

# Elementary Teachers' Perceptions About Implementation of Inclusive Education

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The Disabilities Education Act was introduced in June, 1997 in the Turkish Education System. The Act states that schools have a duty to educate children with disabilities in general education classrooms. All children with disabilities should be educated with non-disabled children at their own age and have access to the general education curriculum. The philosophy of inclusive education aims at helping all children learn in regular classrooms. Children learn at their own pace and style within a nurturing learning environment because schools are important places for children to develop friendships and learn social skills. Children with and without disabilities learn together and from each other in inclusive classes. On the other hand, when children attend classes that reflect the similarities and differences of people in the real world, they learn to appreciate diversity. The aim of this study is to examine the perceptions of teachers about implementation of inclusive education in elementary schools. In order to collect data for this study, a questionnaire which consisted of eight open-ended questions was developed and administered to 66 elementary school teachers. The teachers worked at primary schools and taught 1-5 grades. They were asked to write their opinions and experiences about the implementation of inclusive education in the elementary schools. Primary school teachers generally have a positive attitude about inclusive education and its philosophical and psychological foundation. However, they express that they encounter some difficulties in implementing inclusive classrooms. A crowded classroom is a main obstacle to obtain desired objectives in educational activities. The levels of students' disability are related to effectiveness of classroom management. The effectiveness of inclusive education depends on not only the teachers' quality but also the school administrators'. Some superintendents assess the effectiveness of teachers in inclusive and regular classrooms in the same way.

*Keywords:* inclusive education, teachers' perception, Turkish primary education

## Introduction

The Disabilities Education Act was introduced in the Turkish education system in June 1997. Its amendments were reemphasized and clarified in May, 2006. The Disabilities Education Act clearly states that all children with disabilities should be educated with non-disabled children at their own age and have access to the general education curriculum (Retrieved from <http://mevzuat.meb.gov.tr/html/261840.html>). Inclusive education means that all students in a school, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses in any area, become part of the school community. They are included in the feeling of belonging to other students, teachers and support staffs.

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Inclusive education is based on the simple idea that every child and family is valued equally and deserves the same opportunities and experiences. Inclusive education is about children with disabilities, whether the disability is mild or severe, hidden or obvious, participating in everyday activities, just in the way they would do if their disabilities were not present. It is about building friendships and membership and having opportunities just like everyone else. It is very important for children to have the opportunity to learn and grow within communities that represent the kind of world they will live in when they finish school (Reganick, 1995).

All children have the right to be with other children at their own age. A child with disabilities does not have to perform at a certain grade level or act exactly like the other children in their class to benefit from being a full-time member in general education. The vision of inclusion is that all children should be served in their neighborhood schools, in the "regular classrooms" with children at their own age. The idea is that these schools would be restructured so that they should be supportive and nurturing communities that really meet the needs of all the children. Inclusion is much bigger than special education and much bigger than individual classrooms; it is even much bigger than the school. Inclusion really calls for a fundamental restructuring of the schools (O'Neil, 1994). It means changes of pedagogy and changes in the curriculum, staff allocation, teacher education, and so on. The goal of inclusive education is to create a world in which all children are welcome, and all children grow up comfortable with, knowledgeable about and supportive of all kinds of other children. Inclusion is consistent with multicultural education, aiming to create a world in which many more people have opportunities to know, play and work with one another (Barry, 1994).

The philosophy of inclusive education aims at helping all children learn in regular classrooms. Children learn at their own pace and style within a nurturing learning environment. Inclusion is about providing the help for children who need to learn and participate in meaningful ways. The key is to give only as much help as needed. Schools are important places for children to develop friendships and learn social skills. Children with and without disabilities learn together and from each other in inclusive classes (Vaidya & Zaslavsky, 2000). Inclusive settings can make this vision a reality for many children with disabilities. When children attend classes that reflect the similarities and differences of people in the real world, they learn to appreciate diversity. Student diversity is one of the great strengths of our public schools. Students with different learning strengths and weaknesses, students from various cultures, students with physical challenges, all bring special gifts that enrich our school communities. But providing the education that enables each of these students to achieve his/her highest potential presents a daunting challenge.

