in the classes. To gather a deeper understanding about the implementation of inclusion, the study aimed to describe the attitudes and thoughts of general education teachers towards inclusion for students with disabilities at urban schools in Turkey.

Based on the results of the study, it has been recognized that there are some major problems with the implementation and understanding of inclusion among teachers. The interviews demonstrated that general education teachers do not have enough knowledge about students with disabilities and inclusion. Also, there is not enough opportunity for the teachers to understand the new system and to improve their teaching. Moreover, participants stressed the lack of professionals in the schools and they argued that teachers cannot get assistance from the professionals because there are not enough professionals in schools and in districts. This problem causes some systematical problems such as lack of regular IEP meetings, and failure to inform families about the procedure and process. The issue is the violation of the law which requires collaboration while preparing IEPs for students with disabilities. However, general packed programs are used for them without regard to their specific needs.

As a result, not creating appropriate class settings for inclusion of students with disabilities causes unexpected behavioral problems among students with and without disabilities. Therefore, further studies are suggested in that issue.

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