




## INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: TEACHER PERCEPTIONS, PRACTICES, CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

ERKEN ÇOCUKLUKTA KAPSAYICI EĞİTİM: ÖĞRETMEN ALGILARI, UYGULAMALARI, ZORLUKLARI VE İHTİYAÇLARI

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### ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study examines the perceptions, classroom practices, and educational needs of preschool teachers regarding inclusive education. We collected data through face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured interview form. The participants were 15 preschool teachers selected by criterion sampling, working in public preschools in the city center of Diyarbakır. We analyzed the data through content analysis. Our findings reveal that while preschool teachers have a general understanding of inclusive education, they lack specific knowledge in more detailed areas. They believe that the implementation of inclusive education requires consideration of children's individual differences, developmental characteristics, and cultural diversity. The teachers identified several challenges, including a lack of materials, large class sizes, limited understanding and support from parents, and their own professional insufficiency and experience. Additionally, they noted deficiencies in general educational policies on inclusive education. Teachers often seek support from the children's families or school counseling services to address the challenges they face. They also highlighted the need for practical training on developing and implementing inclusive activities, adapting activities to various characteristics of the children, and actively engaging children with special needs in learning. Based on these findings, we have put forward several recommendations for practice and further research.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education, Preschool teachers, Knowledge related to inclusive education, Inclusive education practices, Teachers' professional needs.

### ÖZET

Bu fenomenolojik çalışma okul öncesi öğretmenlerinin kaynaştırma eğitimi ilişkin algılarını, sınıf uygulamalarını ve eğitim ihtiyaçlarını incelemektedir. Veriler yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu kullanılarak yüz yüze görüşmelerle toplanmıştır. Katılımcılar, ölçüt örnekleme yoluyla seçilmiş ve Diyarbakır'daki resmi anaokullarında görev yapan 15 öğretmenden oluşmuş ve toplanan veriler içerik analizi yoluyla analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, okul öncesi öğretmenlerinin kapsayıcı eğitim konusunda genel bir algıya sahip olduklarını ancak içerik alanlarında özgül bilgiden yoksun olduklarını göstermiştir. Öğretmenler, kapsayıcı eğitimin öncelikli olarak çocukların bireysel farklılıklarına, gelişimsel özelliklerine ve kültürel çeşitliliğe odaklanması gerektiğine inanmaktadırlar. Kapsayıcı eğitim uygulamalarında, materyal eksikliği, sınıfların kalabalık olması, ailelerin engelleyici bakış açısı ve yetersiz destek ile kendi mesleki yetersizlikleriyle sınırlı deneyimleri dahil olmak üzere birçok zorluk ortaya çıkmıştır. Kapsayıcı eğitime ilişkin genel eğitim politikalarındaki eksiklikler de vurgulanmıştır. Öğretmenler karşılaştıkları zorlukların üstesinden gelmek için sıklıkla çocukların ailelerinden veya okul rehberlik servislerinden destek almayı önermektedirler. Ayrıca katılımcılar, kapsayıcı eğitim etkinliklerinin geliştirilmesi ve uygulanması, etkinliklerin çocukların çeşitli özelliklerine göre uyarlanması ve özel gereksinimi olan çocukların öğrenmeye aktif olarak katılımı konusunda uygulamaya dönük somut eğitim ihtiyacının altını çizmişlerdir. Bu bulgulara dayanarak, uygulamaya ve sonraki araştırmalara yönelik öneriler geliştirilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kapsayıcı eğitim, Okul öncesi öğretmenleri, Kapsayıcı eğitime ilişkin bilgiler, Kapsayıcı eğitim uygulamaları, Öğretmenlerin mesleki ihtiyaçları.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Inclusive education is an educational framework that addresses a broad spectrum of student diversity by adapting teaching methods and curricula to meet these diverse needs (Pijl et al., 1997). This approach seeks to identify and remove barriers that prevent access to education for all children, shifting from blaming the child to critiquing the educational system itself (Slee, 2018; İli, 2022). Davis and Florian (2004) argue that children are often labeled due to their differences not because these differences are inherent problems, but because the educational structures fail to accommodate them. In inclusive settings, these differences are not seen as deficits but as opportunities to enrich the learning environment, allowing all children to view themselves as integral parts of the community (Flem et al., 2004).

Inclusive education extends beyond simply placing students with special needs alongside their peers. It addresses the broader challenges faced by those who are disadvantaged due to circumstances such as refugee status, special needs, gender, ethnic diversity, state protection, or socioeconomic conditions, including child labor or experiences of neglect and violence. These children might also face challenges from having to learn in a language that is not their first (Demirkol, 2023). Effective inclusive education requires meticulous organization, planning, and implementation of strategies that ensure every child can fully participate (Ilija, 2015). It involves a comprehensive approach that goes beyond accessibility to education; it involves delicately addressing the nuanced needs of all students. For instance, it would be inappropriate for a teacher to involve a student with cerebral palsy in role-playing activities that simulate emergency medical scenarios, as this could cause undue stress (Daniela & Lytras, 2019).

Inclusive education represents a global shift towards embracing diversity and effectuating change. This movement has been significantly shaped by disability rights advocates who have championed the cause against exclusion and rigorously challenged traditional notions of equality and justice (Yardımcı, 2015). Key milestones in the evolution of inclusive education include the Salamanca Statement from the 1994 UNESCO World Conference on Special Needs Education, the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ratified by 161 countries, and the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals by 192 countries at the 2015 United Nations General Assembly (Graham, 2020; Yılmaz Atman, 2022). In Turkey, the focus on inclusive education intensified following the influx of Syrian refugees in 2011. The Integration of Syrian Students into the Turkish Education System Project (PIKTES), backed by the European Union and executed across 23 provinces in 2016 by the Ministry of National Education, significantly advanced the integration of Syrian children into Turkish schools, with circulars enabling 60% of Syrian children of basic education age to access education (İli, 2022).

