

## KINDERGARTEN PRINCIPALS' VIEWS ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A FOCUS GROUP STUDY

### ANAOKULU MÜDÜRLERİNİN KAYNAŞTIRMA EĞİTİMİNE İLİŞKİN GÖRÜŞLERİ: BİR ODAK GRUP ÇALIŞMASI

#### Dr. Zafer KORKMAZ

Ministry of National Education, Batman, Guidance and Psychological Counseling,  
zaferkorkmazpdr@gmail.com  
Batman / Turkey  
ORCID: 0000-0001-6789-2064

#### Dr. Fırat ÜNSAL

Ministry of National Education, Van, Guidance and Psychological Counseling,  
brukani@gmail.com  
Batman / Turkey  
ORCID: 0000-0001-9561-554X

#### Özet

Pek çok ülkede olduğu gibi Türkiye’de de her çocuğun eğitim alma hakkı yasa ve kanunlar ile güvence altına alınmıştır. Buna özel eğitime ihtiyaç duyan tüm engel grupları da dâhil edilmiştir. Akranlarından anlamlı düzeyde farklılık gösteren ve farklı engel gruplarına sahip öğrenciler için genel eğitimde bazı uyarlamalar yapılmadan farklı özellik ve engel gruplarının eğitimden yararlanabilmesi mümkün olamamaktadır. Okul öncesi eğitimde eğitime erken yaşta başlamak ne kadar önemli ise özel eğitime erken yaşta başlamak ta özel eğitimin en temel ilkelerinden biri olup son derece önemlidir. Bu çalışmada görev yaptıkları anaokullarında kaynaştırma öğrencisi bulunan okul müdürlerinin, kaynaştırma eğitimine ilişkin görüşlerinin ve önerilerinin belirlenmesi amaç edinilmiştir. Çalışmada, nitel araştırma tekniği olan odak grup (focus group) tartışma tekniği kullanılmıştır. Çalışmanın sonunda anaokullarında görev yapan anaokulu müdürlerinin özel eğitime ilişkin bilgi kaynaklarının çoğunun üniversite eğitimi, hizmet içi eğitim, okul rehberlik servisi ve bireysel çabalar şeklinde toplandığı, kaynaştırma öğrencilerinin anayasa, kanun, yönetmelik ve yönergelerden kaynaklı haklarını kısmen bildiği görülmektedir. Özel eğitime gereksinim duyan çocuklarla çalışırken yardıma ihtiyaç duydukları konu başlıklarının iletişim, aile eğitimi, davranış şekillendirme, bireysel eğitim planlarının hazırlanması olduğu ve ailelere rehberlik etme konusunda başvurdukları kaynakların kitaplar, özel eğitim uzmanları, çocuk ruh sağlığı uzmanları, üniversitelerin ilgili bölümleri, rehberlik araştırma merkezleri, okul rehberlik servisleri gibi çeşitlendiği görülmektedir. Katılımcı anaokulu müdürlerinin geneli kaynaştırma eğitimini öğrenci için son derece faydalı bulduğunu belirtmiş katılımcıların az bir kısmı ise fiziki koşulların ve imkânların yetersizliğinin bu faydayı azalttığını belirtmiştir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Okul öncesi eğitim, özel eğitim, kaynaştırma eğitimi.

## Abstract

In Turkey, as in many other countries, laws, and regulations protect every child's right to an education. This encompasses all disabilities that need special education. Distinct features and disability groups cannot benefit from education without specific adjustments in general education for students who vary considerably from their classmates and have different disability groups. Starting special education at an early age is one of the most fundamental concepts of special education and is incredibly important, just as it is crucial to start education at an early age in kindergarten education. This research aims to ascertain the perspectives and recommendations of school administrators who have inclusive pupils in their kindergartens on inclusive education. The study included a qualitative research approach known as focus group discussions. At the end of the study, it is discovered that the majority of the information resources of kindergarten principals working in kindergartens are gathered in the form of university education, in-service training, school guidance service, and individual efforts, and that mainstreaming students only have a hazy understanding of their rights as outlined in the constitution, laws, regulations, and directives. When working with special education children, the topics they need assistance with are communication, family education, behaviour shaping, and the preparation of individual education plans, and the resources they use to guide families are books, special education specialists, child mental health specialists, relevant departments of universities, guidance research centres, and so on. It is expanding as a school guidance service. Participating kindergarten principals generally indicated that inclusive education was very helpful to their pupils, while a few participants claimed that the lack of adequate physical conditions and opportunities hindered this advantage.

