



www.ijpes.com



Experiences of Turkish Preschool Teachers for Including Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Challenges Faced and Methods Used

Yeşim Güleç-Aslan¹

¹Istanbul Medeniyet University, Istanbul, Turkey

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 24.12.2019
Received in revised form
16.02.2020
Accepted 26.02.2020
Available online
04.05.2020

ABSTRACT

Inclusion is important for development of social-communication and all skills of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and their participation in social life. In order to carry out a successful inclusion process, preschool teachers have crucial and fundamental role. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences of eight preschool teachers in Turkey. In other words, challenges faced by preschool teachers and methods used were explored. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed via inductive analysis. The findings show that the teachers experience various difficulties and use various methods, though limited, to handle these difficulties. It is expected that this research will shed light on the current practice and inspire advanced research studies. Moreover, it is predicted that research carried out in different cultures can offer cultural perspectives to the international literature.

© 2020IJPES. All rights reserved

Keywords:

Autism spectrum disorder; inclusion; inductive analysis; preschool; qualitative research

1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disabilities defined by presentation of challenges in social communication and interaction skills and restricted and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Individuals diagnosed with ASD make significant progress in all areas of development with qualified special education services started at an early age. One of the main objectives of the special education offered to these children is continuing the one-on-one special education services, which start in early childhood, with supported or unsupported inclusion education in pre-school institutions and beyond. Significant developments are observed in social acceptance and social interaction of children diagnosed with ASD who are trained in inclusive settings having an opportunity to learn through observing and modeling their typically developing peers from an early age on (Lindsay, Proulx, Scott, & Thomson, 2014; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2004; Vakil, Welton, O'Connor, & Kline, 2009). In addition, successful inclusion practices in pre-school institutions are also essential for the success of the child's inclusion practices in primary education and beyond (Lovaas, 2003; National Autism Center [NAC], 2009, 2015; Odom & Connie, 2015; Sturme & Adrienne, 2007).

Preschool teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusion and children with ASD along with their use of appropriate educational methods are important for successful integration (Eldar, Talmor, & Wolf-Zukerman, 2010; Vakil et al., 2009). Given the complex nature of ASD and the presence of severe learning and

* This study was presented with the title "Experiences of preschool teachers for including children with autism spectrum disorders: Challenges faced and methods used" in International East of the West, West of the East Conference.

¹ Corresponding author's address: Department of Special Education, İstanbul Medeniyet University, İstanbul, Turkey
e-mail: yesim.gulec@medeniyet.edu.tr
<http://dx.doi.org/10.17220/ijpes.2020.02.004>

behavioral problems in individuals with ASD, preschool teachers working with individuals with ASD need to have professional competencies specific to ASD in order to carry out a successful inclusion process (Grossi-Kliss, 2006; Scheuermann, Webber, Boutot, & Goodwin, 2003; Simpson, 2004). In other words, it is crucial that preschool teachers need professional competencies in basic relevant subjects such as the characteristics of individuals with ASD, the processes of education and training for these individuals, inclusion, coping with behavioral problems, interdisciplinary teamwork, and cooperation with the family, in addition to having a positive attitude towards the integration process of children with ASD (Eldar et al., 2010; Grossi-Kliss, 2006; Lindsay et al., 2014; Mak & Zhang, 2013; McConkey & Bhlirgri, 2003; Odom & Connie, 2015; Razali, Toran, Kamaralzaman, Salleh, & Yasin, 2013).

1.1. Preschool inclusion in Turkey

Inclusion practices have been initiated in Turkey with the Decree Law No: 573, and regulations on inclusion practices were actualized with Special Education Services Regulation of 2006, Preschool and Primary School Institutions Regulations of 2014 and with Circular on Integrating / Integrating Education Practices of 2017. Under this legislation, pre-school education is compulsory in Turkey for individuals with special need aged 37-72 months. In line with the results of educational evaluation and placement studies carried out at the Counseling and Research Centers under the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), the children with special needs who do not have severe or multiple disabilities are referred to inclusion education in state or private preschools. Children who are not eligible for inclusion education are directed to Early Childhood Special Education Centers or special education classes where children with special needs are educated. Legal regulations emphasize necessary educational adaptations for children in inclusion processes, preparation of individualized education programs (IEP), provision of the necessary support services, actualization of necessary physical arrangements in schools and classrooms, and family participation. In addition, there can be a maximum of two special needs students in the inclusion classes with 10 students and only 1 in classes with 20 students (Akalın, Demir, Sucuoğlu, Bakkaloğlu, & İşcen, 2014; Bozarlan & Batu, 2014; Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 1997, 2006, 2014, 2017, 2018; Richardson-Gibbs ve Klein, 2014; Sucuoğlu & Bakkaloğlu, 2018). Even though there is a great effort to improve and develop inclusion education in Turkey, various problems currently encountered in inclusion practices (i.e.: the overcrowded classrooms with many inclusion students, and lack of trained educators) negatively impact the success of inclusion (Akalın et al., 2014; Bozarlan & Batu, 2014; Melekoğlu, Cakıroğlu, & Malmgren, 2009). It is observed that preschool teachers receive a limited number of courses in fields of special education and inclusion prior to service. These teachers receive only two required credits in special education and inclusion courses and are offered some elective courses in the field over their four-year undergraduate education (Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu [YÖK], 2018). Although these teachers may have the opportunity to participate in a limited number of required and / or voluntary training programs during their service years, these are short-term trainings, mostly dense in theoretical information and lacking or including very little practical information and counseling services. Therefore, it is observed that these teachers' professional knowledge and skills related to inclusion are not sufficient to carry out successful inclusion practices. It is necessary that these they receive long-term and practical pre- and in-service trainings to develop professional qualifications especially in dealing with behavioral problems, classroom management, ASD and individualized training programs in order to carry out successful inclusion practices (Bozarlan & Batu, 2014; Gök & Erbaş, 2011; Melekoğlu et al., 2009).