The early years of education are pivotal for instilling a respect for diversity, as early exposure to inclusive practices fosters deep-seated appreciation and understanding among young learners (Smith, 2006). Engaging children with special needs in inclusive settings from an early age not only enhances their social, emotional, academic, and cultural skills but also cultivates positive attitudes in their peers. Research indicates that children who regularly interact with peers who have special needs are more likely to develop a positive view towards diversity (Lawrence et al., 2016). Furthermore, children who are immersed in a diverse environment from a young age tend to exhibit overall well-being and more robust development across multiple domains (Gupta et al., 2014).

Recent research in Turkey has highlighted several challenges in the implementation of inclusive education. The current practices labeled as "integration/inclusion through education" do not entirely conform to the foundational philosophy of inclusive education as outlined by UNESCO. Key challenges during the preschool period include language barriers faced by teachers with refugee children in their classrooms (Ünal & Aladağ, 2020; Aydın Güngör & Pehlivan, 2021; Doğan & Avcıoğlu, 2022; Doğan & Telli, 2022; Özoruç & Sığırtmaç, 2022; Tanış & Özgün, 2022), a lack of confidence among teachers in their ability to provide inclusive education (Akbulut et al., 2021; Tuzcuoğlu & Aydın, 2023), and deficiencies in knowledge and training about inclusive methods (Pamuk & Bal, 2019; Ünal & Aladağ, 2020; Erdoğan et al., 2022; Tuzcuoğlu & Aydın, 2023). Additionally, the physical conditions of schools often do not support inclusive education, and there is a notable lack of support from stakeholders (Ünal & Aladağ, 2020; Köse et al., 2023; Tuzcuoğlu & Aydın, 2023).

The effectiveness of inclusive education heavily depends on the presence of well-trained teachers, whose knowledge, experiences, attitudes, and behaviors in the classroom directly influence the quality of education (Bricker, 1995, as cited in Siagian & Kurniawati, 2019). Although many teachers recognize the importance of inclusive education and generally have a positive outlook, they frequently experience significant anxiety and reluctance when working with children with diverse needs (Woolfson & Brady, 2009). This reluctance often stems from a lack of adequate knowledge and skills, leading teachers to shy away from fully integrating children with special needs into mainstream educational processes (De Boer & Simpson, 2009; Florian, 2009; Pijl, 2010; Symes & Humphrey, 2010). Compounding the issue, teachers sometimes conflate inclusive education with special education or integration programs (Pamuk & Bal, 2019; Akbulut et al., 2021), and they may not adequately address the holistic developmental needs of all students (Rose, 2010). Literature reviews indicate that early childhood educators often prioritize cognitive and academic outcomes over the comprehensive support of children with varied characteristics and needs (Dağlıoğlu et al., 2017). Furthermore, there is a notable deficiency in adapting the physical environment and materials to foster an inclusive setting, and in developing language skills through tailored educational activities (Pamuk & Bal, 2019).

Effective inclusive education practices in early childhood education clearly require teacher training. Without well-trained teachers, it is not possible to create a learning environment that meets the learning needs of every child. Without convincing teachers of the value of inclusive education and sufficiently motivating them, inclusive education cannot move beyond theory (Forlin, 2013). Teachers with high self-efficacy in inclusive education focus on establishing accessibility, success, and trust for all children in their classroom practices, while those with low self-efficacy continuously monitor differences and intervene in behaviors (Woodcock et al., 2021). In this context, increasing the number of courses related to inclusive education in undergraduate programs and providing opportunities for teacher candidates to achieve lasting practical learning is essential (Akbulut et al., 2021). Teachers are looking for concrete support rather than just advisory statements regarding inclusive education (Bouillet, 2013). The key to advancing inclusive education lies in preparing teachers through pre-service and in-service training on how to implement inclusive education in learning environments (Forlin, 2013; Eşici & Doğan, 2020; İli, 2022).

Although there is a strong emphasis on inclusive education and significant steps toward its implementation globally, a substantial gap remains in understanding the specific challenges and

needs of preschool teachers, particularly in Türkiye. Existing literature highlights obstacles such as language barriers, lack of confidence, insufficient training, and inadequate physical conditions in schools that hinder effective inclusive education. Teachers also seem to face challenges in assessing young children with special needs, developing individualized education plans, adapting teaching, classroom management, and handling challenging behaviors (Özokçu, 2018; Tamakloe & Agbenyega, 2017). However, comprehensive studies focusing on preschool teachers' perspectives and practical experiences are relatively scarce. Thus, we designed this study to fill this gap by exploring preschool teachers' perceptions, practices, and challenges regarding inclusive education. Understanding these aspects will help us better understand teachers' experiences and perceptions, as well as identify areas where teachers require further support and training. Addressing these needs is crucial for developing targeted interventions in enhancing the quality of inclusive education from the early years.

The importance of this study lies in several key domains. Early childhood is crucial for setting the foundation for lifelong learning and social integration. Effective inclusive education at this stage can promote positive attitudes towards diversity and equality among all children. In addition, examining preschool teachers' readiness highlights the importance of providing teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to implement effective inclusive practices. Thus, reducing anxiety and reluctance and cultivating a more inclusive learning context. Additionally, the findings can inform policymakers about the current state of inclusive education in preschools and guide the development of more effective policies and training programs. Lastly, conducting the study in a southeastern province of Türkiye, where inclusive education faces unique challenges due to factors such as the influx of refugee children, offers context-specific insights that can inform both local and national educational policies and practices. This study aims to understand the current landscape of inclusive education among preschool teachers by exploring several key questions:

1. What are the preschool teachers' perceptions of inclusive education?
2. How do preschool teachers implement inclusive practices and what challenges do they encounter in their classrooms?
3. What areas do preschool teachers identify as needing further knowledge and training in inclusive education?