**Keywords:** Preschool education, kindergarten, special education, inclusive education.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education, which allows people to develop their talents and adapt to their surroundings, should begin as early in life as feasible. Early education is more likely to contribute to the acquisition of desirable behavioural changes for people, which is the basic aim of education. Kindergarten education is available to children in three age groups in Turkey: 36–48 months; 48–60 months; and 60–72 months. Kindergarten education refers to schooling provided between the ages of three and six in the United States and Turkey. Teachers hired at the kindergarten education level are chosen from graduates of universities' kindergarten teaching programs or child development programs, and those who serve at this level are known as kindergarten education teachers. Administrators at these institutions are also chosen from kindergarten instructors or guidance counsellors. Regulation on Pre-School Education and Primary Education Institutions, 2014; National Education Basic Law, 1973).

In Turkey, as in many other countries, laws, and regulations protect every child's right to an education. This encompasses all disabilities that need special education (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 1982). Students who vary considerably from their classmates and belong to distinct disability groups cannot benefit from schooling unless general education is modified (Vitello & Soskin, 1985). The education level of all pupils who vary considerably from their classmates and need special education is outlined and guaranteed in full in the Special Education Services Regulation (2018).

Starting special education at an early age is one of the most fundamental concepts of special education and is incredibly important, just as it is crucial to start education at an early age in kindergarten education (Olson, Murphy, & Olson, 1999). It is specified that pupils who need special education shall get inclusive education in kindergartens and kindergartens (excluding special education kindergartens) where kindergarten education is provided. It is critical in this training, known as education via inclusion and integration, that people with special education needs engage with others of all sorts and levels.

These people are also provided with support education services for them to accomplish their educational objectives at the maximum level possible, which may include full-time education alongside their peers or part-time education in special education classrooms (MEB Special Education Services Regulation, 2018). According to the literature on inclusive education, it is "the education of individuals who differ significantly from their peers at the most appropriate and early age, in the least restrictive educational environments, by providing the necessary support and services to ensure that they can become members of society" (Kırcaali-iftar, 1992; Lewis & Doorlag, 1987).

Although there are studies in Turkey on integrating children with special education needs into regular educational settings at the kindergarten level, there are few studies employing qualitative research methodologies (Batu, 1998; Kaya, 2005; Varlier, 2004). As a result, this study aims to examine mainstreaming studies in kindergarten education institutions in Batman province using qualitative research methodologies and considering kindergarten principals' viewpoints.

This research aims to determine the opinions and suggestions of kindergarten principals who have mainstreamed students in kindergarten education schools in Batman. For this purpose, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. What are the opinions of the kindergarten principals in the research group about inclusive education in educational institutions?
2. What is the distribution of the "resources from which they obtained special education information" of the kindergarten principals in the research group?
3. How much do the kindergarten principals in the research group know about the rights of inclusion students stemming from the constitution, laws, regulations, and directives?
4. What is the distribution of the opinions of kindergarten principals in the research group about the benefits of inclusive education?
5. What is the distribution of the kindergarten principals in the research group on "the issues they need help with while working with children in need of special education"?
6. What is the distribution of the "resources that the kindergarten teachers in the research group refer to in guiding children in need of special education and their families"?
7. Does the general approach of the kindergarten principals in the research group change according to their graduation branches?

## 2. METHOD

### Study Model

In this study, a qualitative study was conducted to determine the opinions and suggestions of kindergarten principals about inclusive education in the schools where they work. Qualitative research is a form of research that involves in-depth data collection in a field. Data is collected over a long period in natural settings regarding different variables (Gay, 1987). The focus group discussion technique, which is a qualitative research technique, was used in the study. A focus group is a group of people who share certain characteristics and meet to discuss a specific topic. In other words, a focus group is when the moderator focuses on a small and homogeneous group on a discussion around the research topic (Çokluk & Oğuz, 2011).

### Study group

After calling the kindergartens providing kindergarten education by phone, the school principals with whom inclusion was applied in their schools were determined. They were informed about the research, and the volunteers obtained the necessary permission to carry out the research.

The researchers went to the schools that the kindergarten principals deemed appropriate for the interview and gave face-to-face information to the kindergarten principals who would participate in the research about the purpose of the research and how it would be conducted. The researchers asked the volunteer kindergarten principals to sign the contracts in the preliminary interviews.