1.2. Research on preschool teachers' experiences of including children with ASD

There are several studies about the experiences of preschool teachers related to the inclusion of children with ASD in the literature. Grossi-Kliss (2006) conducted a quantitative research study with preschool teachers (N=41) to examine skill priority for preparing curriculum that meet the needs of children with ASD in an inclusive classroom. The teachers completed a survey rating the importance of skills when providing a curriculum to students with ASD. According to the results of the survey, teachers rated communication and social skills as the most important skills and educational needs of the children with ASD. Teachers rated the motor skills as the skill of lowest importance with respect to requiring educational support. Based on this

study, social and communication skill areas should be the main focus areas for children with ASD in inclusive preschools and that every teacher should gain further knowledge in preparing and modifying curriculums according to these children's needs. Barned, Knapp, and Neuharth-Pritchett' study (2011) investigated knowledge and attitudes of early childhood pre-service teachers. Fifteen teachers completed the Autism Inclusion Questionnaire and researchers conducted interviews with four of these teachers. Results showed that pre-service teachers lacked knowledge and had misconceptions about the core features of ASD. According to findings, teachers held a generally positive attitude toward the inclusion of children with ASD. However, their attitudes were strongly influenced by the severity of the disorder and presence of behavior problems. They needed further, in-depth knowledge about ASD and inclusion in order to become successful teachers in inclusion settings. Another quantitative study was conducted to explore the knowledge, attitudes, and practices around children with developmental disorders (such as ASD) among 503 preschool teachers. The results showed that the teachers had inadequate knowledge and wanted to improve their special education and inclusion skills. They needed to receive education and training (Lian, Ying, Tean, Lin, Lian, & Yun, 2008). Razali et al. (2013) conducted a narrative inquiry about three preschool teachers' perceptions regarding including children with ASD. Findings from these interviews showed that the preschool teachers lack knowledge and skills on educating children with ASD and also need to gain further awareness of the importance of inclusion. The findings also included the need to resolve obstacles to the success of inclusive practices in a classroom such as lack of shadow aide, and overcrowded classrooms. Another study examined the preschool teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of children with ASD. This study's data were collected from 471 teachers via questionnaires. Results indicated that teachers' knowledge of ASD and evidence-based intervention were insufficient. Findings also indicated that preschool teachers needed training and they were willing and motivated to further develop their skills for working more effectively with children with ASD (Liu, Li, Zheng, Zaroff, Hall, Li, & Hao, 2016).

In addition to the international literature, there are studies conducted in Turkey, as well. In Yazıcı & Akman's (2017) qualitative study, interviews were conducted with 20 preschool teachers on inclusion of children with ASD diagnosis. Their findings yielded that while some of the teachers knew the basic features of ASD, the overall competencies of the teachers were inadequate in topics such as basic symptoms of ASD, social and communication difficulties, and stereotyped behaviors. The majority of teachers believe that inclusion is beneficial for these children and some of them want these children to be in their classrooms. Teachers who reported not to wish to have children with ASD in their classrooms explained their desire to be due to not having relevant experience, not knowing what kind of work should be carried out with a child diagnosed with ASD, and the size of their classroom not being appropriate for inclusive practices. Another quantitative study examined preschool educators' level of knowledge on ASD. A total of 270 participants consisting of pre-school teachers, branch teachers, and assistant teachers filled out ASD knowledge data sheets. Findings indicated that participants did not have a sufficient level of knowledge on ASD or inclusion and needed pre-service and in-service training programs (Er-Sabuncuoğlu, 2016). Another qualitative study investigated the opinions on preschool inclusion of 26 teachers who work with individuals diagnosed with ASD at preschool institutions. The results show that the educators lack sufficient knowledge on inclusion and that especially those with negative opinions needed further information. Participants emphasized the importance of special education support services like resource rooms, acceptance of special needs individuals by typically developing children and families, and educators' education for a successful inclusion (Bozarslan & Batu, 2014). A qualitative case study was carried out with 9 teachers working with individuals with ASD diagnosis. The interview results yielded that, in order to carry out a successful inclusion process, teachers needed increased competencies in knowledge and skills, less students per classroom, in-service trainings, special education support services (i.e.: special education counseling), and support from school management and family (Özaydın & Çolak, 2011). The findings from Gök & Erbaş's (2011) qualitative study based on interviews with 10 preschool teachers also show that these teachers lack knowledge in inclusive practices, the classrooms lack necessary equipment, and that difficulties are experienced in acceptance of students with ASD diagnosis by their typically developing peers and their families.