## **2. METHODS**

### **2.1. Research Design**

We employed a phenomenological design as part of our qualitative research methodology. Phenomenology aims to understand and interpret the real-life experiences of participants concerning a specific topic (Creswell, 2007). We preferred using this design because we aimed to explore experience-based data of preschool teachers related to inclusive education to compile it into a meaningful whole (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Another reason for choosing this design is to gain an in-depth understanding directly from preschool teachers about their knowledge, practice, and challenges related to inclusive education, their classroom practices, and their educational needs, and to present this information cohesively.

### **2.2. Participants**

The participants of this study are 15 preschool teachers working in official preschool education institutions affiliated with the Ministry of National Education in the central district of Diyarbakır.

We used criterion sampling, a type of purposive sampling. The criteria for the sample in this research is that the participants are preschool teachers who have at least a bachelor's degree in preschool education and are currently teaching a class. We have selected these criteria to make sure that the data collected is relevant to the field and the teachers, accurately reflecting the true experiences and needs of qualified preschool teachers within the context of inclusive education.

The study included 15 preschool teachers (see Table 1), comprising 13 women and two men, all of whom have graduated from an undergraduate program in preschool education. The age distribution shows four teachers between 23 and 30 years old, eight between 31 and 39, and three who are 40 or older. In terms of professional experience, nine teachers have less than 10 years, while six have more than 10 years. Eight of the teachers are employed in independent kindergartens, and seven are in preschool classes within various institutions. The children at these schools are of average socioeconomic status. Regarding linguistic diversity, three teachers currently have non-Turkish speaking children in their classes, with a total of 12 teachers having had such experiences in the past. When it comes to inclusion, ten teachers currently accommodate children with special needs in their classrooms, and 14 have had such experience previously. All teachers have students from diverse family backgrounds in their classes, including single-parent and extended families, and in some cases, a parent working abroad. Eleven teachers have undergone training in inclusion either at university or through in-service programs, whereas four have not received any formal training on the subject.

**Table 1. Profile of Participants**

Participant	Gender	Age	Experience (years)
1 K1	Female	37	15
2 K2	Female	29	5
3 K3	Female	30	8
4 K4	Female	42	19
5 K5	Female	31	9
6 K6	Female	39	6
7 K7	Female	40	15
8 K8	Male	36	11
9 K9	Female	38	15
10 K10	Female	35	7
11 K11	Female	35	5
12 K12	Male	26	4
13 K13	Female	31	9
14 K14	Female	23	1
15 K15	Female	45	22

### **2.3. Interview Protocol and Data Collection**

We collected the data using a semi-structured interview technique. This approach is characterized by having predefined questions that ensure a certain level of standardization, while also allowing for flexibility (Türnüklü, 2000). Depending on the flow of the conversation, we asked additional questions and encouraged participants to explore their perceptions, experiences, and feelings about inclusive education more thoroughly. This approach made the

technique both standardized and flexible, which was suitable for our purposes of understanding and interpreting teachers' lived experiences during this educational research.

Before we began collecting data for our study, we conducted a pilot study with three teachers to ensure the relevance and clarity of our interview protocol. Additionally, we obtained expert panel opinions from three individuals working in the field of early childhood education who hold graduate degrees. The finalized interview protocol consisted of two parts. The first part aimed to gather demographic and contextual information about the teachers, such as gender, age, professional seniority, educational background, the socioeconomic status of children in their classes, whether they have taught children who speak languages other than Turkish, the presence of children with special needs, family structures of the children, and whether they have worked with refugee children, as well as their training in inclusion. The second part included 12 main questions and 14 related prompts designed to probe deeper into teachers' perceptions, lived experiences, practices, and needs concerning inclusive education. Before commencing the interviews, we obtained all necessary approvals from the school administration, and the participants. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in the principals' offices at the schools where the teachers worked. We allowed teachers additional time to reflect and organize their thoughts after each interview question. Each interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes. This timeframe is an average duration for most of the interviews. However, some interviews were well over 30 minutes. The teachers participated voluntarily and were not compensated for their participation.

#### **2.4. Reflexivity**

As the primary researchers, we spent significant time reflecting on our roles in this study. The first author, a doctoral candidate and teacher in Diyarbakır, has a deep familiarity with the schools involved. The second author is a researcher with a doctoral degree and extensive experience in qualitative research across Canada, the US, and Turkey. Besides his research projects, he actively collaborates with teachers in various roles, including in-service trainings, curriculum development, joint projects, and field visits. This combination of experiences and perspectives allowed us to recognize the variations in resources, opportunities, and community characteristics across these schools. Such awareness enhanced our understanding of the challenges some teachers face. Beyond sharing their perceptions and experiences with inclusive education, some teachers also communicated their challenges and sought advice from us. At times, we felt compelled to provide guidance and support to help teachers address these challenges. However, we consciously restrained ourselves from offering advice that extended beyond our research responsibilities. Throughout the interviews, we carefully avoided any personal comments or directives that could influence the study's outcomes. To minimize potential biases, we meticulously documented our emotions and reactions in field notes after each interview. We consistently debriefed and discussed our feelings to maintain a focus on our research obligations while still engaging empathetically with the teachers.

