

# What Is Meant by Inclusive Education? Perceptions of Turkish Teachers towards Inclusive Education

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## Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine the perceptions of teachers in Turkey towards inclusive education through metaphors. Phenomenology was adopted in this research. The study group of the research consisted of 120 teachers working in public schools in Turkey in 2019-2020 academic year. Snowball sampling, criterion sampling and maximum diversity sampling methods were used to determine the study group. Content analysis was applied to the data. As a result of the research, it was revealed that Turkish teachers considered inclusive education as a process that required patience and exertion and that this education was an indispensable need for the student with special needs. It was concluded that suitable educational support should have been given to the students with special needs according to their individual needs. It was also concluded that it was important for students with special needs to share the same learning environment in an integrity without separating them from their peers who had 'normal' academic and social development. In addition, it was emphasized that students with special needs should have been accepted with their own behaviours and characteristics in the learning environments they were in and it was important to turn these differences into opportunities for the benefit of the student.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, students with special needs, metaphor

## 1. Introduction

Education is vital for children with special needs like all children both in terms of having a profession and participating in social life. Such that, attending school has an important place in completing the personality of the child and being an individual. In addition, social relations established both in social life and educational environments can change the situation of individuals with special needs and indirectly contribute to protecting their rights. For example, other children who communicate with children who have special needs in inclusive classrooms can learn not to be biased towards these children and respect differences. Therefore, it is possible to say that inclusive education has an indispensable role in promoting equal and fair societies.

One of the ways to provide education to the students with special needs is implementing inclusive education. Inclusive education sees all children as equal members of an educational community and supports their full participation in the general education system. Inclusive education requires recognizing and protecting the rights of all children and understanding human diversity as a rich resource. Inclusive education is an educational approach that is free from discriminatory beliefs, attitudes, and practices. Inclusive and integrative values should be put into action to ensure that all children participate in education and develop in inclusive education (Cologon, 2013).

Farrell (2000, 154) defines inclusive education as 'education service in which students with special needs participate in the general education system with their normally developing peers, take an active role in school life, and where they are seen as valuable and integral members of the school'. Similarly, Rafferty, Boettcher, and Griffin (2001, 266) explains inclusive education as 'the process of educating children with special needs in general education classes by using the services and support they need'.

According to Loreman and Deppeler (2002), the main purpose of inclusive education is not only to accept students with special needs but also to be ready to meet them with all their differences. To achieve this goal, it is not enough to

make changes only in terms of structure and functioning in schools. At this point, the attitudes, beliefs and values of school management, teachers and employees on this issue become important. Uditsky (1993), with similar thoughts, emphasizes that students with special needs (regardless of special requirement type and grade) in inclusive classes should be valuable members of their classes. According to the author, students in inclusive classrooms continue their education in general education classes (they are supported individually when they need), follow the curriculum (they benefit from individualized education programs in the least restrictive educational environments), make friends, contribute to the learning of the whole class by promoting a more tolerant classroom atmosphere and they participate actively in all stages of school life in accordance with their competences and interests.

There are some issues that should be taken into consideration for students with special needs to see themselves as part of the environment they are in and therefore to feel valuable. These issues include preparing programs to meet the needs of students or adapting existing programs in line with student needs, using effective methods and techniques in teaching and benefiting from support services both in and outside the classroom (Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, 2014). De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2011) state that issues such as education, resources, legislation, and teachers often come to the fore in research on inclusive education. Among them, especially teachers are considered to play a key role in the development and implementation of inclusive education (Meijer, 2003; Norwich, 1994). According to various studies examining the attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education, it was observed that some teachers had positive attitudes (Abbott, 2006; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Marshall, Ralph, & Palmer, 2002). Some teachers, on the other hand, had serious reservations about the implementation of inclusive education due to the problems experienced (Florian, 1998; Pearman, Huang, & Mellblom, 1997; Ring & Travers, 2005).