Parents have been and will be the driving force for inclusive education. All parents wish their children to be accepted by their peers, have friends and lead "regular" lives. The best outcomes occur when the parents and professionals work together. Effective partnerships happen when there is collaboration, communication, and most of all, trust between parents and professionals.

### **Method**

In order to collect data for this study, a questionnaire which consisted of eight open-ended questions was developed and administered to 66 elementary teachers. These teachers worked in primary schools and taught 1-5 grades. They were asked to write their opinions and experiences about the implementation of inclusive education in the elementary schools. The open-ended format of the questionnaire calls for a free response in the participants' own words. It also provides for a greater depth of response. The respondents revealed their frame of reference and possible reasons for their responses (Best & Kahn, 1989). The aim of this study was to examine

elementary teachers' perceptions of inclusive education. The questionnaire consisted of eight open-ended questions about implementation of inclusive education.

## Results

### What Kind of Experiences in Terms of Curriculum Do the Elementary Teachers Have While Implementing Inclusive Education in Their Classrooms?

Table 1

#### *Implementation of Curriculum in Inclusive Classrooms*

Rank	Implementation of curriculum	Frequency
1	Regular curriculum was developed for non-disabilities students, so it is difficult for disabilities students to follow regular curriculum.	26
2	Classrooms are so crowded and teachers do not allocate enough time for disabilities.	21
3	Non-disabilities students could not complete regular curriculum.	11
4	Disabilities students follow individualized curriculum.	8
Total		66

The teachers in this study think of inclusive education regarding to the implementation of curriculum (see Table 1). The crucial view is that disabilities students cannot follow the regular curriculum which is developed for non-disabilities students. The teachers in inclusive classrooms are responsible to prepare two programs: A regular program for non-disabilities and the individualized educational program for disabilities students. Disabilities students are responsible for following the individualized educational curriculum. The teachers are challenged to implement both regular curriculum and individualized curriculum simultaneously because some classrooms are so crowded. In fact, school administrators consider enrolling one disabilities student for each classroom if they have enough classrooms. Further more, students' levels of disability are important criteria for classroom enrollment, so the students who have similar disabilities are enrolled to different classrooms.

### What Kind of Experiences in Terms of Classroom Management Do the Elementary Teachers Have While Implementing Inclusive Education in Their Classrooms?

Table 2

#### *Classroom Management in Inclusive Classrooms*

Rank	Classroom management	Frequency
1	While the teacher pays attention to disabilities, non-disabilities pay no attention to learning activities.	24
2	I do not have any difficulties in managing inclusive classroom.	19
3	Non-disabilities students expect the teacher to tolerate their behavior as much as disabilities' behaviors.	17
4	Since disabilities could not follow the rules exactly, it is difficult to prevent non-disabilities students from interrupting.	6
Total		66

Classroom management is a difficult aspect of inclusive education to evaluate teaching-learning atmosphere of classroom (see Table 2). The levels of students' disabilities are related to effectiveness of classroom management. For instance, it could be very difficult for the teacher to organize a classroom with behavioral, emotional and cognitive disabilities students than other disabilities. Some disabilities students need more help and care from the teachers. In fact, the teacher is challenged to reach and allocate enough time for all students in the classroom. On the other hand, rules of classroom are set up at the beginning of academic year,

and then each student in the classroom is responsible to stick and follow them. However, it is extremely difficult for some disabilities students to behave and follow classroom rules appropriately. When the teacher shows her/his tolerance and flexibility for disabilities students, non-disabilities students expect the same level of tolerance for their misbehaviors. Otherwise, they question teacher's fairness and equity.