#### **2.5. Ethical Considerations**

Çukurova University Ethical Committee approved this study, and we strictly adhered to the ethical guidelines detailed in the Belmont Report. We ensured that participation was voluntary, governed by thoroughly established informed consent procedures. We provided detailed information to the teachers about the study, ensuring confidentiality for their personal information and interview data. Teachers who voluntarily agreed to participate signed an informed consent form. In addition, we also obtained additional verbal consent from the

teachers before recording the interviews, which commenced only after they indicated their readiness. To protect the confidentiality of the teachers' identities, we used pseudonyms (see Table 1).

## **2.6. Data Analysis**

We employed the content analysis method, typically associated with phenomenological research (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). This process commenced with the verbatim transcription of all recorded interviews, reading transcripts multiple times for open coding, identifying codes that closely represented the content of the interviews and entailed systematically comparing codes and categories across different participants, moving back and forth between the data and categories until saturation was achieved. Subsequently, we reviewed these categories within the context of our research questions, further refining them into more abstract themes. Throughout each stage of analysis, we maintained a high level of abstraction while staying true to the data, grounding our interpretations in the participants' expressions. Throughout this process, we created memos to capture insights and note emerging categories and themes.

## **2.7. Rigor and Trustworthiness**

To check and balance researcher biases and enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, we employed a semi-structured interview protocol during the data collection process. This approach allowed us to maintain consistency across different interviews while providing the flexibility needed to capture the unique experiences, perspectives, and needs of each participant. By adhering to the semi-structured interview protocol, we ensured that all relevant topics were covered in each interview, thereby maintaining the methodological rigor essential for qualitative research. Simultaneously, the flexibility of this approach allowed participants to freely express their individual experiences and insights, enriching the data with diverse and context-specific information. This balance between structure and flexibility helped us gather comprehensive and rich data while minimizing the potential influence of researcher bias.

Moreover, following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommendation, we implemented member checking to allow participants to review the collected data for accuracy and completeness. After completing and recording the interviews, we played back the recordings to the teachers at 2x speed. This playback enabled the teachers to reflect on their initial statements and ensure their views were accurately captured. During this process, teachers could clarify any points, add additional comments, or correct inaccuracies. Once they confirmed that no further additions or changes were needed, we finalized the recordings. This step was crucial for ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the data collected, as it provided an opportunity for participants to validate their contributions and ensured their perspectives were fully and accurately represented.

To evaluate our interpretations of teacher narratives and consider other potential explanations, we followed established practices (Miles et al., 2014; Morrow, 2005). We began by assessing the intercoder agreement (ICA), which measures the consistency with which different coders assign the same codes to a given dataset. To do this, we recruited an additional coder with a master's degree who is experienced in interview techniques and content analysis. This researcher independently coded three randomly selected interview transcripts. We then compared these codes side by side, assigning a value of 1 to data points coded the same by both authors, and a value of 0 to data points coded differently. We calculated ICA by dividing the number of

agreements by the total number of coding decisions, achieving a final agreement level of 90% (0.9074), aligning with the suggested 85% to 90% range (Miles et al., 2014).

However, the relevance of ICA in qualitative research is debated, with some arguing that it is inappropriate or irrelevant for qualitative analysis due to its interpretative nature (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Therefore, we also engaged in rigorous discussions and coder adjudication to resolve discrepancies and ensure accuracy. Having two researchers allowed us to enhance the trustworthiness and confirmability of our findings. We collectively discussed and revised any codes or sections with differing interpretations until we reached consensus.

### **3. FINDINGS**

In our study, we identified three main themes: 1. Perceptions on Inclusive Education, 2. Practices and Challenges in Inclusive Education, and 3. Further Training in Inclusive Education and Needs Among Preschool Teachers. Under the theme of *"Perceptions on Inclusive Education"*, we explored perspectives and understanding of inclusive education, consideration of individual and developmental differences, focus on children with special needs, need for environmental adaptation, and the broad scope of inclusive education. The *"Practices and Challenges in Inclusive Education"* theme included the importance of resources and physical conditions, shortage of personnel and materials, the role of families and stakeholders, and the flexibility and feasibility of educational plans. Lastly, the *"Further Training in Inclusive Education and Needs Among Preschool Teachers"* theme covered current training and training gaps, the need for practical skills and application, and resources and external support. Although most have received training in inclusive education, primarily through integrative education programs, they express a need for more comprehensive and practical training. They utilize various resources, such as training seminars, academic materials, and online content, to stay informed. Overall, while teachers strive to implement inclusive education, there is a need for improved training, resources, and policies to better support their efforts and address the diverse needs of all students.

In our presentation of direct quotes from the participants, we organized the data using a specific coding scheme. Each participant is identified by a research code (K1, K2, etc.), followed by their gender, age, and years of teaching experience. In this scheme, "F" stands for Female, "M" for Male, "yo" signifies years old, and "y/exp." represents years of teaching experience. Detailed findings on each theme and category are presented in the following sections.

#### **3.1. Perceptions on Inclusive Education**

##### **3.1.1. Education for All**

All participating preschool teachers in this study indicated prior familiarity with the concept of inclusive education. Most preschool teachers advocated for inclusive education encompassing all children. K10 (F, 35 yo, 7 y/exp.) asserted, "Actually, all our students show differences within themselves. I think we can include all our students." They commonly defined it in terms of embracing differences and ensuring equal access to education for all students. For example, K14 (F, 23 yo, 1 y/exp.) described inclusive education as "being able to include each child in education according to their differences and providing education that meets their needs." Similarly, K6 (F, 39 yo, 6 y/exp.) noted it as "all individuals meeting on equal ground and benefiting from the same opportunities in education." K3 (F, 30 yo, 8 y/exp.) emphasized the need to distinguish inclusive education from special education, stating, "It is education that includes not only special needs students but all students."



