



Inspiring Change, Innovating Futures

Exploring the perspectives of primary school teachers on the participation of children with special needs A qualitative research

MSc. OT., Medine Nur Özata Değerli, BSc. OT., Begüm Zeynep Uzun, Assoc. Prof. Hatice Abaoğlu

mnurozata06@gmail.com



Hacettepe University, Department of Occupational Therapy

Ankara, Türkiye

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Content



Background



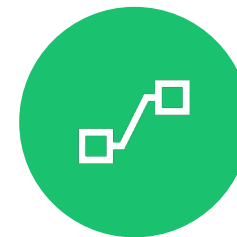
Methodology



Results



Discussion



Conclusion

Education of Children with Special Needs in Türkiye



Children with Special Needs



‘who requires additional educational support or adaptations due to developmental, physical, sensory, emotional, or learning-related characteristic.’ ¹



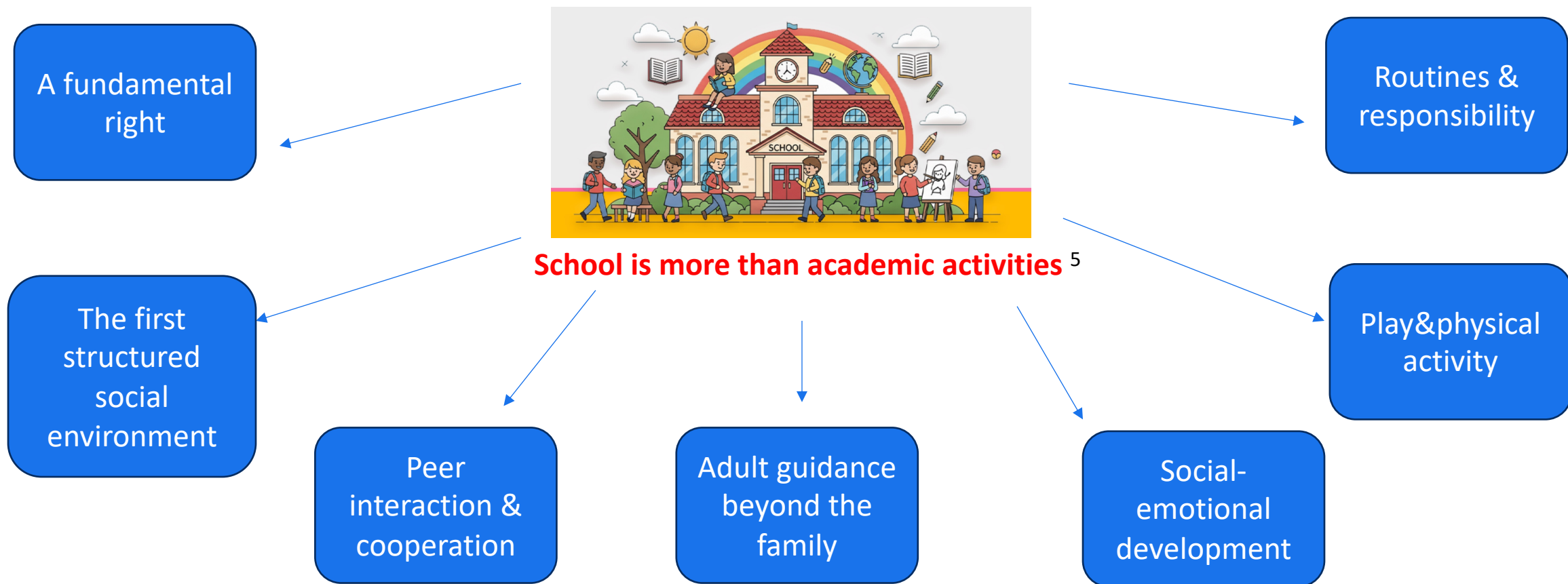
Türkiye

Approximately **425,000 children** with special educational needs (around **318,000** of whom are educated through inclusive education) ²

