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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Examining the Turkish Preschool Education Program from an Inclusive Perspective

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### Abstract

This study examines the Turkish preschool education program from the perspective of educational inclusivity, taking a qualitative approach through the use of documentary data. Recent years have seen an ongoing discussion about education for immigrant children in Turkey, and the Ministry of Education has proposed guidelines that suggest offering inclusive education. Nurseries in Turkey use the preschool education program to structure activities and prepare children for the classroom. This study analyses the program and asks whether room exists to implement inclusive education in nurseries. Although the existing program does not refer explicitly to taking an inclusive approach toward immigrant children, our findings show that three of the program's features are oriented toward inclusivity. Moreover, achievements in developmental education indicate that the program implicitly has an inclusive perspective.

**Keywords:** Curriculum, inclusive education, preschool education, Syrian preschool children

### Introduction

Scholars have suggested various definitions of inclusive education. Florian (2008, p. 202) believes that “inclusive education is based on the principle” that all children should be provided with an education regardless of disability, or of linguistic, social, and emotional differences. Meanwhile, Cologon (2014, p. 5) defines inclusive education as “a process that occurs within the everyday moments in any education setting.” This is a situated view of inclusive education, and necessarily requires the commitment of schools and teachers. Inclusive education is often associated with children with special educational needs. In Turkey, for example, inclusive education for children with special needs is well established through relevant legislation (Diken et al., 2016). Before inclusive education can be defined, however, it is necessary to know who it includes (Cologon, 2014). This implies that inclusive education should encompass not only children with special needs but also immigrant and minority children (Leeman & Koeven, 2019).

- In what ways does the preschool education program have an inclusive approach?

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- How do the achievements of the preschool education program guide teachers to include immigrant children?

### **Inclusive education and the use of “funds of knowledge” in early years**

As inclusion is “a complex and ongoing process” (Cologon, 2014, p. 4), it is difficult to provide a straightforward definition. Any such definition needs to incorporate different aspects of inclusivity, such as the social and the psychological. The scope of inclusive education has expanded from the inclusion of children with special needs to disadvantaged children and those from immigrant backgrounds (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). Our understanding of inclusive education must therefore extend to include all children who have hitherto experienced different forms of exclusion, including coming from an immigrant or minority family. New definitions cover the inclusion of all children in classroom activities and other social domains. Prosser & Loxley (2007, p. 57) argue that inclusive education:

...is a philosophy of acceptance and about providing a framework within which all children, regardless of ability, gender, language, or cultural origin, can be valued equally with respect and provided with equal opportunities.

This framework enables teachers to develop their students’ potential by accepting all children and valuing them equally, regardless of background. One way of encouraging teachers to do this is through professional development (Leeman & Koeven, 2019). Such approaches can change teachers’ beliefs about immigrant children, helping them to develop their skills and to engage in more reflexive practices by emphasizing the teacher’s agency in shaping and structuring the classroom environment (Leeman & Koeven, 2019). This implies a top-down approach that sees teachers as significant agents of inclusivity in education, and the implementation of this approach begins at the macro-level (Leeman & Koeven, 2019).

Studies of immigrant children’s learning have shown that they possess different linguistic and cultural resources imported from their home country and preserved in their immigrant community (Drury, 2004, 2007; Moll et al., 2005). Moll et al. (2005) suggested the concept of “funds of knowledge” to help teachers understand and guide their students in classroom activities. They argued that immigrant children can use their own household knowledge to improve their new language learning. The authors maintained that when teachers permit all children to apply their household and cultural knowledge, all students are encouraged to engage in classroom activities (Moll et al., 2005). In other words, this concept highlights how inclusive education can be implemented, but this practice depends on teachers’ abilities and professional development. The concept also holds that immigrant children who as yet have little or no knowledge of the majority/official language of their host country should not be treated as lacking knowledge. Studies have shown that immigrant children can

draw on their pre-existing knowledge of their home languages, cultures, and households, to improve their learning of a new language. Conversely, they also extend the knowledge levels of the majority culture by introducing their own practices (Hedges, 2015; Riojas-Cortez, 2001; Soltero-González, 2009). Studies suggest that teachers should start by encouraging immigrant children to talk about what they know, rather than what they do not know. Teachers can structure and adapt activities to reflect the needs of all students in the community where their school is located. Teachers can thus include children both linguistically and psychologically in classroom activities.