### **3.1.2. Focus on Specific Groups**

Many teachers, despite using comprehensive terms, indicated that only children with special needs should be included, suggesting an association of inclusive education primarily with special education and integration practices. K8 (M, 36 yo, 11 y/exp.) stated, "I think especially children with social needs and special needs should be included. If they are included, the education seems to achieve its purpose." K9 (F, 38 yo, 15 y/exp.) added, "Disadvantaged children and children with special needs. I think these are the children who should be included in inclusive education."

### **3.1.3. Uncertain or Undifferentiated Stance**

Despite this general understanding, some teachers held uncertain or undifferentiated views about inclusive education. K8 (M, 36 yo, 11 y/exp.) reflected this ambiguity, stating, "Inclusive education, probably because of its name, seems like education that includes all individuals in the educational environment, right?" Other teachers provided explanations that did not differentiate inclusive education from other educational practices. For instance, K7 (F, 40 yo, 15 y/exp.) remarked, "Inclusive education means taking the child as a whole, providing what is needed from enrollment to graduation, and sending them to primary school ready."

### **3.1.4. Considering Stakeholders**

Few teachers mentioned the inclusion of parents and other stakeholders in the inclusive education process. K15 (F, 45 yo, 22 y/exp.) emphasized, "Due to our field, families must definitely be involved. Yes, the most important thing is families. I think the guidance counselor should definitely be included."

### **3.1.5. Environmental Adaptation**

Only one teacher highlighted the importance of adapting the learning environment to meet diverse needs, in addition to ensuring access. K11 (F, 35 yo, 5 y/exp.) explained, "Of course, classrooms should be arranged accordingly. For example, there might be a child with hearing impairment or vision problems, and the environment should be adjusted for them."

Overall, while preschool teachers have a general understanding of inclusive education, their views on who should be included often do not align with the comprehensive nature of inclusive education. This indicates a need for further training and clarification to ensure that inclusive practices are fully and accurately implemented.

### **3.1.6. Ideal Environment for Inclusive Education**

Most teachers emphasized the physical properties of ideal inclusive education, highlighting the need for rich educational materials and smaller class sizes. K15 (F, 45 yo, 22 y/exp.) noted, "Our environments fall short of being ideal in terms of materials and the classroom. Our work heavily relies on materials." K13 (F, 31 yo, 9 y/exp.) highlighted class size: "Class sizes should be smaller for inclusive education to be effective. If I have more than 20 students, it becomes very difficult to give special attention to a student with special needs."

Some teachers advocated for the Montessori approach. K1 (F, 37 yo, 15 y/exp.) stated, "Every preschool classroom should be suitable for the Montessori approach. It makes it easier to use materials and implement activities that children can access comfortably." Others emphasized the need for multiple teachers in the classroom. K6 (F, 39 yo, 6 y/exp.) remarked, "Having multiple teachers in a classroom would be more effective because one teacher can't address every need, especially in large classes."

Few teachers mentioned the affective qualities of an inclusive environment. K14 (F, 23 yo, 1 y/exp.) stressed the importance of a supportive atmosphere: "A child needs to feel comfortable to fully engage in education. Once they feel safe and the teacher approaches them with love, other resources can be managed."

Most preschool teachers evaluated their own classrooms as inclusive environments based on their individual efforts. They considered individual differences in classroom practices and made instructional adaptations for disadvantaged children. K12 (M, 26 yo, 4 y/exp.) explained, "We include students from different socio-economic backgrounds in the educational process and make necessary adaptations in daily and monthly plans to include special education students."

Some teachers felt their classrooms were not inclusive due to physical limitations or their own lack of knowledge and experience. K8 (M, 36 yo, 11 y/exp.) noted, "The physical space is small, and there aren't enough materials for special education students." K14 (F, 23 yo, 1 y/exp.) acknowledged her own shortcomings, stating, "I need to improve myself and follow more studies to better support the children."

### **3.2. Practices and Challenges in Inclusive Education**

This study examines preschool teachers' practices regarding inclusive education, focusing on three categories: "inclusive education plan," "effective inclusive education practices," "challenges in implementing inclusive education," and "addressing these challenges"

#### **3.2.1. Inclusive Education Plan**

Preschool teachers emphasized the need for individualized plans that consider children's developmental and cultural characteristics. K10 (F, 35 yo, 7 y/exp.) highlighted this by stating, "Every student is different, so we need a plan that includes all students." Teachers also stressed the importance of involving all staff in creating inclusive education plans. K5 (F, 31 yo, 9 y/exp.) noted, "Preschool teachers, support staff, and administrators should all contribute to the plan."

Additionally, teachers indicated that inclusive education plans should be flexible, feasible, and rich in materials. K8 (M, 36 yo, 11 y/exp.) emphasized, "Flexibility is essential. An inclusive plan must be adaptable to suit everyone's needs." K2 (F, 29 yo, 5 y/exp.) added, "More diverse materials should be included in the plan."

To enhance the inclusivity of their plans, teachers sometimes simplify activities to match children's developmental levels, enrich activities based on children's interests and needs, or replace unsuitable activities with more appropriate ones. K3 (F, 30 yo, 8 y/exp.) explained, "If the plan is not suitable for my students' developmental levels, I modify it to be more appropriate." This approach ensures that educational plans are comprehensive and adaptable, meeting the diverse needs of all students and fostering an inclusive learning environment.

#### **3.2.2. Effective Inclusive Education Practices**

When discussing effective inclusive education practices, preschool teachers primarily focused on classroom strategies. They emphasized the importance of considering children's individual characteristics, ensuring active participation, maintaining flexibility, and fostering effective communication with stakeholders. K9 (F, 38 yo, 15 y/exp.) highlighted, "We need to consider individual characteristics and be flexible. Inclusive education involves collaboration with other school units, the guidance service, the school administration, and parents."

