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## Acceptance in Early Childhood: A Study from Turkish Children\*

### Abstract

*Acceptance of children with special needs is very important in terms of achieving a successful inclusion. Children's acceptance should be assessed in order to see their needs and develop effective interventions in the inclusive settings. A total of 161 children between 4 and 7 years old were participated in the study. The children's acceptance levels were examined using the "Acceptance Scale for Kindergartners-Revised" (ASK-R). The results revealed that the children in Turkey had low acceptance levels. It was found that the gender, age, and income level were effective on the children's acceptance levels whereas the parents' education level and having a classmate with special needs did not significantly affect the acceptance.*

*Keywords: acceptance, early childhood, inclusion, special education*

### Introduction

Inclusion of children with and without special needs is a universally accepted approach which has been implemented in the developed countries for many years. This approach has also been applied recently in the developing countries (Diken, Rakap, Diken, Tomris & Celik, 2016). One of the main goals of inclusion is to help the children with special needs become the active members of society. Just placing the children with special needs and those without special needs in the same classroom does not guarantee a successful inclusion. Those children's social interaction must also be supported. Acceptance of children with special needs is very important in terms of achieving a successful inclusion. Meaningful friendships, more social

interaction, more learning opportunities from each other, more school motivation, less peer victimization and problem behaviors can be possible through the peer acceptance. Children must be supported for building acceptance in the inclusive classrooms (Yu, Ostrosky, & Fowler, 2012).

Early childhood education plays a crucial role in inclusion. During the preschool years, children come together for the first time. They gain their first impressions and experiences. These first impressions and experiences can be effective on the children both with and without special needs in their later school lives. Besides, preschool children may not play with their friends with special needs, thinking that they are incapable of playing or being friends with. The preschool children were found to be more likely to select the playmates without

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disabilities over the children with disabilities on the playground (Nabors & Keyes, 1997). Therefore, the children with special needs cannot participate in the classroom activities and, as a result, engage in less social interaction with their peers (Odom, 2000). Rejection and peer victimization in small children are very common towards the children with special needs (Odom, Zercher, Li, Marquart, Sandall, & Brown, 2006; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). The information concerning what young children think about the people with disabilities will increase our understanding of their behavior towards the individuals with disabilities (Dyson, 2005).

Children's acceptance should be assessed in order to see their needs and develop effective interventions in inclusive settings (Favazza, Phillipson & Kumar, 2000). According to the studies in the literature, children's general attitudes towards the people with disabilities affect how they interact with their classmates with special needs (Okagaki, Diamond, Kontos, & Hestenes, 1998). The studies on acceptance provide knowledge for making policies, creating successful programs, and understanding how different cultures view the disability. The thoughts and feelings can vary from one cultural group to another, and so can their actions and reactions. The studies on acceptance in preschoolers were mostly conducted in the western cultures (deBoer, Pijl, Minnaert, & Post, 2014; Dyson, 2005; Nikolaraizi, Kumar, Favazza, Sideridis, Koulousiou & Riall, 2005). However, there have been few studies examining the acceptance in preschool in the eastern cultures (Oh, 2016).

Turkey has taken steps to support the inclusion policies in the early childhood. However, these policies are not put into practice in the classroom as intended (Diken, et al., 2016). Especially the early childhood inclusion can be considered relatively new compared to the inclusion in the later periods of school life. Most of the studies in Turkey have focused on the in teachers' (Bozarlan & Batu, 2014; Özaydın & Çolak, 2014; Sucuoğlu, Bakaloğlu, İçcen Karasu, Demir & Akalın, 2014; Varlier & Vuran, 2006) and parents' views and attitudes (Metin, 2016). Nevertheless, there are some studies in which the social acceptance and attitudes of

children without special needs in the inclusive classrooms were studied (Aktaş & Küçüker, 2002; Gökbulut, Gökbulut, & Yeniasır, 2017; Gümüş & Çetin, 2017; Kargin & Baydık, 2002; Şahbaz, 2007). In these studies, the participants were either older children who were at school age or adolescents. To our best knowledge, there has been no study examining the children's acceptance level in the early childhood in Turkey. The purpose of this study was to examine the preschool children's acceptance levels towards the children with disability depending on their demographic characteristics such as gender, age, education and income level of parents, and whether being in an inclusion program in Turkey.

#### *Research Questions*

1. Are there differences in the children's ASK-R scores by gender.
2. Are there differences in the children's ASK-R scores by age.
3. Are there differences in the children's ASK-R scores by inclusion.
4. Are there differences in the children's ASK-R scores by income.

#### **Method**

In this section, some details are given regarding the characteristics of the study group, data collection tools, and data analysis.

#### *Research Model*

This study was designed in line with the relational screening model, one of the general screening models. In the general screening models, a sample is taken from the population in order to make a general judgment about a population consisting of a large number of elements. If the research includes the past or present events, the "scanning" models are used for the descriptive purposes. By using descriptive research model, this study aimed to examine the acceptance level of young children in terms of whether there was a significant difference in this perception according to various parameters (Karasar, 2008).

