Determining the characteristics of an inclusive preschool education program: A Delphi study

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is considered to be an approach that consists of serving only the children with special educational needs in educational settings. However, a perspective that supports diversity among all children and requires respect for differences is increasingly implemented today on an international basis. Inclusive education is for all children. Use of inclusive approaches for all children at all levels of education is also significant to support all developmental areas. Inclusive education practices in early childhood period will enable children to access equal rights, opportunities and potential. For this reason, it is very important to present the inclusive features that should be found in preschool education programs today. Accordingly, this study seeks answers to the following question: "What should be the features of an inclusive preschool education program?" Case study method, which is one of the qualitative research methods, was used in this study. Delphi technique was used via interview questions and surveys to determine the characteristics of an inclusive preschool program in this study. The first round of the Delphi application started with 24 experts, the second round with 17 experts and the third round with 14 experts. Content analysis was used for the first responses received from the participants and categories were obtained. It was determined that the experts mentioned 52 items in 4 separate categories. The study determined some of the principles and characteristics that an inclusive preschool education program and an inclusive preschool teacher should possess.

Keywords: Inclusive education, pre-school education, pre-school education program.

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INTRODUCTION

In most education systems, inclusive education is used as an approach that positively supports the education of children who are excluded, discriminated against, who do not participate in quality learning or who are inadequate as learners (Black-Hawkins et al., 2007). Inclusive education is known as an approach that includes the adaptation and change of the methodology to meet the needs of all students and learning with peers from different backgrounds and abilities in mainstream schools. The realization of inclusive education is determined by the geographical, demographic, cultural, linguistic characteristics and factors of the relevant country (Grynova and Kalınıchenko, 2018).

In some countries, inclusive education is considered as an approach to serving only the children with special educational needs. However, nowadays, inclusive education is internationally acclaimed with an understanding that supports diversity among all students and respects the differences among learners (UNESCO, 2001).

The concept of inclusion has been a topic of discussion in society and political theory for the last three decades and this concept has been shaped by discussions on interventions to be followed in order to include individuals/groups living at the extremes of society (Sen, 2000; Terzi, 2014). The fact that noteworthy institutions address the concept of inclusive education has been an important reason for these discussions. The inclusion of the concept of inclusive education in the policy documents of many international organizations, especially the United Nations (UN), has ensured that inclusive education is considered and brought to the

agenda worldwide.

The Center for Studies on Inclusive Education, established in the UK in 1982, expresses the principles of this philosophy as follows:

- All children have the right to learn and play together;
- Children should not be appraised separately due to their disability or learning difficulties and exclusion, removal or discrimination against children based on disability or learning difficulties should be prevented;
- There should be no reason to prevent children from attending schools (CSIE, 2002).

In Turkey, the concept of "Inclusive Education" is not directly addressed in statues, laws and regulations but it is included in a manner that implicates the principles and objectives of inclusive education. Everyone has the right to education and gender discrimination is eliminated with the following articles: The Constitution of the Republic of Turkey (1982)- Right and duty of education Article 42. No one shall be deprived of the right of education. Primary education is compulsory for all citizens of both sexes and is free of charge in state schools. The State shall take necessary measures to rehabilitate those in need of special education so as to render such people useful to society. Additionally, MoNE (1973), Basic National Education Law No. 1739 Article 4 - Educational institutions are open to everyone regardless of language, race, gender, disability and religion. No privilege shall be given to any person, family, group or class in education. Article 8 – Equal opportunities are provided to all men and women in education. Special measures are taken to train children in need of special education and protection. Primary Education Act Article 1 - Primary education is the basic education and training that serves the physical, mental and moral development and upbringing of all Turks, men and women, in accordance with national goals. Article 2 - Primary education is provided in primary education institutions and it is compulsory for girls and boys of school age, free of charge in state schools. Article 12 - Children who are mentally, physically, mentally and socially disabled despite being in the compulsory primary education age are provided with special education and training. In addition, inclusion in education is legally guaranteed with legal arrangements such as Law No. 2916 on Children in Need of Special Education, Decree Law (1997) No. 573 on Special Education, Law No. 5378 on Disabled Persons and MoNE (2018) Special Education Services Regulation.