Teachers also stressed the critical role of family involvement in effective inclusive education practices. K1 (F, 37 yo, 11 y/exp.) remarked, "Family involvement is crucial. We must include families and consider children's individual differences to ensure effective practices." Furthermore, developing empathy among children was seen as essential. K5 (F, 31 yo, 9 y/exp.) suggested, "Taking children to rehabilitation centers or parks for the disabled helps develop their empathy skills."

Several teachers emphasized the Ministry of National Education's role in supporting inclusive education practices. K10 (F, 35 yo, 7 y/exp.) noted, "The Ministry should provide widespread training for teachers and inform parents. Seminars and remote education packages could be helpful." The need to reduce class sizes to allow for more individualized attention was another common concern. K14 (F, 23 yo, 1 y/exp.) stated, "Reducing class sizes is very important because teachers can't give individual attention to each child in large classes."

K14 also highlighted the importance of integrating technology into education. She said, "We should try different methods and techniques, including technology, to keep up with the children." Additionally, some teachers called for the Ministry to offer alternatives in preschool programs that consider children's developmental characteristics and regional needs. K12 (M, 26 yo, 4 y/exp.) explained, "Programs should be prepared based on feedback from the field to better meet local needs."

In evaluating their own practices, preschool teachers generally considered their methods inclusive, based on children's responses during end-of-day evaluations, active participation in activities, and feedback from parents. K14 (F, 23 yo, 1 y/exp.) observed, "Seeing the children's development shows us we are on the right track." K4 (F, 42 yo, 19 y/exp.) added, "Positive feedback from parents and students' excitement indicate that our practices are inclusive."

One teacher assessed the inclusivity of her practices based on personal reflection. K11 (F, 35 yo, 5 y/exp.) stated, "I try to do everything I can, and at the end of the day, I reflect on whether I've done enough." Preschool teachers also noted that they provide special attention to children with different needs and characteristics within the classroom. K13 (F, 31 yo, 9 y/exp.) explained, "I give special attention to a student with special needs, guiding them through activities step by step."

Finally, some teachers mentioned efforts to ensure that peers and parents have a positive view of children with different needs. K10 (F, 35 yo, 7 y/exp.) noted, "We work to ensure acceptance of these children among their peers and parents, promoting empathy and understanding."

Preschool teachers highlighted various strategies and challenges in implementing inclusive education, emphasizing the importance of individualized plans, family involvement, empathy development, and support from the Ministry of National Education. They also underscored the need for smaller class sizes, technological integration, and adaptive preschool programs to better meet local needs and foster an inclusive learning environment.

### **3.2.3. Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education**

Preschool teachers identified parent-related issues and the physical limitations of classrooms as the main challenges in implementing inclusive education. K10 (F, 35 yo, 7 y/exp.) remarked, "The biggest barrier is often not the children but the parents. Children can progress, but if parents are closed off, we can't make much headway."

Teachers also cited the lack of educational materials, the uniformity of existing equipment, and high student numbers as significant physical challenges. K1 (F, 37 yo, 15 y/exp.) explained, "Our biggest barrier is the lack of materials. We wish we could work in perfectly adapted classroom environments."

K7 (F, 40 yo, 15 y/exp.) expressed that having children with special needs in the class could hinder the implementation of inclusive education, stating, "Integration students with special needs cause disruptions, making it difficult to fully implement our activities." Additionally, the challenge of accommodating children from different socio-economic backgrounds and dealing with adverse familial attitudes was highlighted by K8 (M, 36 yo, 11 y/exp.), who said, "Different student backgrounds and parents' lack of awareness are all barriers." These insights reflect the multifaceted challenges faced by preschool teachers in creating truly inclusive educational environments.

#### **3.2.4. Addressing Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education**

To address the challenges of inclusive education, preschool teachers sought support from school administrations or utilized their own resources. K5 (F, 31 yo, 9 y/exp.) shared, "I brought a stool from home for a short student and requested smaller toilets from the administration."

Teachers also collaborated with families, school administrations, and guidance services to address student-related difficulties. K12 (M, 26 yo, 4 y/exp.) noted, "I try to minimize issues through collaboration with parents, school administration, and the guidance service." Similarly, K15 (F, 45 yo, 22 y/exp.) said, "We communicate with families and send additional activities home to support the children."

K1 (F, 37 yo, 15 y/exp.) stressed the importance of having a special education teacher in each preschool class, stating, "Having a special education teacher would be very helpful in providing expertise and support." A few teachers indicated receiving support from experienced colleagues or peer networks. K9 (F, 38 yo, 15 y/exp.) noted, "We try our best within the classroom, but we also rely on support education rooms for additional help."

Preschool teachers expressed a need for improved physical standards in educational environments, direct financial support for schools, and reduced class sizes to enhance inclusive education practices. For example, K7 (F, 40 yo, 15 y/exp.) emphasized this need by explaining, "...improvements should be made to reduce class sizes and provide necessary materials." K15 (F, 45 yo, 22 y/exp.) emphasized, "Financial support is essential because without it, not much can be done."

Some teachers highlighted the need for nationwide educational policies to improve inclusive education, emphasizing the importance of raising awareness and knowledge among parents and teachers. K2 (F, 29 yo, 5 y/exp.) noted, "We need to include parents in the classroom, but we struggle to do so. This is an area where improvement is needed."

Preschool teachers view the establishment of an ideal inclusive education environment and the presence of an inclusive education plan as crucial. Sensitivity to individual differences and developmental characteristics is emphasized in both areas. While teachers generally view their classroom practices as inclusive, there are gaps in their ability to support children with diverse needs. They face challenges in implementing inclusive education, particularly related to physical classroom conditions and national education policies. Teachers express a need for

improvements in these areas and identify parents as both significant challenges and crucial supporters in their efforts to implement inclusive education.