International and national new research on the needs, experiences and recommendations of preschool teachers, especially the findings of qualitative research studies that allow these teachers to transfer their thoughts in depth; can provide important guiding insights for ensuring successful inclusion practices. Specifically, research findings that indicate the challenges and needs of these teachers will guide qualified practices for students with ASD. In other words, in the context of the important role of preschool teachers in successful inclusion, it is very important to carry out the research about the needs and difficulties of these teachers and conducting the practices for teachers based on the findings of existing and new researches (for example; Bozarslan & Batu, 2014; Eldar et al., 2010; Lian vd., 2008; Lindsay et al., 2014; Razali vd., 2013; Scheuermann et al., 2003 Simpson, 2004). In the light of these informations and considering the quite limited literature on the subject in Turkey, this research has been carried out. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the experiences of preschool teachers with regard to including children with ASD. Considering the limited literature on preschool teachers' experiences about ASD, the findings of this study can be expected to make contribution to the literature. In addition, based on the pre-service and in-service training needs of pre-school teachers regarding special education and ASD (Bozarslan & Batu, 2014; Gök & Erbaş, 2011; Melekoğlu et al., 2009), it is thought that this study may shed light on the practices, measures and new researches to be successfully included. The findings from Turkey are also expected to enrich the cultural perspective of the current literature. This study aims to address the following research questions:

What are the challenges faced by preschool teachers who have students with ASD?

How can preschool teachers who have students with ASD can cope with these challenges?

2. Method

This qualitative research has been conducted through phenomenological approach. The general purpose of phenomenological study is to understand and explore the individuals' lived experience of the phenomenon. This type of research in educational settings involves the experience and perception of individuals about a specific phenomenon. In this study, the experiences of preschool teachers on the inclusion of children with ASD were investigated. This approach, like the subject of this research, introduces the basic knowledge about the subjects which have been studied at a limited level, sheds light on the field of practice and constitutes the basis for further research (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994; Smith ve Osborn, 2004, Yüksel ve Yıldırım, 2015).

2.1. Participants

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to determine participants (Creswell, 2014). The study sample consisted of eight Turkish preschool teachers who met the following criteria: (1) have minimum two years of experience in an integrated classroom; (2) have a child with ASD in their classroom for the last two years; (3) volunteer to participate in the research; (4) live in Istanbul. Istanbul is Turkey's most populous province with a population of approximately 15 million. Initially, thirteen teachers who met these criteria applied to volunteer in the study but five of them could not attend the study for various reasons such as intensity of their work. The identities of the teachers are kept confidential in accordance with research ethics. In this context, teachers identified by the notation of "T" for teacher with accompanying participant number (for example, T1).

All of the participants were females. The age range of the participants was 26 to 39, with an average age of 29 years. Among the 8 participants, 6 teachers worked at state preschools and 2 teachers worked at private preschools. The participants' teaching experience ranged from 3 to 18 years. All teachers had taken special education courses during their undergraduate education. Two of the teachers had also enrolled in the Small Steps Early Education Program course. Four of the teachers stated that they have attended seminars and congresses on special education and ASD throughout their career.

2.2. Data Collection

The data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Interviews are the basic data collection tool to collect information about experiences in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2014; Smith ve Osborn, 2004). Interview questions were prepared by researchers with reference to extensive literature review (Lindsay et al., 2014; Mcconkey & Bhlirgri, 2003). After obtaining a review of interview questions by two special education teachers and approval of two experts, the questionnaire was finalized. One of the experts works as an assistant professor in the Preschool Education Department of a university and the other in the Special Education Department. There were six questions in the questionnaire as follows: "What difficulties do you encounter when working with students with ASD?", "How do you ensure that your student with ASD participates in class and school activities", "What training methods do you use for your students with ASD?", "What would you like to say about the results and effects of the methods you use?", "What kind of educational support do you think you need about ASD?", and "What are your suggestions for the trainings offered in inclusive environments to be beneficial for students with ASD?"

The interview was conducted by the researcher at teacher's school. Voice recordings were taken of each interview. The duration of the interviews ranged from 17 to 40 minutes with an average of 26 minutes per interview. The teachers also completed a demographic form collecting information such as age, gender, and teaching experience.

2.3. Data analysis

Content analysis was used for data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Creswell, 2014). The author read and perused repeatedly interview transcripts to determine initial categories. After initial categories were formed, one specialist who is proficient with qualitative research, special education and ASD reviewed categories and gave feedback. The author refined coding categories by feedback. After preliminary themes were determined by the author, themes refined via peer debriefing process. For this process, aforementioned and another researcher proficient with qualitative research and special education examined preliminary themes and categories for the consistencies between preliminary themes and categories After specialists' feedback, the author examined and finalized themes according to feedback. After this stage, all data were structured thematically. Finally all themes were reported in an interrelated manner and a systematic way. Following strategies were applied for trustworthiness (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Creswell, 2014): (a) keeping participant identities confidential; (b) research is written in detail to allow for replication and understandability; (c) as seen in the above sections, peer debriefing during data collection, data coding and theme constitution; (d) the analysis and discussion of the data was conducted in line with the literature and the consistency of the data with the literature and the data is ensured to be consistent with the literature.