Various factors may influence teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with special needs. According to De Boer et al. (2011) teachers' attitudes generally differ according to the type of special needs the child has. In a study conducted by Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden (2000), it was found that teachers had more negative attitudes towards students with emotional and behavioural difficulties compared to other children with special needs. Apart from these, variables such as experience related to inclusive education (Moberg, 2003) and class size (Anderson, Klassen, & Georgiou, 2007; Rose, 2001; Smith & Smith, 2000) might have effects on teachers' attitudes.

While talking about inclusive education, it is also important to emphasize not only the academic objectives but social development of students as well. The aim of the parents to demand inclusive education for their children with special needs is to ensure their children's social development and increase their chances of communicating and interacting with their peers (De Boer et al., 2011; Sloper & Tyler, 1992). According to parent reports, peer relationships established in general education classes have positive effects on children with special needs in terms of their behaviours and social interactions (Koster, Pijl, Houten, & Nakken, 2007).

Although inclusive education has positive effects on children with special needs, many researchers state that there are some risks in this field both for students with special needs and other students. When evaluated from their perspective, children with special needs who benefit from inclusive education are ignored and mocked by other peers in the class (Cole & Meyer, 1991). Similarly, Wiener and Harris (1989) explain that students with special needs, especially those with learning problems, are rejected and neglected by their peers. Research on social acceptance shows that students with special needs in general education classes receive less acceptance than their classmates without special needs (Freeman & Alkin, 2000), they generally have a lower social status than their classmates (Pavri & Luftig, 2001; Kuhne & Wiener, 2000) and they show that they lead a more isolated life than their peers in terms of sociability (Margalit & Efrati, 1996).

Some practices in inclusive education may also have some negative aspects for students who do not have special needs. For example, placing students who display uncontrollable behaviours in general education classes may negatively affect other students both academically and socially (Kauffman, Lloyd, Baker, & Riedel, 1995). In addition, teachers who have students with special needs in their class may fail to provide appropriate support and service to meet the needs of these students (Shanker, 1995). In this context, the successful inclusion of students with special needs in schools within the general education system requires reform efforts to meet their different needs (Koh & Robertson, 2003). In schools that provide services to students with special needs, buildings or departments should be designed in such a way that all students can access and move freely (Pivik, McComas, & Laflamme 2002), curriculum should be revised to ensure effective and efficient participation of students and differentiated according to students' needs (Martinez & Humphreys, 2006).

Educating students with special needs in regular classrooms has been legally adopted in Turkey by Children with Special Educational Needs Law enacted in 1983. As of this date, the idea of organizing schools and classes to include all students and making adaptations to meet the individual needs of students has been increasingly adopted with the

spread of inclusive education. In this education system, it is emphasized that each child should be supported without being left behind (Kargın, Güldenoğlu, & Şahin, 2010). For a successful inclusive education, all school employees, especially principal, should take a welcoming and supportive attitude towards these students. Because children with special needs and their families constantly interact with teachers, school principals and other school staff by the school enrolment phase during which many problems start to emerge. There are many studies (Doğaroğlu & Dümenci, 2015; Sönmez, Alptekin, & Bıçak, 2019; Özkubat, Sanır, Töret, & Babacan, 2016; Toy & Duru, 2016) demonstrating that teachers play an important role in the effectiveness of inclusive education. From this point of view, it is possible to say that it is very important to reveal teachers' perceptions about inclusive education. In this context, it was aimed in this study to determine the perceptions of teachers in Turkey towards inclusive education through metaphors.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Research Design

Phenomenological research design, which is one of the qualitative research designs, was applied in this study. Phenomenological research design focuses on the cases that we are aware of but do not have detailed information on (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). The phenomenon in this study is the public-school teachers' perceptions about inclusive education.