### **3.3. Further Training in Inclusive Education and Needs Among Preschool Teachers**

The majority of preschool teachers have participated in training related to inclusive education, primarily through the Ministry of Education's "Project for the Development of Integrative Education" (BEGEP). This indicates a focus on integrative rather than specifically inclusive educational practices. While most teachers have engaged in some form of training, only a minority reported receiving comprehensive training directly related to inclusive education, and just one mentioned having an undergraduate course on the subject.

Teachers reported varying levels of preparedness and knowledge, with many indicating a need for more focused training. They highlighted a particular gap in practical skills, especially in recognizing and integrating children with special needs into general education settings effectively. K6 (F, 39 yo, 6 y/exp.), pointed out the disparity in knowledge, especially among new teachers: "So I think training on special needs children should be increased. We don't have enough knowledge about special needs children. Over time, experienced teachers learn this through experience or by improving themselves, but I can't say the same for new graduates."

The need for practical training was a common theme, with teachers expressing a desire for programs that provide actionable strategies and real-world applications. K11 (F, 35 yo, 5 y/exp.), expressed her need for practical training: "Practically, I don't know much about how to handle special needs or differentiate instruction for all kids in the classroom. I want training that helps me integrate special needs children into the class without segregating others."

Similarly, K12 (M, 26 yo, 4 y/exp.) mentioned the prevalence of special needs children and the necessity for targeted training programs: "In general, we encounter many children with special needs. I think there should be more seminars and programs aimed at helping these children more positively participate in the process." K1 (F, 37 yo, 15 y/exp.) also emphasized the need for resources and expert guidance: "I especially want seminars given by expert trainers during the seminar period. Being a preschool teacher, it's challenging to meet at a common point. If they provide us with activity plans and examples, I believe it would make implementation much easier."

Some teachers actively seek external support to bridge the gap between school and home, ensuring ongoing support for children as they implement inclusive education. This assistance mainly comes from families and school counseling services. One teacher explains the process: "We often seek help from counseling services and communicate regularly with families. We send extra activities home and request family support in areas where the children are lacking because we cannot meet all needs in the classroom due to our focus on specific groups. Individual attention is quite rare, so family involvement is crucial" (K15, F, 45 yo, 22 y/exp.).

Overall, while some teachers are finding ways to adapt on their own, the consensus indicates a significant need for more robust and specific training in inclusive education to better equip teachers to meet the diverse needs of their students.

#### **3.3.1. Sources for Meeting Educational Needs**

Preschool teachers often rely on various resources to meet their educational needs and stay informed about best practices in inclusive education. They commonly utilize primary sources such as training seminars, conferences, and workshops organized by the Ministry of Education

or universities. The role of teacher training and readiness in creating an inclusive education environment is widely acknowledged. One teacher emphasized, "Teacher preparedness is crucial. I believe that teachers need special training in this area, but it should be interactive, not just sitting and listening to someone lecture. This is very important." (K13, F, 31 yo, 9 y/exp.)

The value of face-to-face interactions was also highlighted. As one teacher noted, "Currently, academic works and articles are being published. We can read those, but attending conferences and seminars would be even better; I would participate whenever possible because face-to-face interaction is much more effective. You can get all your questions answered, or at least ask them. I try to attend any seminar, conference, or even online events I can find," (K14, F, 23 yo, 1 y/exp.).

Fewer teachers mentioned consulting experts to meet their learning needs, while one suggested visiting special education institutions for observation. Many teachers cited online content as a secondary source for information. K9 highlighted the accessibility of the internet: "Firstly, the internet is our biggest helper in accessing information in the 21st century. Therefore, we can use it," (K9, F, 38 yo, 15 y/exp.). K12 expressed a preference for academic materials: "I believe I can refer to academic sources, articles, especially those written on this topic, and books that I think can develop my understanding," (K12, M, 26 yo, 4 y/exp.). While preschool teachers generally assess their classroom practices as effectively inclusive, many recognize a gap in supporting children with diverse needs and characteristics.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

The perceptions and practices of preschool teachers regarding inclusive education largely align with findings from similar studies in the literature. Preschool teachers commonly describe inclusive education as embracing diversity and ensuring equal access to education for all students. This aligns with other studies where teachers associate inclusive education with terms such as "equality," "adaptation," and "integration" (Bricker, 1995, as cited in Siagian & Kurniawati, 2019; Sahillioğlu, 2020). While preschool teachers are generally familiar with the concept of inclusive education, many possess incomplete or incorrect information on more specific aspects of the topic.

While most teachers believe that inclusive education should include all children, some think it should be limited to children with special needs. In line with existing literature, teachers often struggle to distinguish inclusive education from other educational approaches, sometimes confusing it with special education and integration practices. Many studies reveal a lack of accurate knowledge about inclusive education among teachers (Pamuk & Bal, 2019; Ünal & Aladağ, 2020; Erdoğan et al., 2022; Tuzcuoğlu & Aydın, 2023). Some teachers or teacher candidates have never encountered the concept before (Taneri, 2017). This study, similar to others (Woolfson & Brady, 2009), shows that teachers often limit the concept of inclusive education primarily to students with special needs. This view contrasts with the broader definition of inclusive education advocated by UNESCO, which emphasizes that inclusive education should encompass all students, regardless of their background or abilities (De Boer & Simpson, 2009; Florian, 2009; Pijl, 2010; Symes & Humphrey, 2010; UNESCO, 2020). This discrepancy suggests that some teachers may not fully understand the comprehensive nature of inclusive education, indicating a gap in teacher training and professional development regarding the full scope and principles of inclusive education (Bouillet, 2013; Eşici & Doğan, 2020; Forlin, 2013; İli, 2022; Kraska & Boyle, 2014; Samadi & McConkey, 2018; Schuelka, 2018; Stemberger & Kiswarday, 2018).