3. Results

In the following section, the findings are presented under the following themes: challenges teachers faced, methods teachers use, teachers' educational needs, teachers' recommendations for successful inclusion:

Challenges Teachers Faced

All of the participating teachers reported encountering various challenges during inclusive practices. These challenged are examined under four sub-themes: School and classroom conditions, reactions of typically developing children and their families, characteristics of students with ASD, and teacher competencies.

School and classroom conditions

Five teachers (T1, T2, T3, T4, and T6) stated that they face challenges regarding classroom size and equipment insufficiency in their classrooms and schools create obstacles in executing inclusive practices. For instance:

The biggest problem we have with autism is that the physical conditions of the classrooms are not very appropriate. For example, children with autism in my class also have hyperactivity; my current student with ASD also has it. However, the ends of the tables, chairs in my classroom are pointy. Actually, this is a problem for all of the kids. Lack of appropriate educational materials that create obstacle for my student with autism is challenging for me as well (T1).

Class sizes are too large. For example, I have 24 students in my class and I am the only teacher (T3).

In addition, two teachers (T1, T4) stated that the absence of a resource room in schools prevented the success of inclusive practices. A teacher emphasized: *"The lack of a resource room at school is one of the biggest problems"* (T1). Six teachers (T1, T3, T4, T6, T7, T8) in their classrooms reported lack of support staff with necessary professional competence in their classroom (shadow teacher, co-instructor, etc.) to make it difficult to carry out inclusion. Some of them expressed their concerns with the following statements:

There are no shadow teachers. The most important problem is the lack of workforce support. You can't take care of everything yourself. When you are alone, the child is sometimes unattended, and finds room to display problem behaviors (T4).

No shadow teachers in classes. The lack of educated, professionally sufficient shadow teachers is one of the biggest challenges I have (T8).

Reactions of typically developing children and their families

Four of the teachers (T1, T3, T4, T5) stated that some typically developing children in their classrooms and/or their families had difficulty accepting the inclusion student, and that they had difficulty overcoming this situation and providing inclusion for the student with ASD. They stated that this situation was more difficult when the inclusion student was a child with problem behaviors. Several teachers described their experiences as follows:

The families of other children are opposed to inclusion because they don't want their children to be with in the same class with these children. They don't want the teacher to take more care of the child with special needs. We're having problems with this. In terms of children, we are experiencing difficulties in accepting children with autism. We're trying to solve these problems. But it is difficult (T1).

Families of typical children are really difficult within this respect, I can't balance the tension. I also find it very difficult to explain this situation to other children. I don't know how to bridge the class and the child (T5).

Characteristics of students with ASD

In the process of inclusion, all teachers stated experiencing difficulties regarding the diagnostic features of students with ASD. Teachers listed various deficiencies of children with ASD such as social and communication skills, behavior problems and repetitive behavior as the greatest difficulty experienced in the process of inclusion. All of the teachers, as expressed in the following example statements, reported that these characteristics of children with ASD were very challenging for them, that they found these difficult to resolve, and that this was an obstacle to successful integration:

They refuse to participate in activities. They have obsessions. Their attention span is very limited. These are the challenges I encounter (T2).

My student doesn't have much communication or make eye contact. Most of the time s/he is repeating what I say. S/he has problem behaviors like throwing toys at peers. When I attend to him/her the other children lose focus and when I attend the rest of the class the child with ASD loses focus. I don't know what to do (T3).

Because children with ASD often come from a one-on one educational settings before attending inclusion classrooms, and lacking or having had very limited group education, they experience problems in things like how to behave in group settings or obeying the rules. We face challenges in making them gain these skills. Moreover, majority of these children come to our classrooms not having developed self-care skills. Most of their prior education

is focused around academics and cognition. They often lack a lot of skills in self-care, social, communication, and communal areas. This creates a significant challenge for us (T6).

My student has many obsessions. For example, s/he continuously focuses on balls and will not let go of a ball. S/he expresses self only through crying and does not attend social activities. These are only a few of the challenges I encounter (T7).

Teacher competencies

Five teachers (T1, T2, T3, T5, T7) stated that their knowledge and skill deficiencies were important challenges for successful inclusion. These teachers stated that they felt inadequate in terms of their knowledge and skills pertaining to ASD, education and behavior changing methods suitable for individuals with ASD, inclusion, and communication with families. They expressed that they experienced difficulties due to these competency issues. A teacher mentioned how important it is for successful inclusion to have knowledge about ASD: "We don't know enough about what autism is. We did not have any courses on this in university. Now, we are trying to learn through reading, attending seminars, but I still find it difficult to carry out inclusion processes due to the shortcomings in my knowledge" (T1). Other teachers expressed the importance of teacher competencies with similar examples. To illustrate:

I know very little about how to work with children with autism. I didn't know anything when I first started my career and I was shocked when a student with autism attended my class for the first time. If we are professionally competent, especially if we have practical knowledge, we will not have so many challenges. (T3).