### **Syrian preschool children in Turkey**

As highlighted in the introduction, inclusive education for children with special needs is already prescribed as a goal of the preschool education program (Preschool Education Program, 2013). However, the program does not explicitly legislate for the inclusive education of other groups, such as immigrant children. An estimated 700,000 Syrian children have attended Turkish schools since the outbreak of civil war in 2011 (UNICEF, 2019). Studies of Syrian children's learning have shown that teachers' beliefs about the implementation of inclusive education vary significantly and that they use a range of inclusive strategies. A study by Yanık Özger & Akansel (2019) examined Syrian preschool children's experiences in Turkey and concluded that teachers' approaches to the children impacted their adaptation to the classroom. The authors showed that approaches might be defined as inclusive if the teacher used gestures and body language to include all children in classroom activities. Thus, although teachers may have only limited knowledge of Arabic, they can still help Syrian children and their families to feel included and comfortable with the teacher and the classroom activities. For example, similar words in Arabic and Turkish can help teachers communicate with children, and if a teacher or child needs further assistance, a teacher more fluent in Arabic could be there to assist (Yanık Özger & Akansel, 2019). Uzun & Bütün (2016) conducted interviews with six preschool teachers to discover more about the problems faced by Syrian preschool children. The teachers interviewed agreed that language was the main problem for the children, who were unable to communicate with their peers or teachers in Turkish. As such, they found it hard to make friends and participate in peer group activities. As Uzun & Bütün (2016) highlight, it is likely that language will be an obstacle to Syrian preschool children's learning. This situation can be remedied, however, if preschool children are presented with an inclusive education. Kahrman Pamuk & Bal (2019) showed that, although teachers supported inclusive education, they were unsure how to implement it. Another study by Cengiz Şayan (2020) demonstrated that teachers who attended inclusive education seminars were better able to structure classroom activities to accommodate their students' needs. Moreover, the author showed that teachers valued inclusive education as they believed that more inclusive activities would provide immigrant children with opportunities to communicate with their peers and to be

accepted more readily by peers and teachers. Teachers also explained that they often adapted the content of textbooks to meet their students' needs. These studies stress the agency of teachers in implementing inclusive education in preschool years. Similarly, Ayan-Ceyhan's (2016) showed how teachers' agency helped to create space for inclusive education at primary and secondary levels in Turkey. Her study highlighted how, even if the curriculum does not explicitly support aspects of inclusive education such as language and gender, teachers have the ability to adapt classroom practice in ways that promote inclusivity.

### **Validity and reliability of the research**

Leung (2015, p. 325) refers to validity as the "appropriateness" of data and the methods for its collection and analysis. Validity addresses whether research questions are relevant and whether the chosen methodology is "appropriate for" addressing them (Leung, 2015, p. 325). Bapir (2012, p. 10) suggests that validity deals with whether a research is conducted "in a professional, accurate, and systematic manner." To ensure validity in the current study, relevant research questions were prepared to examine the preschool education program from an inclusive perspective. These questions provided guidelines that allowed the research to be situated in the relevant literature, an appropriate data collection method (document analysis) to be chosen, and the research to be conducted in a systematic way that included the examination of relevant literature and research designs.

In qualitative studies, the reliability of research depends on the consistency and repeatability of results. Reliability refers to the consistency of findings (Davies & Dodd, 2002). If the findings can be reproduced and repeated using similar methods, the research is considered reliable (Brink, 1993). In research that employs document analysis, as is the case here, researcher intervention is minimized (Bowen, 2009). This means that the findings obtained by this study may be duplicated using a similar methodology.

### **Method**

This qualitative study used documentary data to examine the preschool education program that applies to all state funded nurseries in Turkey. Documentary evidence is not particularly time-consuming to research, as the relevant information is publicly available (Bowen, 2009). Collecting and analyzing data from documentary is a valued approach that enables the goals and achievements of a given curriculum and program to be analyzed (Tarman, 2011). This approach may therefore be considered a viable method for analyzing the preschool education program published by the Ministry of Education (Kandır & Yazıcı, 2016). The program is available in every preschool setting in Turkey, where it is used to guide preschool teachers in structuring their classroom activities. Documentary evidence is used in

this study to examine how the perspectives used in the Turkish preschool education program are inclusive.