In these agreements, the purpose of the research, how it will be conducted, and the principles of interviewing are clearly stated. After the preliminary interviews, all of the 13 kindergarten principals interviewed stated that they wanted to participate in the research and declared that they would be present at the appointed appointment date. Of the 13 kindergarten principals who agreed to participate in the research, 11 participated in the research, and the research was conducted with 11 kindergarten principals. The research participants are school principals who work in kindergartens and have worked with at least one student with special needs. When the gender distribution of the principals was examined, five were male, and six were female, according to their education level. It was determined that all of them had a bachelor's degree, no one had a master's degree, and their average professional experience was 13 years. It is seen that five of the school principals are guidance teachers, and six of them have kindergarten teaching branches. Participants were listed as P1, P2, and P3.... P11 in the study.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

To collect the qualitative data for the study, the "Focus Group Interview Participant Information Form" was developed to get the demographic information of the participants, and the "Kindergarten Inclusive Education Focus Group Interview Form" was developed to get the opinions of the principals of the kindergartens that provide inclusive kindergarten education. First, domestic and international qualitative and quantitative studies on the subject were scanned to develop the interview form. Open-ended questions regarding the purpose and conceptual framework of the focus group interview were included. Two researchers conducted focus group interviews in a kindergarten, in a multi-purpose hall allowed by the school administration, on predetermined days and times. Nameplates were prepared for the participants, the moderator, and the reporter before the interview. Before the focus group meeting, the moderator and the reporter came to the meeting place, completed the preparations (table, chair, paper, pen, seating arrangement, drink, food), and greeted the participants. The recorder has been checked. Before the interview started, the moderator recorded the date, place, and time of the interview, who would moderate it, and the reporter's name on the tape recorder. At the beginning of the interview, information forms were distributed, and the participants were asked to fill them out. At the beginning of the meeting, the moderator stated that the interviews would be recorded with a voice recorder. It was stated that these records would be reported by the researchers in charge of the study and that the actual names of the participants would not be included in these reports.

### ***The questions asked of the participants during the interviews are given below, respectively:***

1. Can you introduce yourself? (The place and year of your graduation. How many years have you been a manager?)
2. Have you received any training for the education of students with special needs? (Courses, lectures, in-service training)
3. What do you think are the problems with inclusion practice in your school?
4. What are the reasons for the problems, limitations, and failures in inclusion practices in your school?
5. For the inclusive practice in your school to be more successful, a. From the Ministry of National Education b. From the school administration; c. Other teachers; d. Regular students in your class; e. What are your expectations of the families of mainstreaming students?
6. What sources do you obtain special education information from?
7. How much do you know about the rights of mainstreaming students stemming from the constitution, laws, regulations, and directives?
8. What are your views on the benefits of inclusive education?
9. What issues do you need help with while working with children who need special education?
10. What resources do you use to guide children needing special education and their families?
11. Is there any subject you would like to emphasize regarding special and inclusive education?



### 3. FINDINGS

The findings obtained as a result of the study are given in sub-headings containing the questions asked of the participants. Although the majority of the questions were open-ended, the answers were categorized based on the frequency with which the participants responded, and the data were attempted to be concretized by transforming them into tables.

**Table1:** *Distribution of "resources from which they obtained special education information" of kindergarten principals in the research group*

Participants	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11
University education	x	x	x	x	x			x		x	
In-service training (MEB)	x		x		x	x	x			x	x
School Guidance Service	x					x	x		x	x	x
individual efforts		x		x	x				x	x	

It is seen that most of the information sources of the participants regarding special education are gathered in the form of university education, in-service training, school guidance service, and individual efforts. All of the school principals numbered P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5, whose graduation branch is guidance and psychological counselling, stated the source of information as university education. Most participants stated that they obtained information about special education by benefiting from in-service training activities. While some of these in-service training activities are voluntarily taken as seminars, some are given by the Provincial Directorate of National Education. Most kindergarten principals whose graduation branch is kindergarten teaching stated that they actively use the school guidance service as a source of information. In addition, most of the participants stated that they were in cooperation with the guide service for the inclusion of students in need of special education and that they obtained information from books or the internet by making individual efforts at the points where they were lacking.

**Table 2:** *Do you know the rights of mainstreaming students stemming from the constitution, laws, regulations, and directives?*

Participants	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11
I know all	x	x			x						
I partially know			x	x		x	x		x	x	x
I do not know								x			

"Do you know the rights of mainstreaming students stemming from the constitution, laws, regulations, and directives?" Participant P8 stated that he had no concrete information about the rights of individuals with special needs. He stated that he knows all the rights of individuals with special needs (guidance) as per the P1, P2, and P5 branches. Except for P8, the other participants stated that while they knew some of the rights of individuals with special needs, they did not know some of them.

**Table 3:** *Distribution of the opinions of kindergarten principals in the research group on the benefits of inclusive education*

Participants	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11
I think that inclusive education is highly beneficial for students.	x		x	x	x		x		x	x	
I think that inclusive education is partially beneficial for students.		x				x					x
I do not think that inclusive education is beneficial for students.								x			

P1, P3, P4, P5, P7, P9, and 10 stated that inclusive education benefited the student and emphasized the importance of school management, guidance service, and family coming together to cooperate for the student's benefit. The participants of P2, P6, and P11 stated that they believed that inclusive education had some benefits for the students, but the benefits remained incomplete due to the existing physical conditions and insufficient cooperation. Participant P8 stated that he thought inclusive education did not benefit because the physical conditions were insufficient and no special education teacher supported the kindergarten teacher.