The special education course I took at university is not enough for me to work with children with autism. I don't know what to do with the student with autism in my classroom. What do I teach? And how? How do I deal with problem behaviors? It's very tiring and exhausting (T5).

I cannot be sure about the accuracy of the methods I use in classroom. It is difficult for me to not know if I am doing the right thing or not (T6).

Methods teachers used

The findings show that five teachers applied various methods to deal with some of the difficulties they encountered in inclusive practices. These methods are examined in three sub-themes of coping methods for problem behaviors, teaching methods, and social skills development.

Coping methods for problem behaviors

Two teachers (T3, T6) mentioned coping with problem behaviors via proximity control and taking precautions during transitions using the following statements: "In order to prevent problem behavior like throwing toys at peers, I tend to sit in proximity so I can intervene immediately to avoid these behaviors." (T3), "Most problem behaviors occur during activity transitions. Because we have many activities we have many transition periods. I inform the student about the following activity, meaning that I use visuals to tell about the next activity. When the child knows what is ahead, s/he can participate in the activity without any problems" (T6).

Teaching Methods

Four teachers (T5, T6, T7, T8) reporting using various teaching methods to ensure the child benefits from education and to overcome educational challenges. For example, some teachers highlighted the importance of reinforcement, prompts, and environmental arrangement: "I reward them if they complete their activities. For example I tell them that they earned a surprise for completing an activity and I give them a reward. I know my student really enjoys drawing so I use drawing as a reward" (T5); "To avoid losing focus during activities, I ensure the classroom environment is simpler. I use environmental adjustments to remove elements that can negatively impact his/her attention. Moreover, I reward him/her when s/he participates in an activity. For example, we color together first, and in time s/he can color independently" (T7); "I give reinforcements. For example, I give a star sticker when s/he succeeds" (T8). The other teacher emphasized the importance of small group activities in class and giving the

families homework as follows: *"I give homework to family members. I ask them to repeat at home what we cover in school. This ensures the permanence of what I teach. Besides, I do certain activities not as a whole class but by breaking into smaller groups. Students with ASD participate more easily when we work in small groups and pay attention to what is being taught"* (T6).

Social skill development

Two teachers (T6, T7) stated that it is important to teach classroom rules to improve the social skills of students with ASD: *"I am trying to teach the social rules that must be followed in the classroom"* (T6) and *"I teach the rules to develop their social skills"* (T7).

Teachers' Educational Needs

Teachers reported that they have various educational needs to carry out successful inclusion practices for children with ASD.

All of the participants stated that they needed trainings where they could gain knowledge on ASD. Moreover, they emphasized that these trainings should not consist only of theoretical concepts but should also be based on practical information as well:

I need trainings, seminars on autism. What is autism? What are the methods used with children with autism? (T1).

I need trainings covering information on autism, delivered by experts. Trainings focusing on practice related recommendations would be great (T3).

There should be trainings on autism. I also would like to attend a seminar about how to explain autism to children in the classroom and their families (T5).

I need trainings where I can be up to date on new information, where we are presented with latest findings on autism (T8).

I need trainings on autism. However, these seminars need to be practice based. Solely theoretical trainings are not of much help (T7).

In addition, two teachers (T1, T4) also reported that they needed resource room support at schools. For example, one teacher shared her opinion as *'If there were resource rooms at schools, we would work with children with ASD in those rooms at certain times'* (T1). Six teachers (T1, T3, T4, T6, T7, T8) reported that it is imperative that there are assistant staff with adequate professional competencies in their classrooms who can support them (i.e.: shadow teachers, assistant teachers, etc.). For example, *'There is no support like a shadow teacher or assistant teacher. The greatest challenge is lack of workforce support. We need assistant staff* (T4).

Teachers' Recommendations for Successful Inclusion

Teachers have provided various recommendations for carrying out successful inclusion processes. All of the teachers recommended trainings on inclusion, ASD, and children with ASD that attend inclusion classrooms.

I should definitely be informed by experts about the child with ASD that is going to attend my classes. I should be informed about the child's character and how I should behave. I do get to know the child over time once they begin to attend my classes but adaptation period would be much easier and we would be able to have better practices if we were well informed prior to attendance (T5).

I need training on autism. But these seminars should be practice oriented. In addition, seminars can be organized for teachers only. Counseling services can be provided after the trainings. (T6).

I need trainings that provide the latest information on autism, where I can be up to date on the new information. Seminars should be organized especially for teachers to attend free of charge for developing their professional competencies. Most of the seminars are very expensive (T8).

In addition, two teachers (T1, T5) stated that activities (seminars, etc.) should be provided for typically developing children and their families to raise their awareness about integration and ASD. Teachers' statements were as follows: *"First, it is necessary to raise the awareness of parents of children with normal development. I think that the seminars given by the experts are very important. Problems arise if the condition of the student with ASD is not explained to the parents. I do not know much knowledge on it either. If families are informed in advance, adaptation will be easier for students, families and teachers"* (T1), *"If only there were trainings for children in classroom, provided by experts on autism and how to treat children with autism. This would make the process easier for everyone"* (T5).