### ***The preschool education program***

The current preschool education program came into effect in 2013, representing a revised version of the program introduced in 2006. Two previous programs (1994 and 2002) also applied specifically to nurseries in Turkey. The 2006 program constituted a major shift in the philosophy of preschool education, as this program was prepared from a constructivist perspective, which views children as active participants in their learning (Gelişli & Yazıcı, 2012). The program has been described as child-centered, flexible, and play-based (Tuncer, 2015). Other relevant features of the program include learning cultural and universal values and including children with special needs. The reference to learning cultural and universal values suggests that children are expected to learn and internalize their community and universal values. This emphasizes the idea that children are encouraged to live alongside different individuals and respect diversity (Preschool Education Program, 2013, p. 15). The program has six developmental areas, each with its own achievement levels, covering the development of linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional, self-care, and motor skills.

### **Statistical Analysis**

In this section, the content analysis method will be used to examine relevant features of the preschool education program (2013). Based on the research questions, content analysis enabled the relevant information from the documents under examination to be organized into categories (Bowen, 2009; Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). In this study, an inductive content analysis method was used in which concepts and categories emerged from the data rather than being imposed beforehand (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). By reading the program iteratively, three concepts were identified as relevant to this study, namely child-centered education flexibility, and learning cultural and universal values. The analysis of these concepts and corresponding achievements (see below) shows that the program provides a framework upon which teachers can structure classroom activities to ensure immigrant children are included. This process of analysis lead to three important findings, pertaining to flexibility and supporting diversity, using linguistic resources, and learning for teachers and others

## **Results**

### ***Flexibility and supporting diversity***

The child-centered feature of the program, “Developing positive self-perception, feeling valued and communicating with peers and teachers” (p. 12), emphasizes that children should be given the opportunity to practice and develop various skills. The flexible feature, “Activities can be adapted and structured according to the school’s location, family and children’s changing needs” (p. 13), enables teachers to prepare

and structure classroom activities that include minority children. Finally, in terms of learning cultural and universal values, the program “encourages children to respect other children who have different backgrounds and to have experience of living together with them” (p. 13).

In addition to these features, the program lists achievements pertinent to the developmental areas relevant to inclusive early years education. Table 1 shows the total number of achievements for each developmental area, and the achievements and indicators relevant to inclusivity.

Table 1  
*The Total Number of Achievements for Each Developmental Area*

<b>Developmental areas</b>	<b>Total number of achievements</b>	<b>The number of relevant achievements</b>	<b>Relevant achievements</b>	<b>Relevant indicators</b>
Language development	12	2	5 8	2, 3 2, 4
Cognitive development	21	2	6 7	1, 2 1
Social and emotional Development	17	5	1 2 8 9 16	1 1, 2, 3 3 1 1
Self-care	8	1	5	2
Motor skills	5	X		

### *Using linguistic resources*

Achievements in the linguistic and self-care areas suggest that children can use all linguistic resources to communicate, comprehend, and understand classroom activities. For example, achievement 5 in the linguistic category is “able to use language as a means of communication.” In terms of achieving this, indicators 2 and 3 describe “understanding gestures and mimicking behavior,” and “using gestures and mimicking behavior” (p. 23). Achievement 8 in the linguistic category is being “able to state what s/he has heard and seen in different ways.” Indicators 2 and 4 concern being “able to answer questions about what s/he has heard/seen” and “demonstrating what s/he has heard/seen through art, music, drama and story-telling” (p. 24). Achievement 5 in the self-care area is being able to explain the importance of listening, while indicator number 2 is “participating in relaxing activities” (p. 33).

### *Learning for themselves and others*

Five achievements in the social and emotional area (1, 2, 8, 9 and 16) may be considered relevant to an inclusive early years education. These achievements highlight the idea that children should be given opportunities to identify themselves and other. Achievement 1 is being “able to introduce his/her attributes,” in areas

such as “saying his or her name, surname, age, and physical attributes.” Achievement 2 is being “able to introduce family attributes.” Indicators 1, 2, and 3 expand on achievement 2 with “stating his or her father’s/mother’s name and surname,” “stating his or her father’s/mother’s physical characteristics such as hair color,” and “stating other relatives’ names such as aunts and uncles” (p. 26). Achievements 8 and 9 in the social and emotional area indicate the extent to which different cultures are accepted in the classroom. Achievement 8 reflects being “able to show respect for differences” (p. 27), as indicator 3 describes “participating in activities with different children” (p. 27). Achievement 9 is being “able to explain different cultural traits” (p. 27) and indicator 1 for this achievement is “stating the cultural traits of her/his country” (p. 27). Achievement number 16 is being “able to explain that individuals have different roles and responsibilities in the society” (p. 28), for which indicator number 1 is the ability “to state different roles and duties practiced in the community” (p. 28).