### 2.2 Study Group

The study group of the research consisted of 120 teachers working in public schools in Ankara and Kayseri provinces of Turkey in 2019-2020 academic year. Snowball sampling, criterion sampling and maximum diversity sampling methods were used to determine the study group. Accordingly, it was started by the names known to the researchers and new names were reached using the snowball technique. While determining the participants, teachers with special needs students in their class were included in the study by using the criterion sampling approach. To reach the maximum diversity, the research was conducted with teachers who was working at different school levels (kindergarten, primary school, secondary school, and high school) and differed in terms of gender, professional seniority, and branch. A balance was achieved between school levels, gender, professional seniority, and branches of the teachers. Theoretical sampling approach was adopted when deciding on sample size. After 120 people were included in the study, the researchers decided that they had reached the saturation (Shenton, 2004) and stopped the process of including participants in the sample. 39 people were eliminated from the sample for not using the metaphor correctly in the form or leaving the questions partially or completely blank. Data analysis was performed on 81 participants. Accordingly, 20 participants were working in kindergarten, 20 participants were working in primary school, 21 participants were working in secondary school and 20 participants were working in high school. 46 of the participants were women and 35 of the participants were men. The work experience of the participants varied between 1 year and 20 years.

### 2.3 Data Collection

'Teacher Interview Form for the Examination of Teachers' Opinions about Inclusive Education through Metaphors' was used as data collection tool. In the first part of the form, there are questions about the personal information of the teachers and in the second part, there is a statement aiming to reveal the teachers' metaphor perceptions about inclusive education. There are several researches applying metaphors as a research tool, as metaphors give valuable data for defining perceptions (Noyes, 2004; Saban, Koçbeker, & Saban, 2005). In educational terms, metaphors are used as an effective tool to make meaningful connections between personal perceptions and educational theories (as quoted in Leavy, McSorley, & Bote, 2007).

In the second part of the form, a question was asked to the participants as: 'Inclusive education is like... Because...'. In metaphor studies, the concept of 'like' is used to explain the relationship between the subject of the metaphor and the source of the metaphor while the concept of 'because' is used to give a reason for metaphor (Saban, 2009). Data collection forms were given to the participants directly by the researchers and were collected by them.

### 2.4 Data Analysis

The data obtained with the forms were subjected to content analysis, which included determining patterns, coding, and categorizing steps (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). Following these steps, categories were created by reviewing the metaphors produced for each concept and the expressions of the participants about why they used these metaphors. In other words, metaphors produced by teachers were grouped under specific categories for each concept. Frequency (f) values for each metaphor was calculated in each category.

### 2.5 Trustworthiness

The relevant literature was scanned, and the tests used to reveal metaphors were utilized to ensure trustworthiness. The questions in the data collection form were examined by two field experts of inclusive education, and they were revised according to their comments on the form. Before applying the data collection tool to the study group, a pilot study was conducted with three teachers. In the research, the data analysis process, namely, how the categories were created from the data was clearly explained. Direct quotations from the teachers' own statements were included in interpretation of the findings. The participants were coded as T1, T2, T3 etc. The categories were generated independently by two researchers and their results were compared to ensure reliability in the research. As a result of the comparison, it was seen that similar findings were obtained. In addition, the opinions of the two field experts were asked to check whether the metaphors under the created categories represent the category in question. After their comments on the categories were revised, the researchers came to an agreement on the final categories.

### 3. Findings

Within the scope of the research, the metaphors used by teachers regarding inclusive education were categorized and gathered under nine categories. The reasons written by teachers about metaphors were used in the creation of categories. Teachers used 62 metaphors in total. These metaphors in each category are given in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Metaphors Used by Teachers Regarding Inclusive Education