**Table 4:** *Distribution of "the issues they need help with while working with children in need of special education" by kindergarten principals in the study group*

Participants	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11
Material support	x	x		x	x		x	x	x		x
Communication	x						x		x		
Family Education	x	x		x		x		x			x
Behaviour shaping	x				x				x		
Preparation of individual training plans					x			x		x	x

As seen in Table 4, all participants except P3, P6, and P10 stated that they needed unique educational materials while carrying out special education work and procedures. Sometimes, they had difficulty communicating, or they could not fully descend into the child's world. Nearly half of the participants stated that they needed help with family education and behaviour change and the preparation of individual education plans according to the type of disability of the child. He stated that he needed the support of the guidance research centre or the school's guidance service in this regard.

**Table 5:** *Distribution of "resources used by the kindergarten principals in the research group to guide children in need of special education and their families."*

Participants	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11
Related departments of universities	x		x						x		
Special education specialists child mental health professionals	x		x			x					x
Guidance research centres	x	x	x			x				x	
School Guidance Services		x		x	x				x	x	x
Related web pages	x				x		x	x	x		

When the distribution of "resources they refer to guide children in need of special education and their families" by the kindergarten teachers in the research group is examined, it is seen that the participants with numbers P1, P3, and P9 consulted the teachers at the university. It is seen that the participants P1, P3, P6, and P11 received support from special education teachers, and most of the participants were able to get support from the guidance and research centre or school guidance services. Some participants declared that they received support from relevant websites and child mental health experts.

The research question was whether the kindergarten teachers in the research group consider themselves sufficient in inclusive education. The participants numbered P1, P2, P4, and P5, whose graduation branch is guidance and psychological counselling, and P6 and P9, whose graduation branch is kindergarten teaching, sometimes stated that they have difficulties, inadequacy, and need support due to physical conditions, the type of disability of the child, and sometimes the lack of support from the family.

#### 4. CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At the end of the study, it is seen that most of the information resources of the kindergarten principals on special education are gathered in the form of university education, in-service training, school guidance service, and individual efforts, and that mainstreaming students partially know their rights stemming from the constitution, laws, regulations, and directives. While working with children in need of special education, the topics they need help with are communication (Kasap,2021), family education, behaviour shaping, preparation of individual education plans, and the resources they refer to for guiding families are books, special education specialists, child mental health specialists, relevant departments of universities, guidance research centres, it is seen that it diversifies as school guidance services. Participating kindergarten principals generally stated that they found inclusive education highly beneficial to the student, while a few participants stated that the inadequacy of physical conditions and opportunities reduced this benefit. Although most participants find themselves sufficient in inclusive education, some have inadequacy and need support in this regard.

Similar to the findings of this study, in studies conducted with different teacher groups, it is seen that teachers feel competent in inclusive education (Özokçu, 2018; Toy & Duru, 2016; Yavuz, 2017). Again, the finding of this study that kindergarten principals consider themselves inadequate in inclusive education and that they need to be informed is in line with the results of previous research (Altun & Gülben, 2009; Gök & Erbaş, 2011; Küçük Doğanoğlu & Bapoğlu Dümenci, 2015).

The data of the study titled Kindergarten teachers' views on inclusive education conducted by Korkmaz and Ünsal (2022) as a focus group study, and the data of this study named Kindergarten principals' views on inclusive education, show parallel. When we look at the two studies, the sources from which they obtain their special education information are similar, and the inclusion students know their rights stemming from the constitution, laws, regulations, and directives at similar rates. It is seen that their views on the benefits of inclusive education are similar, the subjects they need help with while working with children in need of special education are similar, and the resources they refer to for guiding children and their families in need of special education are almost the same.

In addition, according to the findings obtained in this research, it is seen that kindergarten principals whose graduation branch is guidance and psychological counselling feel more competent and equipped in inclusive education than kindergarten principals whose graduation branch is kindergarten teaching.

The results from the research "Kindergarten teachers' opinions on inclusive education," performed as a focus group study by Korkmaz and Ünsal (2022), and the data from this study "Kindergarten principals' views on inclusive education," exhibit parallelism. When the two studies are compared, the sources from which they obtain their special education information are similar; inclusive students know their rights derived from the constitution, laws, regulations, and directives at comparable rates; their perspectives on the benefits of inclusive education are similar; the subjects they require assistance with while working with children who require special education are similar, and those who require special education are similar. The resources they look to for guiding children and their families are almost identical.

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