Inclusive education is for all children. Including all children at all levels of education is essential to support all developmental areas as well. Inclusive education practices in early childhood are important for children to access equal rights, opportunities and to reach their potential. For this reason, ensuring that all curriculum programs, widely implemented in the pre-school period, become inclusive will assure that children stay away from practices based on discrimination and stereotyping starting from early ages. Especially in the preschool period, children cannot benefit from educational opportunities equally due to the conditions they live in. Making pre-school education inclusive will help children both to equally benefit from educational opportunities and to gain a more inclusive perspective at early ages, when they acquire many attitudes and behaviors and develop a perspective towards life.

To ensure the implementation of inclusive education at all levels from pre-school to higher education is a very difficult task. This is a process in which many institutions, organizations and individuals need to cooperate and especially the teacher skills, applied curriculum and programs, resources and materials should be reviewed by taking the principles of inclusive education into consideration. It is certain that offering programs enriched with an inclusive education approach to children at early ages is essential to create an inclusive society and perspective. For this reason, it is highly relevant and significant to explore and present the inclusive characteristics that are required in preschool education programs. Therefore, this study sought answers to the following question: "What should be the characteristics of an inclusive preschool education program?"

METHODOLOGY

Research model

Case study, one of the qualitative research methods, was used in this study which aimed to determine the characteristics that should be found in an inclusive preschool program. Case study is a methodological approach that involves in-depth study of a limited system using multiple data collection tools to gather systematic information about how the system is processed (Chmiliar, 2010). Delphi technique, which helps to reach consensus among the experts in the subject area through interview questions and surveys, was used in the study to determine the characteristics of an inclusive preschool program.

The universe and sample of the research

Study participants were selected by using purposeful sampling method. Specialization criteria included the following: "having completed a doctorate education in the field of preschool education, being a lecturer in the field of pre-school education in a foundation or a state university, having studies on pre-school education program or pre-school inclusive education". In line with these criteria, 170 academicians employed in the child development departments (Faculty and undergraduate) at all the foundation and state universities in Turkey

during the 2019-2020 academic year were sent (via email) an invitation letter explaining the contents of the study. As shown in Table 1, 24 academicians provided positive feedback to these invitation letters and the first round of the Delphi study started with those 24 experts, 17 experts responded to the survey in the second round and 14 experts in the third round. The literature reviews of Delphi studies states that it is appropriate to have between 13 and 77 individuals in order to carry out a study (Adıgüzel, 2019; Güzelyurt and Saraç, 2018; Herring, 2004; Wilson et al., 2010). Therefore, it was decided that sufficient number of experts had been reached in the study.

Data collection and analysis

After the formation of the expert group, three basic stages were followed for the application of the technique. *1. Sending the questions*: In the first round, the experts were sent the open-ended question of "What should an inclusive preschool education program include?" The experts were also sent a form with the following statement "Please state below your suggestions to transform the 2013 preschool education program into a more inclusive preschool education program" to ensure

that they provided concrete suggestions. The experts, who accepted face-to-face interviews, were interviewed through programs such as Zoom and Skype. *2. Analyzing the responses*: At this stage, content analysis was done to the first responses received from the participants. It was determined that the experts addressed 52 items in 4 separate categories. After the content analysis, the categories and items obtained through the content analysis were shared with the experts again before creating a Likert type tool and their opinions were taken on the suitability of the items and categories. *3. Thematizing the responses*: The answers approved by the experts were divided into sub-themes and transformed into a 6-point Likert type form. The transformed form was once again sent to the experts in order to get their opinions and to ensure that it was reviewed. At this stage, experts were asked to score the 6-point Likert form and also evaluate the suitability of the identified items, whether they were suitable for the specified category and what different alternative items could be if additional items were needed. After the expert opinions were received, the form was finalized and sent to the experts again in order to reach a consensus. According to Adıgüzel (2019), the number of rounds can be increased until reaching a consensus. In this study, consensus was reached with the experts in the 3rd round.