Categories	Metaphors	Opinions (f)
Patience and Exertion	Mineral Exploration (3), Tough Nut (2), Bottomless Well (2), Pathway (2), Mandala (1), Preparing for the Olympics (1), Pomegranate Extraction (1), Night (1), Digging the Well with Needle (1), Stone in Stream (1), Honey Production (1), Butterfly in Cocoon (1), Swimming in the Choppy Sea (1), Climbing a Branchless Tree (1), Equation (1), Craft (1), Wheat Growing (1), Mine (1), Seasons (1), Baby Care (1)	25
Affection	Mother (4), Family (2), Marriage (1), Flower Growing (1)	8
Proper Educational Support	Coal Processing (2), Money (1), Maze (1), Crutches (1), Bomb Ready to Explode (1), Elevator (1), Space Research (1), Yoghurt Fermentation (1), Landscaper (1), Garden Maintenance (1), Archery (1), Iceberg (1), Driving License Course (1), Factory (1)	15
Slow and Gradual Progress	Stair Step (1), Crawling Baby (1), Nature (1)	3
Integration	Travel (1), Puzzle (1), Baby's Birth (1), Flower Arrangement (1), Chain (1), Cooking Rice (1)	6
Understanding Differences	Flower Garden (2), Gardener (2), Reading Books in Mother Tongue (1), Rainbow (1)	6
Equal Access to Opportunities	Scale (2)	2
Need	First Aid (2), Water (2), Point in Exclamation Point (1), Air (2), Light (1), Drug (1)	9
Dealing in vain	Rowing Against the Current (4), Hollow Bucket (1), Unfair Race (1), Patched Fabric (1)	7

According to Table 1, it is seen that teachers mostly evaluate the inclusive education by creating metaphors related to 'patience and exertion (f=25)' and 'proper educational support (f=15)' categories. These are followed by 'need (f=9)', 'affection (f=8)', 'dealing in vain (f=7)', 'integration (f=6)', 'understanding differences (f=6)', 'slow and gradual progress (f=3)' and 'equal access to opportunities (f=2)' categories respectively. Explanations for these categories are discussed below.

#### 3.1 Patience and Exertion

This category included the views of the participants emphasizing that inclusive education was a sensitive and difficult process and therefore required patience and exertion. For example, a classroom teacher working in primary school used the butterfly in cocoon metaphor for inclusive education and said, 'Exertion is required for the butterfly in the cocoon to reach the required strength and to sprout its wings. It is necessary to wait patiently' (T36).

### *3.2 Proper Educational Support*

It was found out that it was important to present a learning environment that was suitable for the individual needs of the student in inclusive education and that the desired results could be achieved by using appropriate teaching methods and materials for the student. Accordingly, a math teacher working in secondary school said, 'Inclusive education is like the coal processing. Because, although it may seem worthless among the diamonds, it will shine like diamonds when processed' (T46). A school counsellor working in high school explained the inclusive education with the words 'In inclusive education, students may have characteristics that are waiting to be discovered, just like an iceberg underwater. If the teacher gives training to reveal these features, good results surprising everyone can emerge from iceberg underwater.' (T66) by using the iceberg metaphor.

### *3.3 Need*

It was emphasized that inclusive education was an indispensable need for the student relying on this education and it was important to meet this basic need. A social sciences teacher used the water metaphor and explained the reason as such; 'Students with special needs in general classes need inclusive education for their emotional, behavioural and academic development. This education is basic and indispensable need for them, like water.' (T11).

### *3.4 Affection*

It was seen that participants evaluated the inclusive education within the framework of interest, affection, and volunteering. This category included opinions that point out the importance of teachers' showing their affection for students and making them feel valuable. In this category, a kindergarten teacher said, 'Inclusive education is like a mother. Because it requires warmth and sincerity of a mother' (T3).

### *3.5 Dealing in Vain*

It was revealed that some participants had the opinion that the structure and functioning of inclusive education could not be understood by the teachers adequately, that sufficient conditions could not be achieved in schools and classrooms for this education and therefore the desired success could not be achieved in practice. For example, a classroom teacher likened inclusive education to rowing against the current and explained his opinion as follows: 'I think that the teachers who have not been educated about inclusive education in public schools do not know the students with special needs well, cannot reach their levels and therefore these students waste their time in the classrooms' (T42).

### *3.6 Integration*

It was emphasized that it was important for students with special needs in inclusive education to share the same learning environment in an integrity without being separated from their peers in cognitive, social and educational practices. Under this category, participants used metaphors hinting that it would be beneficial for students with special needs and other students to benefit from all social, cultural, and educational activities with their peers. In this context, an English teacher working in high school likened inclusive education to the journey and stated that 'Passengers learn new things from each other on this road together' (T1).