### Study Group

The study group consisted of 161 normally developing children in their early childhood years. They were selected from the preschool children and the primary school first-graders in the city center of Muğla, Turkey. The children generally come from the families with medium and high socioeconomic status. 43% (69 children) of the children were girls and 57% (92 children) of them were boys. The age range of the sample was between 59 and 87 months (Mean: 72.49, *SD*: 7.62). 42 (26%) participants in the study group had an inclusive student in their classroom and 119 (74%) did not. None of the children had a close relative with disability. None of the children had an intervention on social acceptance of their peers with disabilities.

### Data Collection Tools

#### Demographic Information Form

This form was designed to collect information about the demographic characteristics of the children. The form contained 16 questions and was filled out by the teachers of each child based on the records in their school files.

#### ASK-R

The Acceptance Scale for Kindergarten-Revised was developed by Favazza and Odom (1999). The ASK-R is an 18-item and 3-point scale (yes=2 point, maybe=1 point, no= 0 point). The items reflect the acceptance levels of children with disabilities or the children who are different. For example, one of the items is "Would you play with a kid if he had a disability?". "Have you ever talked to handicapped kids?" "Would you move to another chair if a handicapped kid sat next to you?". Cronbach alpha coefficient of the original ASK-R was reported as .87 and Spearman-Brown split half as .91. The ASK-R was adapted into Turkish by Tekin Ersan,

Ata, and Kaya (2017). The internal consistency was found to be quite satisfactory ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

### Data Analysis

The collected data were classified according to the sub-problems and analyzed using SPSS 21. The data set was examined in terms of the error value and normality. It was observed that there was no incorrectly entered data in this process. Skewness and Kurtosis was used to check the normality. According to Tabachnick & Fidell, (2013), the accepted range of absolute value of skewness and kurtosis is  $\pm 1.5$ . The values of both skewness and kurtosis in this study fell within the range. Skewness was within the range of  $-.417-.191$  while kurtosis was within the range of  $-.838-.380$ . It meant that the normality assumptions in this study were not violated. T-test was used to analyze the difference of ASK-R scores depending on the variables of gender, income, age, and inclusion. On the other hand, one-way ANOVA test was used in analyzing the difference in terms of the mother's educational level, father's educational level, and school type.

### Findings

According to findings, the children's mean score of acceptance levels was 17.68 (*SD*= 0.57).

When the Table 1 is examined, it can be seen that there was a significant difference in their ASK-R scores in terms of gender ( $X_{girl} = 19.39$ ,  $SD_{girl} = 7.25$ ,  $X_{boy} = 16.40$ ,  $SD_{boy} = 6.91$ ;  $t = -2.63$   $p = .009$ ). According to this, the ASK-R score of the girls was higher than that of the boys. The girls had a higher level of acceptance towards their peers with disabilities or difference than the boys.

**Table 1.**  
*Comparison of ASK-R Scores by Gender*

Gender	N	X	SD	df	t	p
Girl	69	19.39	7.25	150.15	-2.63	.009*
Boy	92	16.40	6.91			

\* $p < 0.05$

**Table 2.**  
*Comparison of ASK-R Scores by Age*

Age	N	X	SD	df	t	p
4-5 years-old	90	18.78	6.66	138.54	-2.16	.029*
6-7 years-old	71	16.28	7.74			

\* $p < 0.05$

When the Table 2 is examined, it can be seen that there was a significant difference in their ASK-R scores in terms of age ( $X_{4-5\text{years-old}} = 18.78$ ,  $SD_{4-5\text{years-old}} = 6.66$ ,  $X_{6-7\text{years-old}} = 16.28$ ,  $SD_{6-7\text{years-old}} = 7.74$ ;  $t = -2.63$   $p = .009$ ). According to this, the ASK-R score of the children at the age of 4-5 years was higher than that of those at the age of 6-7 years. The children at the age of 4-5 years had a higher level of acceptance towards their peers with disabilities or difference than those at the age of 6-7 years.

T-test results shown in the Table 3 reveals that there was no significant difference their ASK-R scores ( $t = .53$ ,  $p = .593$ ) in terms of inclusion status. The children's scores for the acceptance level towards their peers with disabilities or difference were not affected by the presence of inclusion students in their classes.

**Table 3.**  
*Comparison of ASK-R Scores by Inclusion Status*

Inclusion	N	X	SD	t	p
Yes	41	17.16	7.27	.53	.593
No	119	17.86	7.25		

\* $p < 0.05$

**Table 4.**  
*Comparison of ASK-R Scores by Income*

Income	N	X	SD	df	t
Middle	101	18.49	7.18	119.24	2
Upper	58	16.12	7.16		

\* $p < 0.05$

**Table 5.**  
*Comparison of ASK-R Scores by Inclusion Status*

	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Difference
Ask Scores	Between Groups	.933	2	.467	.009	.991	-
	Within Groups	8399.911	158	53.164			
	Total	8400.845	160				

\* $p < 0.05$

When Table 4 is examined, it can be seen that there was a significant difference in their ASK-R scores in terms of income level of families ( $X_{\text{middle}} = 18.49$ ,  $SD_{\text{middle}} = 7.18$ ,  $X_{\text{upper}} = 16.12$ ,  $SD_{\text{upper}} = 7.16$ ;  $t = 2$   $p = .046$ ). According to this, ASK-R score of children from middle income families was higher than that of the children from upper income families. The children from middle income families had higher level of acceptance towards their peers with disabilities or difference than the children from upper income families.