Table 1. Number of participants to Delphi rounds.

	1.Tur	2.Tur	3.Tur
Number of experts who responded to surveys that were sent	24	17	14

RESULTS

Delphi process first round results

In the first round of Delphi study, 24 subject experts answered the open-ended question posed to the experts. These responses were categorized by content analysis method and it was determined that the responses were grouped under 4 different themes and a total of 52 items were addressed. It was determined that in the first round the experts expressed their opinions in the following categories: teacher, program, family and teacher training. Table 2 presents the categorical distinctions, percentage and frequency values of the answers provided for the first category of the Delphi study.

Delphi process findings obtained during the second and third rounds

Examination of the studies in the literature shows that that the researchers follow different methods to provide consensus such as basing expert opinions on

percentages of participation (Ager et al., 2010), using the mean, median and percentages of participation together (Elfeddali et al., 2010; Herring, 2004; Peng, 2009) and using the interquartile range. If the difference between the first quarter and the third quarter is less than 1.2 in the interquartile range, consensus will be achieved (Zeliff and Heldenbrand, 1993, cited in Şahin, 2001).

For this research, analysis was based on using the mean ($\bar{x}$), median (X_{med}), percentages of participation (%) and the interquartile range. The number of items which was 52 in the second round of Delphi decreased to 38 items with the analysis of mean ($\bar{x}$), median (X_{med}), percentages of participation (%) and the interquartile range. Table 3 presents the results of the analysis.

As Table 3 presents, in line with the opinions of 17 expert, the mean and median values of the Items were in the range of "I do not agree at all" and "I mostly disagree" in the Likert scale. At the same time, although the means and medians were in this range, they were included in the items for which there was no consensus in the interquartile range analysis. Therefore, 14 items in the study were excluded.

According to the responses of the experts, 38 items for

Table 2. Distribution of the answers given in the first round of the Delphi process by category.

Categories	Frequency (f)	Percentage value (%)
1. Teacher	18	35
2. Program	20	38
3. Family	8	15
4. Teacher training	6	12
Total	52	100

Table 3. Mean, median and percentage of participation of the items excluded from the Delphi process with the expert opinion.

Items	x̄	X_{med}	Interquartile range (3rd quarter– 1st quarter)	%	f
Item 1	2.11	2.00	2		
Item 2	2.23	2.00	2		
Item 3	2.05	2.00	0		
Item 4	2.00	2.00	1		
Item 5	1.88	2.00	1		
Item 6	2.23	2.00	1		
Item 7	1.88	2.00	1.5		
Item 8	1.88	2.00	1.5	100	17
Item 9	1.76	2.00	1		
Item 10	1.76	2.00	1		
Item 11	1.88	2.00	1		
Item 12	1.88	2.00	1		
Item 13	1.76	2.00	1		
Item 14	1.82	2.00	1		

which there was consensus were analyzed according to mean (x̄), median (X_{med}), percentages of participation (%) and interquartile range.

Table 4 demonstrates the mean, median, percentage of participation and interquartile range of the items for which there was consensus.

According to Table 4, interquartile range for the items for which there was consensus, item means and medians were in the "I mostly agree" and "I completely agree". Based on these results, there was consensus on 38 items.

During the 3rd Delphi Round, Table 4 was sent to the experts along with the 38 items for which there was consensus and their analysis and the experts were asked

to mark their views in Likert scale. Table 5 presents the differences between the mean (x̄), median (X_{med}), percentages of participation (%) and interquartile range in line with the opinions of the experts in the 3rd Delphi Round.