Two teachers recommended having resource rooms at schools: *"If there were resource rooms at schools, we would work with children with ASD in those rooms at certain times"* (T1). *"Resource rooms should be available"* (T4). Two other teachers reported that practices to enhance their motivation were important: *"Authorities should always implement practices that increase our motivation"* (T2); *"Measure should be taken and incentives should be provided that increases teachers' motivation"* (T6). Some of the teachers (T2, T3, T4, and T6) stated that the reduction of class sizes is necessary for successful inclusion. For example, the following statements were made by some: *"Classes are too crowded for inclusion. For example, my class size is 24 and I'm on my own. How can I succeed? It is very difficult"* (T3), *"This work cannot be attained in crowded classes; the class sizes must be reduced. I have 20 students and no assisting staff"* (T4).

Finally, six teachers (T1, T3, T4, T6, T7, T8) reported that there should be support professional staff (shadow teacher, co-instructor, etc.) in classrooms: *"An assistant teacher is required. This person must also be familiar with inclusive practices, special education, and autism"* (T3); *"Certainly, professionally adequate shadow teachers or co-instructors should be officially appointed to schools and work in our classrooms. In addition, a special education teacher should be assigned to each school and serve as a counselor for us"* (T6).

4. Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions

In the context of the importance of early childhood education, while successful inclusion in preschool period brings significant progress in the development of all skills and social acceptance, it is especially effective with respect to social communication and interaction skills of children diagnosed with ASD (Lindsay et al., 2014; Odom & Connie, 2015; Vakil et al., 2009). It is crucial that pre-school teachers have professional competencies needed to carry out successful inclusion practices (Eldar et al., 2010; Lindsay et al., 2014). This study examined the inclusion experiences of some preschool teachers in Turkey with the expectation of being a guiding study for precautions for successful inclusion. It is also expected that the study may contribute to the limited literature. In addition, the findings from Turkey are expected to enrich the cultural perspective of the current literature.

The first finding of this research shows that all of the teachers who participated in this study stated that the challenges they experience regarding the condition of the classroom and the school during the inclusion practices, the negative attitudes and behaviors of typically developing children and their families towards children with ASD, the diagnostic characteristics of children with ASD, and their professional competencies are obstacles for carrying out a successful inclusion. This finding is consistent with findings of previous research studies which highlighted the barriers of successful inclusion conducted with preschool teachers who had children with ASD and / or other special needs in their classrooms (Barned et al., 2011; Lindsay et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2016; Mcconkey & Bhlrigri, 2013; Özeydin & Çolak, 2011; Yazıcı & Akman, 2017).

The second finding shows that some of the teachers who participated in the research applied a variety of methods, though limited, to cope with some of the challenges (problem behaviors exhibited by ASD students, educational challenges, and lack of social skills) they encountered in the process of inclusion. Some previous studies have also shown that some teachers try to make sure that the difficulties encountered during inclusion are overcome and a successful inclusion is actualized via various educational measures and adaptations when they have students with ASD in their classroom (Gök & Erbaş, 2011; Lindsay et al., 2014; Yazıcı & Akman, 2017). This finding can be considered as a promising finding for successful inclusion.

However, considering that there are many precautions that can be taken for the successful inclusion and the effective method that can be applied (NAC, 2009, 2015; Odom & Connie, 2015); it is thought that pre-school teachers should further develop their professional competencies to cope with difficulties. As emphasized in the initial finding, they experience difficulties other than the difficulties stated in the second finding. However, the teachers have not made any explanations on how they cope with these difficulties. Therefore, this finding can be viewed that they try to cope with only a part of the difficulties they have experienced at a limited level, and that they have difficulties in dealing with other difficulties and / or they cannot cope with difficulties. There are, indeed, similar findings indicating that preschool teachers have difficulties in or are inadequate at coping with the challenges they encounter (Grossi-Kliss, 2006; Lian et al., 2008; Özyaydın & Çolak, 2011; Razali et al., 2013).

The third finding shows that in order to successfully carry out an inclusion process, the participant teachers need further development of professional competencies, to inform typically developing peers and their families about the student with ASD, and have support services such as resource rooms and assisting staff. This finding, which draws attention to the importance of meeting the needs of teachers in successful inclusion, is consistent with previous findings (Barned et al., 2011; Bozarslan & Batu, 2014; Grossi-Kliss, 2006; Lian et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2016; Özyaydın & Çolak, 2011; Razali et al., 2013; Varlier, 2004).

The fourth finding includes recommendations for successful inclusion, consistent with the needs of teachers. Teachers proposed procurement of resource rooms, developing professional competencies, raising awareness of typically developing children and their families, taking measures to increase their motivation, reducing class sizes, and appointment of supporting staff. Suggestions for successful inclusion process by preschool teachers in findings of previous studies are similar to the findings of this study (Barned et al., 2011; Er-Sabuncuoğlu, 2016; Lian et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2016; Varlier, 2004; Yazıcı & Akman, 2017).

To conclude, considering the limited literature on preschool teachers' experiences about ASD, the findings of this study can be expected to make contribution to the literature. Moreover, it can also shed light on practices and policies that may be actualized to ensure preschool teachers carry out successful inclusion. Additionally, this study offers a cultural perspective to the literature in the context of containing information relating to preschool inclusion in Turkey and examining some preschool teachers' experiences with inclusion. On the other hand, the collection of data only by interview method can be considered as a limitation.