### *3.7 Understanding Differences*

In this category, it was emphasized that student with special needs had unique behaviours and characteristics differentiating them from other students. In addition, there were opinions that these differences should have been accepted and converted into educational opportunities in a way that was in the best interest of the student. For example, a kindergarten teacher who compared inclusive education to the flower garden explained the reason with the words 'Each flower is different and beautiful in flower garden. Students with special needs beautify their environment with their differences in inclusive education.' (T7).

### *3.8 Slow and Gradual Progress*

This category consisted of the views in which the student was taken to the centre and pointed out the importance of advancing in small steps according to the individual needs of the student. A classroom teacher explained her opinion in this category with the words 'Inclusive education is like nature. Because nature constantly renews and changes itself. This constant change is happening gradually. Although there is a slow progress in inclusive education, it definitely causes a positive change.' (T71).

### *3.9 Equal Access to Opportunities*

In this category, it was marked that all students, including students with special needs should have been assured to benefit equally from the educational opportunities. Similarly, there were opinions that emphasized the necessity of

full and complete utilization of the right of education for students with special needs. In this context, a physics teacher expressed his opinion as 'Inclusive education is like a scale. Because to provide equal education to disadvantaged individuals in the same environment as other students and to improve their social communication, one must try to establish a constant balance between the two student groups.' (T58).

#### 4. Discussion

In this study, the categories of patience and exertion and proper educational support were the categories in which teachers mostly used metaphors in explaining inclusive education. With the patience and exertion category, it was revealed that inclusive education was a difficult process requiring precision and it was emphasized that it called for patience and exertion. Similar results emerged in Uysal's (2004) study. The author evaluated the opinions of the teachers about inclusive education and most of the participants stated that inclusive education was tiring because it demanded a lot of individual work and dedication. In another similar study conducted with teacher candidates by Kayılı, Koçyiğit, Doğru, and Çiftçi (2010), it was revealed that participants considered the inclusive education beneficial for both students with special needs and other peers, but they considered it a very difficult and tiring process for the teacher. It can be said that these views of teachers about inclusive education arise from negative experiences, difficulties, or lack of sufficient knowledge about this issue in schools.

The adversities, challenges or equipment inadequacies experienced by teachers about inclusive education may affect their attitudes on this issue negatively. Because in many studies (Alver, Bozgeyikli, & Işıklar, 2011; De Boer et al., 2011; Gök & Erbaş, 2011; Gözün & Yıkmış, 2004; Karasu, 2019), it was found that teachers' lack of sufficient knowledge about inclusive education had a negative effect on their attitudes towards inclusive practices. In this regard, Blanton, Pugach, and Florian (2011) emphasized that teachers' views towards supporting inclusive practices increased gradually, but research had generally shown that they felt unprepared in this process, were anxious to cope with the problems and thus were reluctant to place students with special needs in their classrooms. Similarly, Monteiro, Kuok, Correia, Forlin, and Teixeira (2019) stated that teachers find themselves insufficient in terms of knowledge and skills when working with students with special needs in their classrooms and this prevents the success of inclusive practices.

The category of proper educational support was another category in which teachers mostly used metaphors in explaining inclusive education. In this category, it was emphasized that it is important to organize the learning environment in inclusive education to meet the individual needs of the student with special needs and to support the student with appropriate methods and materials. There are studies in the literature that reveal similar findings. For example, Odom, Buysse, and Soukakou (2012) and Watkins (2012) linked the effectiveness of inclusive practices to the provision of special teaching methods according to the individual needs of students. In other words, to facilitate the learning of students with special needs, the individualized education program should be employed rather than the general education program (Pit-ten Cate, Markova, Krischler, & Krolak-Schwerdt, 2018). Based on this, it can be said that teachers' attitudes and behaviours in inclusive education and their competence in providing appropriate educational support are important for the success of this process. Borg, Hunter, Sigurjonsdottir, and S. D'Alessio (2011) stated that teachers should have had a positive attitude and appropriate knowledge, skills and understanding for this education to be effective in inclusive education. Similarly, De Boer et al. (2011) revealed that teachers' attitudes towards students with special needs were related to their competencies.