One-way variance analysis (ANOVA) results in the Table 5 show that ASK-R scores ( $F(2, 158) = .009$ ,  $p = .991$ ) do not vary depending on their mother's education level.

One-way variance analysis (ANOVA) results in the Table 6 show that ASK-R scores ( $F(2, 158) = .114$ ,  $p = .892$ ) do not vary depending on their father's education level.

**Table 6.**  
*Comparison of ASK-R Scores by their Father's Education Level*

	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Difference
Ask Scores	Between Groups	12.146	2	6.073	.114	.892	-
	Within Groups	8388.699	158	53.093			
	Total	8400.845	160				

\* $p < 0.05$

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the young children's acceptance levels towards the children with disability in terms of the characteristics such as gender, age, education level of parents, income level, and whether being in an inclusion program in Turkey. According to our findings, the children's acceptance rates were relatively low compared to the previous studies (Nikolarazi, et al., 2005). The children growing up in different cultures receive some specific inputs from their environment. Therefore, there's a vast array of cultural differences in children's beliefs and behaviors. This may be associated with the nature of attitudes in our culture. Turkey is a developing country with a relatively collectivist culture. In several studies, it was found that the societies characterized by collectivism revealed less positive attitudes than the societies characterized by individualism (Benomir, et al., 2016; Black, Mrasek, & Ballinger, 2003; Rao, Horton, Tsang, Shi, & Corrigan, 2010). In their study examining the extent to which cultural norms were integrated into the fairness cognitions and influenced the social preferences regarding equality and equity, Huppert et al. (2018) tested 2.163 children at the age of 4–11 years from 13 countries. The children from the more individualistic cultures favored the equitable distributions at an earlier age than the children from the more collectivist cultures overall.

In this study, it was found that the age had an effect on the acceptance and the younger children (4-5 years old) had more positive attitudes than the older ones (6-7 years old). Unlike our findings, it was reported in the literature that the children's acceptance improved with age (Dyson, 2005; Nikolarazi, et al., 2005). According to other studies carried out with

the participation of older Turkish children, the age was found to be not effective (Göktürk, et al., 2017). This finding can be a result of the poor inclusion practices and the children's modelling negative behaviors. In Turkey, the children face some poor inclusion practices after the preschool period. The parents and children with special needs may have more positive experiences in the preschool period (Tekin Ersan & Ata, 2018). Based on the positive experiences in the early childhood educational settings, the children with special educational needs are well-integrated and the parents are apparently pleased with the integrated approach. An increasing number of parents want their children to attend the integrated classes.

Our findings revealed a gender difference. The girls were more inclined to accept than the boys in our study. In some of the studies, a gender difference was reported in favor of girls (Favazza & Odom, 1996; Sigelman, Miller, & Whitworth, 1986). On the other hand, in some other studies, there was no significant difference between the boys and girls (Nikolarazi, et al., 2005). In the studies carried out with the participation of older Turkish children, similar findings were reported (Gökbulut, et al., 2017; Gümüş & Çetin, 2017).

According to our findings, having a classmate with disability did not have a significant effect on the acceptance levels of children. However, many other studies asserted that the contact with a person with special needs improved some positive attitudes in children (Diamond & Hestenes, 1996; Dyson, 2005; Nikolarazi, et al., 2005). In fact, this is seen as one of the benefits of inclusion for the children without disabilities. In Turkey, many inclusion practices have serious problems and in general they are not considered as successful programs (Diken, et al., 2016).



Ineffective inclusion practices might have caused this result in this study. In many programs, the students with special needs seem invisible to their peers or school staff. In our study, many children without special needs did not even know that they had a classmate with special needs in the inclusion programs. In their study, Huckstadt and Shutts' study (2014) found that the children's participation in inclusion programs did not appear to affect their evaluation towards the people with disability at the age of 3-5 years. The lack of social contact was also a cause of the findings.

According to our study, the parents' education level was found to have no effect on the children's acceptance. In other studies, the school age children's attitudes towards disability were investigated using a Turkish sample. According to their results, not the education level of mothers but that of the fathers was effective on the children's attitudes (Gökbulut, et al., 2017; Gümüş & Çetin, 2017). However, independently from the education level, there was a difference in terms of income level. The children of the families with high income were found to have less acceptance. In contrast, in some studies carried out in the Turkish sample including the school age children, the income level was found to be ineffective (Gümüş & Çetin, 2017).

### Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. First of all, the study was conducted in a small geographic district. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalized. Secondly, the number of subjects was relatively small. Further studies should be replicated with a larger sample. Thirdly, the school type could not be taken into consideration. In the future studies, school type should be taken into consideration. Another limitation is about the measurement. Since the scale used in this study relied on self-report, the children's responses may be influenced by a desire to please the examiner. And lastly, we did not take the teacher characteristics into consideration. In the future studies, the teacher characteristics associated with children's attitude may be examined.

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