Based on the findings, some suggestions can be offered. The following recommendations are submitted for improving current practice; (a) In the context of increasing pre-service trainings, undergraduate students in preschool programs can be offered courses, seminars on ASD and opportunities for observations and internships in educational institutions for students with ASD; (b) in-service trainings can be offered to preschool teachers that include practice, counseling and mentoring; (c) physical (i.e.: support room), educational (i.e.: materials) and staff (i.e.: shadow teacher) support can be provided to the institutions of preschool teachers; (d) educational support may be provided to the inclusion students and their families; (e) awareness-raising activities can be organized for school-staff, typically developing students, and their families. Recommendations for future studies may be summarized as follows: (a) qualitative and quantitative research studies using different data collection methods and on larger samples should be conducted to explore the experiences of teachers; (b) work of teachers in different cultures should be examined to be able to make intercultural comparisons.

References

- Akalın, S., Demir, Ş., Sucuoğlu, B., Bakkaloğlu, H., & İşcen, F. (2014). The needs of inclusive preschool teachers about inclusive practices. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 54, 39-60. doi:10.14689/ejer.2014.54.3
- American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*. Arlington, VA, US: American Psychiatric Publishing.

- Barned, N. E., Knapp N. F., & Neuharth-Pritchett, S. (2011). Knowledge and attitudes of early childhood preservice teachers regarding the inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Inclusive Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 32 (4), 302-321. doi:10.1080/10901027.2011.622235
- Bozarslan, B., & Batu, E. S. (2014). Özel anaokullarında çalışan eğitimcilerin okulöncesi dönemde kaynaştırma ile ilgili görüş ve önerileri [Examining the opinions of teachers working in private preschools about inclusion]. *Abant İzzet Baysal Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 14 (2), 86-108. doi:10.17240/aibuefd.2014.14.2-5000091529
- Brantlinger, E., Jimenez, R., Klingner, J., Pugach, M., & Richardson, V. (2005). Qualitative studies in special education. *Exceptional Children*, 71 (2), 195-207. doi:10.1177/001440290507100205
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative Research for Education An introduction to theories and methods*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.
- Creswell, W. J. (2014). *Educational research: planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Eldar, E., Talmor, R., & Wolf-Zukerman, T. (2010). Successes and difficulties in the individual inclusion of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the eyes of their coordinators. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14 (1), 97-114. doi:10.1080/13603110802504150
- Er-Sabuncuoğlu, D. M. (2016). Otizm bilgi düzeyi: Okul öncesi eğitimcileri [Autism Knowledge; Preschool Educators]. *H.Ü. Sağlık Bilimleri Fakültesi Dergisi* 3 (1), 28-52.
- Grossi-Kliss, J. (2006). Teaching Children With Autistic Spectrum Disorder: A Preschool Teacher Survey To Determine Best Practice Approach. *Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals (JAASEP)*, 97-106.
- Gök, G., & Erbaş, D. (2011). Okul öncesi öğretmenlerinin kaynaştırma eğitimine ilişkin görüşleri ve önerileri [Opinions and suggestions of preschool teachers about inclusion]. *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education*, 3 (1), 66-87. <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/intjcesse/issue/8649/107947>
- Lian, W. B., Ying, S. H., Tean, S. C., Lin, D. C., Lian, Y. C., & Yun, H. L. (2008). Pre-school teachers' knowledge, attitudes and practices on childhood developmental and behavioral disorders in Singapore. *Journal Paediatrics Child Health*, 44 (4), 187-194. doi:10.1111/j.1440-1754.2007.01231.x
- Lindsay, S., Proulx, M., Scott, H., & Thomson, N. (2014). Exploring teachers' strategies for including children with autism spectrum disorder in mainstream classrooms, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 18 (2), 101-122. doi:10.1080/13603116.2012.758320
- Liu, Y., Li, J., Zheng, Q., Zaroff, C. M., Hall, B. J., Li, X., & Hao, Y., (2016). Knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of autism spectrum disorder in a stratified sampling of preschool teachers in China. *BMC Psychiatry*, 16 (142), 1-12. doi:10.1186/s12888-016-0845-2
- Lovaas, O. I. (2003). *Teaching individuals with developmental delays: Basic intervention techniques*. Austin, Texas: Pro-Ed.
- Mak, C., & Zhang, K. C. (2013). Teachers' perceptions of a community participation programme for preschoolers with autism. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 18 (1), 102-117. doi:10.1080/13632752.2012.695535
- Mastropieri, M. A., & Scruggs, E. T. (2004). *The inclusive classroom: Strategies for effective instruction*. Ohio: Merrill Publishing Company.
- Mcconkey, R., & Bhlirgi, S. (2003). Children with autism attending preschool facilities: The experiences and perceptions of staff. *Early Child Development and Care*, 173 (4), 445-452. doi:10.1080/0300443032000086926
- Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı (MEB) [Ministry of National Education] (1997). 573 sayılı Kanun Hükmünde Kararname [573 Decree Law]. Retrieved from

https://orgm.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2012_10/10111011_ozel_egitim_kanun_hukmunda_karar_name.pdf.

- Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı (MEB) [Ministry of National Education] (2006). *Özel Eğitim Hizmetleri Yönetmeliği*. [Special Education Services Regulation]. Retrieved from https://orgm.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2018_07/09101900_ozel_egitim_hizmetleri_yonetmeliği_07072018.pdf.
- Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı (MEB) [Ministry of National Education] (2014). *Okul Öncesi Kurum ve İlköğretim Kurumları Yönetmeliği* [Regulation on Pre-school Institutions and Primary Education Institutions]. Retrieved from <http://mevzuat.meb.gov.tr/dosyalar/1703.pdf>.
- Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı (MEB) (2017). *Kaynaştırma/Bütünleştirme Yoluyla Eğitim Uygulamaları Genelgesi*. [Circular on Educational Applications through Integration / Integration]. Retrieved from https://orgm.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2017_09/21112929_kaynastirma_genelge.pdf.
- Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı (MEB) [Ministry of National Education] (2018). *Özel Eğitim Hizmetleri Yönetmeliği* [Regulation of Special Education Services]. Retrieved from <http://mevzuat.meb.gov.tr/dosyalar/1963.pdf>.
- Melekoğlu, M. A., Cakiroğlu, O., & Malmgren, K. W. (2009). Special education in Turkey. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13 (3), 287-298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110701747769>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- National Autism Center [NAC] (2015). *National standards report*. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalautismcenter.org/pdf/NACStandards>.
- National Autism Center [NAC] (2009). *National standards report*. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalautismcenter.org/pdf/NACStandards>.
- Odom, S. L., & Connie, .W. (2015). Connecting the dots: Supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *American Educator*, 39 (2), 12-19. <https://doi.org/10.17755/esosder.286479>
- Özaydın, L., & Çolak, A. (2011). Okul öncesi öğretmenlerinin kaynaştırma eğitimine ve okul öncesi eğitimde kaynaştırma eğitimi hizmetiçi eğitim programına ilişkin görüşleri [The views of preschool education teachers over mainstreaming education and over in-service education program of mainstreaming education at preschool education]. *Kalem Eğitim ve İnsan Bilimleri Dergisi*, 1 (1), 189-226. doi:10.23863/kalem.2017.6
- Razali, N. M., Toran, H., Kamaralzaman, S., Salleh, N. M., & Yasin, M. H. M. (2013). Teachers' Perceptions of Including Children with Autism in a Preschool. *Asian Social Science*, 9 (12), 261-267. doi:10.12681/dial.11965
- Richardson-Gibbs, M. A., ve Klein, M. D. (2014). *Making preschool inclusion work*. H. Bakkaloğlu ve B. Sucuoğlu (Trans.). Ankara: Nobel Yayınevi.
- Scheuermann, B., Webber, J., Boutot, E. A., & Goodwin, M. (2003). Problems with personel preparation in autism spectrum disorders. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 18 (3), 197-206. doi:10.1177/10883576030180030801.
- Simpson, L. R. (2004). Finding effective intervention and personel preparation practices for students with autism spectrum disorders. *Exceptional Children*, 70 (2), 135-144. doi:10.1177/001440290407000201
- Smith, J. A., Osborn, M. (2004). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (51-80). London: Sage.
- Sturme, P., & Adrienne, F. (2007). *Autism spectrum disorders*. Austin, Texas: Pro-ed.
- Sucuoğlu, B., & Bakkaloğlu, H. (2018). *Okul öncesinde kaynaştırma: Öğretmen eğitimi* [Inclusion in pre-school education: Teacher training]. Ankara: PEGEM Akademi.

- Vakil, S., Welton, E., O'Connor, B., & Kline, L. (2009). Inclusive means everyone! The role of the early childhood educator when including young children with autism. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 36: 321-326. doi:10.1007/s10643-008-0289-5
- Varlıer, G. (2004). *Okulöncesi eğitim öğretmenlerinin kaynaştırmaya ilişkin görüşleri* (Yayınlanmamış Yüksek Lisans Tezi). [The views of pre-school teachers on integration (Unpublished Master Thesis)]. Anadolu Üniversitesi, Eskişehir.
- Yazıcı, D. N., & Akman, B. (2017). Okul öncesi öğretmenlerinin otizmli çocukların kaynaştırılması hakkındaki düşüncelerinin incelenmesi [An investigation of pre-school teachers' opinions about the inclusion of children with autism]. *Ankara Üniversitesi Eğitim Bilimleri Fakültesi Özel Eğitim Dergisi, Elektronik Yayın*. 19, 1-24. doi:10.21565/ozelegitimdergisi.284253
- Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu (YÖK) [Higher Education Council] (2018). *Okulöncesi öğretmenliği lisans programı* [Undergraduate programs of early childhood education]. Retrieved from http://www.yok.gov.tr/documents/10279/41805112/Okul_Oncesi_Ogretmenligi_Lisans_Programi.pdf
- Yüksel, P & Yıldırım S. (2015). Theoretical Frameworks, Methods, and Procedures for Conducting Phenomenological Studies in Educational Settings. *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 6 (1), 1-20. doi:10.17569/tojqi.59813