According to Table 5, expert opinions were in the "I mostly agree" and "I completely agree" based on the interquartile range for the items for which there was consensus, item means and medians in the 3rd Delphi Round. There was a consensus in the 3rd Delphi Round on the same items for which there was consensus in the 2nd Delphi Round and the characteristics that are required in an inclusive preschool education program were formed with the opinions of experts.

Table 4. The mean, median, percentage of participation and interquartile range of the items for which there was consensus.

Items	x̄	X_{med}	Interquartile range (Q_3– Q_1)	%	f
Item 1	5.94	6	0		
Item 2	5.76	6	0.5		
Item 3	5.82	6	0	100	17
Item 4	5.82	6	0		
Item 5	5.82	6	0		
Item 6	5.94	6	0		

Table 4. Continues.

Item 7	5.88	6	0
Item 8	5.64	6	0.5
Item 9	5.64	6	1
Item 10	5.41	6	1
Item 11	5.76	6	0
Item 12	5.64	6	0.5
Item 13	5.52	6	1
Item 14	5.70	6	1
Item 15	5.76	6	0.5
Item 16	5.47	6	1
Item 17	5.70	6	1
Item 18	5.64	6	1
Item 19	5.52	6	0.5
Item 20	5.47	6	1
Item 21	5.76	6	0.5
Item 22	5.64	6	1
Item 23	5.76	6	0.5
Item 24	5.52	6	1
Item 25	5.64	6	0.5
Item 26	5.70	6	1
Item 27	5.58	6	1
Item 28	5.52	6	1
Item 29	5.76	6	0.5
Item 30	5.76	6	0.5
Item 31	5.70	6	0.5
Item 32	5.76	6	0.5
Item 33	5.76	6	0.5
Item 34	5.88	6	0
Item 35	5.76	6	0.5
Item 36	5.82	6	0
Item 37	5.88	6	1
Item 38	5.41	5	1

Table 5. Differences between the mean, median, percentage of participation and interquartile range of expert opinions in the 3rd Delphi round.

Items	$\bar{x}$	X_{med}	Interquartile range ($Q_3 - Q_1$)	%	f
Item 1	5.92	6	0		
Item 2	5.78	6	0.25		
Item 3	5.92	6	0		
Item 4	5.85	6	0		
Item 5	5.92	6	0		
Item 6	6.00	6	0		
Item 7	5.92	6	0	100	14
Item 8	5.64	6	0.25		
Item 9	5.64	6	1		
Item 10	5.64	6	1		
Item 11	5.71	6	0.25		
Item 12	5.85	6	0		
Item 13	5.78	6	0.25		
Item 14	5.85	6	0		

Table 5. Continues.

Item 15	5.78	6	0.25
Item 16	5.78	6	0.25
Item 17	5.78	6	0.25
Item 18	5.71	6	0.25
Item 19	5.42	6	1
Item 20	5.64	6	1
Item 21	5.78	6	0.25
Item 22	5.78	6	0.25
Item 23	5.78	6	0.25
Item 24	5.57	6	1
Item 25	5.78	6	0
Item 26	5.71	6	1
Item 27	5.57	6	1
Item 28	5.50	6	1
Item 29	5.78	6	0.25
Item 30	5.78	6	0.25
Item 31	5.78	6	0
Item 32	5.78	6	0.25
Item 33	5.85	6	0
Item 34	5.92	6	0
Item 35	5.78	6	0.25
Item 36	5.85	6	0
Item 37	5.78	6	0.25
Item 38	5.64	6	1

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main goal of inclusive education practices is to eliminate the exclusion and discrimination that all students in educational settings may face due to prejudices and negative attitudes regarding their individual differences and characteristics. Since education directly affects all individuals in the society, an inclusive education system is the basis of building a society in which a quality education system is created for all and no discrimination is experienced whatsoever. Inclusive education, in which differences are evaluated not as a problem but as a source of wealth, also constitutes a reflection of an inclusive society. Although awareness has been raised on inclusive education in the recent past, the existence of children who have gone out of the education system for various reasons or who have been exposed to negative educational experiences indicates the urgent need for improvements in this area (Booth and Dyssegaard, 2008; Education Reform Initiative, 2016; Stubbs, 2008).