Effective inclusive education practices, according to teachers, should address every stage of the educational process, considering children's individual characteristics and needs, fostering strong communication with families and other stakeholders, and actively involving children in the educational process. Teachers feel that positive feedback from children and parents indicates that their educational practices are inclusive. Unfortunately, very few teachers consider the involvement of families and other stakeholders necessary for inclusive education. In addition, a few teachers report challenges in implementing effective inclusive education due to the presence of children with special needs, which they feel hinders the process. One teacher even expressed that having a child with special needs disrupts the inclusive nature of the classroom, indicating a lack of full internalization of inclusive education principles by some teachers. This perspective is contrary to the essence of inclusive education, which aims to benefit all students without isolating any due to their differences (Loreman, 2009).

According to preschool teachers in our study, the ideal inclusive education environment should be tailored to children's individual differences, have low student-to-teacher ratios, be resource-rich, and create a comfortable atmosphere where both children and well-trained teachers can thrive. Many teachers cited the lack of materials and overcrowded classrooms as significant hindrances to inclusive education. These physical challenges are consistent with findings reported in other research (Ünal & Aladağ, 2020; Köse et al., 2023; Tuzcuoğlu & Aydın, 2023) and highlight the necessity of low student numbers (Erdoğan et al., 2022; Köse et al., 2023). These studies emphasize the importance of resources and materials in creating an inclusive environment.

Preschool teachers believe that an effective inclusive education plan should be adaptable, feasible, rich in materials, and sensitive to the individual differences and developmental needs of children, as well as the cultural characteristics of their communities. Other studies have also emphasized the importance of this adaptability for transforming educational settings into truly inclusive environments (Imaniah & Fitria, 2018). Teachers often assess the inclusiveness of their plans by checking if they offer multiple activity options for children with diverse needs and by evaluating feedback from children after implementing the plans. Additionally, research suggests that daily learning activities in early childhood classrooms should be reviewed and adjusted according to children's needs to align with the goals of inclusive education (Akrim & Harfiani, 2019; Schuelka, 2018; Zabeli & Gjelij, 2020). These studies underscore the importance of understanding and addressing the unique needs of each student to create a truly inclusive educational environment.

Preschool teachers face challenges due to a lack of support from parents and physical limitations in their classrooms, which are further compounded by high student numbers and insufficient resources. Research literature suggests that many teachers face these difficulties and feel isolated in their efforts to implement inclusive education due to insufficient support from parents (Köse et al., 2023; Tuzcuoğlu & Aydın, 2023).

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study provides several recommendations designed to enhance practices and guide future research in the field of inclusive education. First, the findings from this study highlight both the consistencies and discrepancies in the perceptions and practices of preschool teachers regarding inclusive education. While teachers generally understand and value the principles of inclusive education, discrepancies arise in their specific understanding and implementation of these principles. Many teachers possess incomplete or incorrect information about inclusive

education. Some tend to limit the concept primarily to students with special needs, rather than recognizing the broader definition advocated by UNESCO, which includes all students regardless of their background or abilities. This gap in understanding indicates a significant need for urgent reforms in teacher training for inclusive education, as well as targeted teacher training and professional development policies. Effective pre-service and in-service training programs for teachers and school administrators, developed by the Ministry of Education, universities, and non-governmental organizations, should address this gap. These programs should offer hands-on experiences and comprehensive education on the full scope and principles of inclusive education, ensuring that teachers are well-equipped to implement inclusive practices that benefit all students.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of improving physical classroom conditions to support inclusive education. Teachers frequently cite the lack of materials and overcrowded classrooms as significant barriers to effective inclusive education. Addressing these issues requires a significant investment in educational infrastructure. This includes ensuring that classrooms are equipped with a wide variety of teaching materials and resources that cater to the diverse needs of all students.

Additionally, fostering stronger support from parents and other stakeholders is crucial for the success of inclusive education. Teachers often feel isolated in their efforts to implement inclusive practices. Building strong partnerships with parents and involving them in the educational process enhances the effectiveness of inclusive education by fostering a supportive and collaborative environment for students. This can be achieved through regular communication, volunteering opportunities, parent workshops, and active involvement in school associations. Creating a welcoming environment that values diversity, establishing parent resource centers, and promoting transparency build trust and mutual respect. Additionally, providing home learning activities, celebrating student success, and developing parent support groups and community partnerships further strengthen the school-home collaboration, ensuring comprehensive support for all students.

In conclusion, while preschool teachers generally understand and value the principles of inclusive education, there are notable gaps in their knowledge and implementation. Addressing these gaps through targeted teacher training and professional development, improving physical classroom conditions, and fostering stronger support from parents and stakeholders is essential for achieving truly inclusive educational environments. These steps will help ensure that all students, regardless of their background or abilities, can benefit from an inclusive, equitable education.

## **7. LIMITATIONS**

This study was conducted in only one province with 15 preschool teachers. Expanding this research to various regions and socioeconomic contexts could yield a comparative analysis that provides insights into regional variations and identifies potential improvements in inclusive education practices across contexts. Although the current study draws on insights collected through interviews with preschool teachers, future research could enhance understanding by including direct observations of classroom practices. Such empirical investigations would allow for a detailed comparison with the teachers' reported statements and offer a deeper understanding of the real-world implementation of inclusive education. Collectively, these approaches aim to foster a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of inclusive education, supporting the development of more effective educational practices and policies.



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