### **According to Elementary Teachers, What Kind of Experiences Do School Administrators Have While Implementing Inclusive Education in Their Classrooms?**

Table 3

#### *Behaviors of School Administrator for Inclusive Education*

Rank	Behaviors of school administrators	Frequency
1	School administrators focus on official procedures.	32
2	I do not dispute school administration about implementation of inclusive education.	15
3	School administrators do not care what is going on in inclusive classrooms.	12
4	School administrators are willing to help when I need it.	7
Total		66

The effectiveness of inclusive education depends not only on teachers' but also the school administrators' qualities (see Table 3). The teachers in this study expressed their collaborations and communication with school administrators. Majority of the teachers stated that school administrators focus on official paper works because they are responsible to complete official requirements. They do not care what is going on in inclusive classrooms in terms of educational activities. They do not want to hear any problems and complaints from parents, superintendents and local administrators. On the other hand, some of the teachers in this study explained that they collaborate with their administrators very well to improve inclusive education.

### **What Kind of Experiences Do the Elementary Teachers Have From Superintendent While Implementing Inclusive Education in Their Classrooms?**

Table 4

#### *Behaviors of Superintendent for Inclusive Education*

Rank	Behaviors of superintendent	Frequency
1	Superintendents lack of knowledge about inclusive education, so they cannot help us.	32
2	Superintendents want to know what have been done for disabilities students.	17
3	I do not have any bad experiences with superintendents about inclusive education. They show their sympathy.	11
4	Superintendents cannot distinguish between disabilities and non-disabilities students.	6
Total		66

Superintendents visit schools twice every academic year (see Table 4). One visit is for a guidance purpose which occurs in the first semester. The second one is to evaluate teachers' performances. Even though some superintendents encourage, help and admire the teachers in inclusive classrooms, some of them do not take their work into consideration, and these results in diminishing motivation of the teachers. Particularly, in the evaluation process, superintendents should distinguish between effectiveness of teachers in inclusive classrooms and regular classrooms. Some of the teachers in this study expressed that some superintendents were not aware of or they lack of knowledge about the implementation of inclusive education. In fact, they assess the effectiveness of teachers in inclusive and regular classrooms in the same way.

### What Kind of Behaviors Do Other Teachers Have While Implementing Inclusive Education?

Solidarity of teachers is crucial for professional improvement (see Table 5). They collaborated with each other to solve issues in their school atmosphere. Some of the teachers in this study stated that teachers cooperate with each other and shared their experiences among them to enhance students' achievement. On the other hand, some teachers thought that they are responsible for their own classroom and they had to take care of their own students. Most of the time, teachers were reluctant to accept disability students because they feel they are under rigorous competition among classrooms in school, local and nationwide.

Table 5

#### *Other Teachers' Behaviors of Inclusive Education*

Rank	Other teachers' behaviors for inclusive education	Frequency
1	Teachers collaborate with each other to enhance inclusive education.	26
2	Each teacher has responsible for his/her own classroom.	18
3	I do not have any communication with other teachers about inclusive education.	12
4	Sometimes, there is competition between classrooms so disabilities students are not counted of for classroom assessments.	10
Total		66

### How Are Relationships Between Non-disabilities Students and Disabilities Students While Implementing Inclusive Education?

Table 6

#### *Relationships Between Non-disabilities Students and Disabilities Students*

Rank	Relationship of students in inclusive classrooms	Frequency
1	First of all, non-disabilities students first hesitated to accept disabilities students, afterwards, they unified.	28
2	Non-disabilities students showed their sympathy, tolerated and accepted disabilities friends in the classrooms.	15
3	Non-disabilities students paid attention to their disabilities classmates at the beginning of academic year, and then they get used to them.	12
4	Some non-disabilities students are not willing to play and cooperate with disabilities classmates.	11
Total		66

Schools are important places for children to develop friendships and learn social skills (see Table 6). There is great value in integrating special education students with regular education students as fully as possible. The integrated class provides opportunity for students to develop compassion for those who struggle academically and a fairly strong spirit of cooperation evolved. According to the observation of the inclusive teachers, at the beginning of the academic year, non-disabilities students are reluctant to cooperate with their disabilities classmates. But, after a while, they accept, show their sympathy and try to help their disabilities classmates make their school life easy. Non-disabilities students also realize and appreciate their strengths in inclusive classrooms.