After the items were excluded in line with the opinions of the experts in the study, Delphi 2nd round analysis revealed that the experts expressed their opinions in two different categories regarding their perspective on the program. In this context, experts expressed their opinions in teacher and program categories. It can be argued that experts generally focused on the chacrateristics that should be found in an inclusive preschool teacher and emphasized these 21 items in this regard. These items in general were found to describe an inclusive teacher. It is very important that teachers who implement the program comes to the agenda this way. In the study, it was often emphasized by experts that a good practitioner was the key to inclusive education.

In their study, Mngo and Mngo (2018) investigated the attitudes of general education teachers towards disabled students and found after the inclusive education program they implemented as a pilot that teachers with special education experience preferred schools providing special education instead of normal schools with inclusive education. It was determined that the teachers were unprepared for the inclusive education program and felt inadequate in this regard. Yada and Savolainen (2017) also examined teachers' self-efficacy in inclusive education. They concluded that although teachers' attitudes towards disabled people and other children were generally positive, their self-efficacy was low. They found that teachers felt inadequate to cope with students who displayed problem behaviors, especially in inclusive education. The study by Savolainen et al. (2012) on how the development of inclusive education was seen from a teacher's point of view in different countries such as Finland, South Africa, Slovenia, Lithuania, China and the

UK concluded that despite the country's sensitivity towards disabled people, teachers had concerns about including these children in their classrooms. In their study, Forlin and Chambers (2011) stated that increased knowledge about legislation and policy on inclusive education and increased level of confidence in regards to being an inclusive teacher did not necessarily reduce teachers' anxiety or perceived stress about having disabled students in their classrooms. The study conducted by Khan et al. (2017) revealed that inclusive education is accepted as a desirable practice, that all students should be accepted in classrooms and that they were also optimistic about mildly disabled children. The study of Stemberger and Kiswarday (2018), which was carried out with teachers working specifically in early childhood, is also significant in this regard. Within the scope of their study, Stemberger and Kiswarday (2018) determined the attitudes of pre-school and primary school teachers towards inclusive education and found that preschool teachers viewed inclusive education more positively compared to primary school teachers. All of these studies in the literature reveal the importance of teachers' characteristics and competence for inclusive education. The study conducted by Khan et al. (2017) also argues that teachers' abilities are an essential component of inclusive education. These findings reveal that teacher characteristics are essential for an inclusive program. It can be argued that the findings of this study are consistent with the literature since experts in the present study frequently mentioned teacher characteristics in relation to inclusive programs and the support teachers needed to implement inclusive programs.

Pijl et al. (1997) reported that teachers should receive support in regards to methods, materials and in-service training in order to create and successfully implement an inclusive education environment in classrooms. According to Travers et al. (2010), it is important for teachers to regard themselves as responsible individuals in their students' education within the framework of inclusive education and to develop themselves by getting the necessary support in this direction. In their study, Subban and Sharma (2006) acknowledged the need for additional support, training and expertise for teachers within the framework of inclusive education and emphasized the need to increase teachers' readiness by presenting relevant information on the legislation for taking part in inclusive classrooma during professional development and teacher preparation programs. In the context of this study, experts often emphasized the development of teachers in the context of inclusive education. According to the results of the study, it is concluded that the program and the teacher are inseparable from each other in inclusive education. Therefore, it can be argued that the emergence of items in the study that pointed to the need in regards to teacher development shows paralels with the literature.

The system is changed to suit the student in inclusive education, it is not the other way around (Radivojevic et al., 2009; Stubbs, 2008). For this reason, it should be ensured that the programs that guide the systems in schools have some principles to include all children. All of the experts whose opinions were taken within the scope of this study stated that the pre-school education program is an inclusive program but they emphasized that some elements of the program should be improved so that inclusive education do not refer only to the education of the disabled, but has wider impact and implications for all involved. It can be argued that a better understanding of the program is important in removing all forms of discrimination from the pre-school period.