Two achievements in the cognitive area, 6 and 7, may be considered relevant to inclusive education. Achievement 6 is “being able to match animate/inanimate creatures and objects according to their attributes.” For this achievement, indicator 1 is “to match animate and inanimate objects one to one,” while indicator 2 is “to differentiate and match animate/inanimate objects according to their color, shapes and length” (p. 19). Achievement 7 in the cognitive area is to be “able to form groups of inanimate creatures or inanimate objects according their attributes.” For this achievement, indicator 1 is “to categorize inanimate creatures and inanimate objects according to their color, shapes, length, fabric and voice” (p. 19).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study examined the current preschool education program (2013) which applies to nurseries in Turkey. Although the program does not explicitly mention inclusivity in early years education, close analysis of achievements in developmental areas indicates that some such achievements imply an inclusive approach to young children’s learning. More specifically, the emotional and social area includes more achievements and indicators relevant to inclusive education than other areas such as language, for which only two achievements may be considered relevant. The two achievements in the linguistic area show that teachers should allow children to use linguistic resources including gestures and mimicking (García, 2009). In so doing, teachers give children the opportunity to use linguistic and cultural resources from their own homes and communities. This enables children to communicate with their teachers and to become more comfortable with teachers and nurseries, and recalls Yanık Özger and Akansel’s (2019) study, which showed that teachers used some lexical items in Arabic to communicate with Syrian children and their families.

These findings support previous studies on preschool teachers' beliefs about inclusive education (Cengiz Şayan, 2020; Kahrman Pamuk & Bal, 2019). These studies showed that teachers were ambivalent about inclusivity as they did not know how to implement it in their own classrooms (Kahrman Pamuk & Bal, 2019). Studies also indicated that, although preschool teachers supported inclusivity, they preferred not to have children with different abilities in their classroom (Akalm et al., 2014). While it could be argued that this is because the program does not explicitly refer to inclusivity other than for children with special needs, teachers should be ready to accept all children regardless of their abilities and disabilities. This accords with Ayan-Ceyhan's (2016) study, which concluded that teachers' agency played an important role in the implementation of inclusive education. She concluded that inclusive education is currently applied at a micro- rather than macro-level, and suggests that a top-down, macro-level approach to inclusive education can help both teachers and children to develop the children's full potential. This approach may involve a revision of the program and of teacher training (Leeman & Koeven, 2019). This also aligns with Agbenyega & Klibthong's (2014) study, which argued that preschool education programs should address children's diverse needs – including linguistic and social needs – in the classroom. They suggested adjusting preschool education programs toward inclusive education can provide preschool teachers with additional practical knowledge in terms of implementing inclusivity (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2014).

Examining official documents pertaining to minority children in Norway, Hilt (2015) showed that the inclusion was defined as participation in all aspects of life. This broad view does not confine the inclusion of immigrant or minority children to a single social setting such as school. Instead, it aims to address barriers faced by immigrant minority children in all aspects of their social life. Hilt (2015) also mentioned that the documents presupposed that parents and school were equally responsible for the inclusion of immigrant children. In other words, the inclusion of children could not be achieved through the efforts of schools and teachers alone.

This study has implications for researchers, teachers, and policymakers. It suggests that researchers into early years education should conduct experimental studies to examine the ways in which teachers implement inclusive practices in the classroom. The study also suggests that policymakers should pursue pedagogical changes (e.g., revised and adapted classroom activities emphasizing inclusive education) in early years education to guide preschool teachers toward best practice in inclusive education (Göl & Sakız, 2020). A guidebook could be prepared covering such inclusive practices, similar to one that has been published for primary teachers (Öztürk et al., 2017). Based on these findings, it is further suggested that a new definition of inclusive education for immigrant children could be added, completing the one that addresses children with special needs. Admittedly, this



study had certain limitations, such as its focus on a single official documents, and the fact that it did not include classroom studies to investigate preschool teachers' existing inclusive practices. It is to be hoped that future research will address these and related issues.

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