### What Kind of Behaviors Do Parents of Non-disabilities Students Act While Implementing Inclusive Education?

It is important for parents of children with or without disabilities to have positive attitudes towards effectiveness of inclusive education (see Table 7). Some of the teachers in this study observed that some of the parents of children with non-disabilities worry that their kids could be influenced negatively in inclusive classrooms. However, when inclusive teachers communicate with parents of non-disabilities children to explain the arrangement of inclusive classroom, they understand and support inclusive classroom.

Table 7

*Behaviors of Non-disabilities Students' Parents*

Rank	Behaviors of non-disabilities students' parents	Frequency
1	Some parents of children with non-disabilities think that their kids could be influenced in negative way.	28
2	Since there is one or two disabilities students in each classroom, parents of a non-disabilities child look at them positively.	14
3	Since the teacher arranges atmosphere of inclusive classroom very well, parents of children with non-disabilities do not feel any difficulties.	12
4	Some parents of children with non-disabilities are not aware of what is going on in the classroom.	12
Total		66

**How Do the Elementary Teachers Think of Inclusive Education?**

Table 8

*Thoughts of Elementary Teachers About Inclusive Education*

Rank	Thoughts of elementary teachers about inclusive education	Frequency
1	If the size of classrooms is small, inclusive education is okay.	34
2	Disabilities students should be partly included in classrooms.	18
3	All kinds of disabilities should not be included.	14
Total		66

Although the teachers in this study had positive attitudes towards inclusive education, they expressed some suggestions for improvement (see Table 8). A crowded classroom is a main obstacle to obtain desired objectives in educational activities. It is also difficult to implement inclusive curriculum in the crowded classrooms. Other recommendation is that disabilities students should be included partly. Therefore, disabilities students take some courses in a special class as well as regular classes. Finally, students with disabilities should be included in regular class based on levels of their disabilities.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

There is great value in integrating special education students with regular education students as fully as possible. However, inclusive education requires different instructions for different kids, and all types of instruction happen in the same place at the same time. The teacher in inclusive classroom is responsible to prepare two programs: A regular program for non-disabilities and an individualized educational program for disabilities students. It is recommended that, at the beginning, the children should be put in a special program and then gradually reintroduced them to the regular class (Daniel & King, 1998).

Levels of student with disabilities are related to effectiveness of classroom management. Some kids learn very well through one approach, but others do not learn well in this way. Some, like deaf kids, need special instruction that can not be provided in a regular class. Many kids with severe emotional or behavioral disorders need a more supportive environment than any regular classroom can possibly provide (O'Neil, 1994). Teachers who work with children with special needs may have to spend much more time explaining, modeling, interacting or practicing particular strategies. In fact, it is difficult for teachers to manage classroom properly.

According to teachers in this study, school administrators focus on official paper works more than teaching-learning activities. Administrators should help the teachers create classrooms that meet the needs of all children. On the other hand, superintendents should distinguish between the teachers in inclusive and regular classrooms for evaluation process. Some of the teachers in this study state that teachers cooperate with each

other and share their experiences among them to enhance students' achievement. The value of collaboration among teachers should be realized for successful implementation of inclusive education. The class integration process appears to work especially well when the special education teachers work side by side with the regular teachers (Barry, 1994).

Some of the parents of children with non-disabilities worry that their kids could be influenced negatively in inclusive classrooms. The parents of the children with non-disabilities should be informed about implementation and benefit of inclusive education both for disabilities and non-disabilities. Whether children are separated based on ability or any other characteristic, a separate education is not an equal education and research shows that typical children and children with disabilities learn as much or more in inclusive classes (Vaidya & Zaslavsky, 2000). In conclusion, inclusion without resources, without support, without teachers' preparation time, without commitment, without a vision statement, without restructuring or without staff development will not work.

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