All the results obtained from the study have shed light on the characteristics that should be found in an inclusive preschool program. In this context, the importance of supporting teacher characteristics in inclusive education can be emphasized once again. In addition, it can be argued that the results of the study emphasize the importance of developing an inclusive preschool education program that will include all children with a rich material support and with acquisitions and indicators that are multi-faceted and free from discrimination.

Based on this study, it may be suggested that more studies should be carried out to support the competencies of pre-school teachers in inclusive education. In the literature, there are very few studies on inclusive education that includes all groups in the field of preschool education. For this reason, more academic studies are recommended to support inclusive education at pre-school level. It is recommended to carry out studies for a better understanding of the currently used 2013 Preschool Education Program to ensure the development of an inclusive pre-school education program by taking into account the opinions of experts. It is also recommended to carry out more studies using the Delphi technique by creating an important roadmap in determining the needs, which reveals the importance of expert opinions in the field of preschool education.

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ANNEXES

Items agreed on by experts with consensus at the end of the Delphi study

	An inclusive preschool teacher
1	Should have adopted the inclusive education philosophy.
2	Should understand his/her role in inclusive education.
3	Should include all children in the classroom by refraining from discrimination in his/her behaviors in the classroom.
4	Should use inclusive language that is free from discriminatory expressions in his/her classroom speech.
5	Should know that every child in his/her class is different from each other.
6	Should realize that the children in his/her class have different readiness levels.
7	Should know that the children in his/her class have different learning speeds.
8	Should be aware of the different learning styles of the children in his/her classroom.
9	Should be aware of the difficulties every child in his/her class are experiencing.
10	Should be aware that children in his/her class may have different disabilities.
11	Should respect the culture of the children in his/her class..
12	Should try to support every child in his/her class with the activities he/she will organize.
13	Should be aware of the factors (gender inequality, agricultural work, etc.) that may cause inequality and disadvantage among children in his/her class.
14	Should take measures to minimize inequality among the children in the classroom.
15	Should be able to include every child in his/her class in education as they need.
16	Should be able to benefit from online social support networks according to the situation and conditions in his/her class.
17	Should be able to use the materials in his/her classroom in a multi-faceted way according to the needs of his/her students.
18	Should be able to add facilitating elements to the planned activities during the day.
19	Should be able to collaborate with different domain experts to support all children in his/her class.
20	Should be able to collaborate with children's families to support all children in his/her class.
21	Should take care to choose all materials used in his/her classroom in a way that ensures that children gain an inclusive perspective.
22	Should ensure that the learning centers are enriched with materials according to the individual differences and characteristics of the children.

	An inclusive preschool education program;
23	Should consist of activities to include children with different characteristics.
24	Should refer to people and social groups with different characteristics.
25	Should maintain positive language towards different groups / individuals.
26	Should be supported by children's books that include inclusive education.
27	Should have events that include differences in content, process and product dimensions.
28	Should contain acquisitions and indicators appropriate for the developmental level of each child.
29	Should allow teachers to add acquisitions and indicators based on their needs.
30	Should include administering self-evaluations done twice a year so that teachers can evaluate their own training.
31	Should include a multidimensional process evaluation.
32	Should include adaptations not only for children with a special education report, but for every child who needs it in the classroom.
33	Should include examples of how differentiation can be made by taking into account the differences in children according to each age group in the trainings regarding the program.
34	Should be suitable to create activities that allow individual, small group and large group work in accordance with the individual characteristics of each child.
35	Should be flexible enough to allow changes according to the physical environment and materials of the classroom.
36	Should support the organization of learning centers according to the objectives, indicators and concepts according to the individual differences of the children.
37	Should include tips for rest / transition activities to support children's active participation.
38	Should support the use of all kinds of sensory (visual, auditory, tactile, etc.) materials that include inclusive elements in the application of achievements and indicators.