In the research, teachers frequently used metaphors in the categories of need, affection, integration and understanding differences in the description of inclusive education. In the category of need, it was pointed out that inclusive education was an indispensable basic need for the student with special needs. In the affection category, it was emphasized that inclusive education was a process that could be carried out with interest and affection. When these two categories are considered together, it is revealed that teachers' perspectives, attitudes, and behaviours to the education of students with special needs are important. It can be said that these attitudes and behaviours of teachers are affected by many factors such as professional experience, student's special needs type, class size, teacher self-efficacy and adequacy of teaching materials. For example, researchers such as Schmidt and Vrhovnic (2015) and Boyle, Topping, and Jindal-Snape (2013) with regard to professional experience reached the conclusion that the teachers in the 20-30 age group had a more positive attitude towards inclusive education compared to the teachers in the 40-50 age group with higher professional experience. In terms of specific requirement type, while Avramidis and Norwich (2002) stated that teacher attitudes were more supportive in the inclusion of students with sensory or physical disabilities in general education classes; MacFarlane and Woolfson (2013) revealed that teachers had negative attitudes in the education of students with emotional, social or behavioural disorders. When evaluated in

terms of teachers' self-efficacy, a positive correlation was found between teachers' attitude towards inclusive education and self-efficacy in many studies (Hofman & Kilimo, 2014; Yada & Savolainen, 2017). On the other hand, in Malki and Einat's (2018) study, factors such as class size, number of students with special needs in the classroom and the use of information technologies in teaching were among the factors affecting teachers' attitude in inclusive practices.

In the study, related to the category of integration, it was concluded that it was important for students with special needs to share the same learning environment in an integrity without being separated from their peers in terms of cognitive, social and educational practices. In the category of understanding differences, it was concluded that students with special needs should have been accepted with their unique behaviours and characteristics and it was important to turn these differences into opportunities for the benefit of the students. In this regard, Odom et. al. (2012) stated that students with special needs made better academic progress in general education classes compared to differentiated classes. However, Buysse, Goldman, and Skinner (2002) demonstrated that inclusive education provided better results in terms of social acceptance, interaction, and peer education than other special education practices. In this context, inclusive education both tries to provide individuals with special needs the highest level of independent living skills and ensures the integration of the individual with society (Moran, 2007).

In summary, it was revealed that teachers considered inclusive education as a difficult, patience and exertion demanding process. In this process, teachers pointed to the importance of proper educational support that addressed the individual needs of the student. Teachers also emphasized that inclusive education was an indispensable need for students with special needs and they pointed out that it was important for teachers to display positive attitudes and behaviours towards students. In the research, findings overlapping the integration philosophy of inclusive education had also emerged. Accordingly, it had been concluded that it was important for students with special needs to share the same learning environment in an integrity without separating them from their peers who had 'normal' academic and social development. In addition, it was concluded that students with special needs should have been accepted with their own behaviours and characteristics in the learning environments they were in and it was important to turn these differences into opportunities for the benefit of the student.

## 5. Conclusion

When the results of the research are evaluated in general, it can be said that Turkish teachers know the basic philosophy of inclusive education and the general characteristics of the students with special needs academically and socially. However, it is known that there are deficiencies in the effective implementation of this education in classrooms and teachers are inadequate in this regard. Because Turkish teachers have knowledge on the subjects such as employing integrative practices, giving importance to individual differences, and providing appropriate educational support for the success of inclusive education. Yet, the applicability of this information in practice depends on the provision of some conditions in Turkish Education System. In this context, the awareness of school principals, teachers, parents, and other employees about children with special needs should be increased in order for inclusive education to be effective and the student with special needs to benefit from this application at the highest level. Then, teachers' insufficiency in knowledge and skills in recognizing the individual characteristics of the student with special needs and providing him/her appropriate educational support should be improved during undergraduate education and in-service training. Apart from these, problems such as crowded classes, physical insufficiency of schools and classes and lack of appropriate support services should be resolved in order to be successful in inclusive education in Turkey.

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