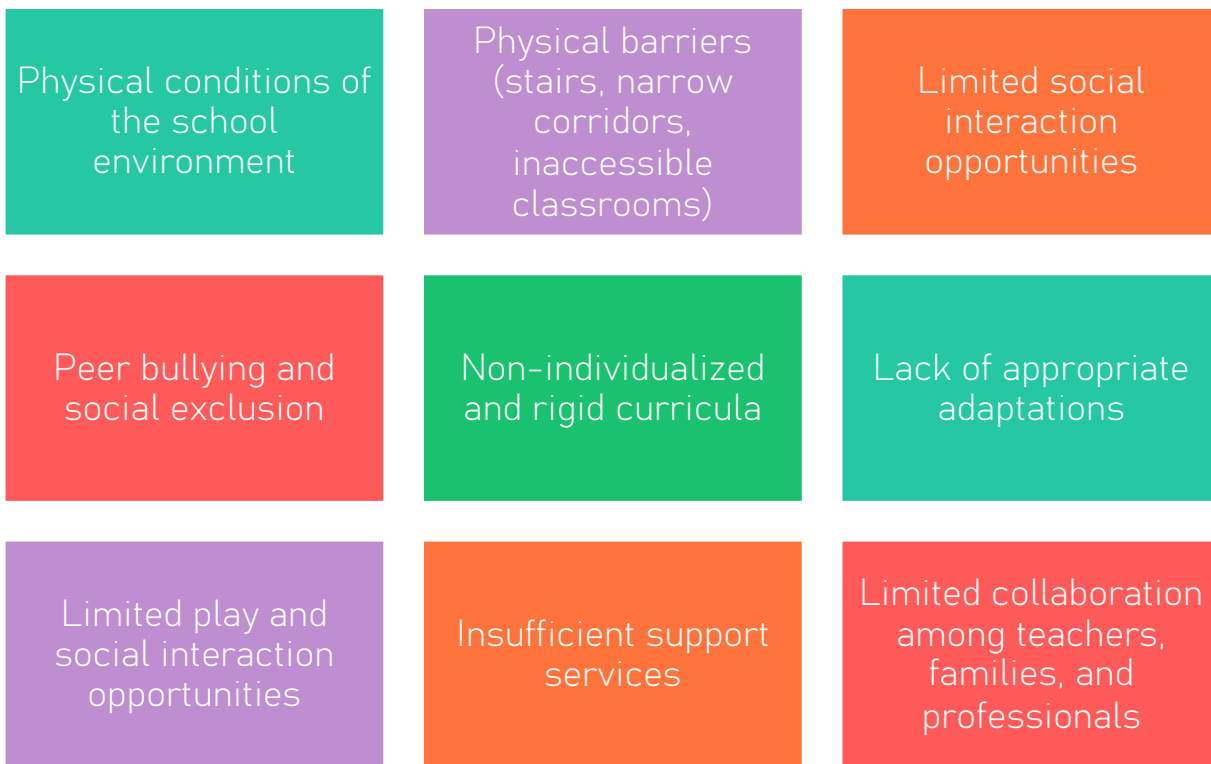


- Inclusive education as a policy focus has been implemented only since 2018 ³
- Prior to this period, educational provision was predominantly based on special education schools.
- **Therefore, how children with special educational needs experience participation within inclusive settings remains unclear** ⁴

Why School Participation Matters for Children?



Key Factors Shaping School Participation of Children with Special Needs

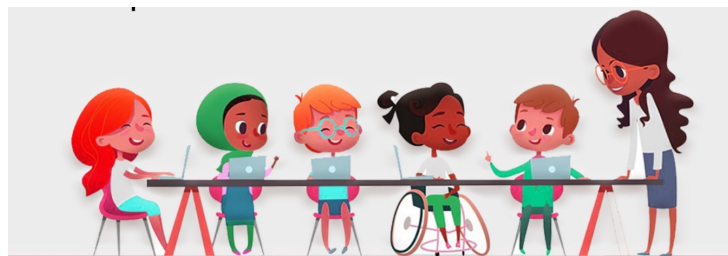


Across all these factors, teachers' awareness, knowledge, and professional competence play a critical role in enhancing the school participation of children with special needs ⁶.



The Importance of Teachers' Perspectives in Understanding School Participation

- Teachers are the **primary stakeholders** who interact with children with special needs on a daily basis ⁷.
- They directly observe students' **academic, social, and behavioral** participation in the classroom ⁸.
- Teachers play a **central role** in planning, implementing, and adapting instructional practices ⁹.
- Teachers' knowledge, awareness, and attitudes strongly influence the **quality of inclusive education**
- Teachers' perspectives help identify both barriers and **facilitators** to school participation..
- **Examining teachers' views contributes to the development of practical, context-sensitive solutions for inclusive education** ¹⁰.



Research Aim



Qualitatively explore primary school teachers' attitudes toward the participation of children with special needs, addressing a literature gap and clarifying contextual factors influencing inclusive education.

Method

Design

Qualitative phenomenological study

Participants	
Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be actively employed as a primary school teacher in a public school • Have at least five years of teaching experience • Have at least one prior experience teaching a student with special needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retired • Working part-time, or no longer actively teaching

A total of 30 primary school teachers participated (82.1% were female).

Measures

Demographic Information Form

Gender, marital status, age, years of teaching experience, prior training related to students with special needs

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Consisted of 10 open-ended questions designed to explore teachers' views, attitudes, and experiences regarding the participation of students with special needs

Example Interview Questions

- How would you describe the overall participation of students with special needs in classroom activities?
- What factors do you think most influence the participation of students with special needs in academic learning tasks?
- How would you evaluate their participation in social situations such as recess, play, or free-time activities?

Procedure and Analysis

Participation invitations were distributed to public primary schools. All interviews were conducted **face-to-face** in participants' schools, and each interview lasted approximately **50–60 minutes**. Interviews were **audio-recorded**.

Interviews were concluded when **thematic saturation** was reached.

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the data were reviewed together with field notes to ensure data integrity.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis approach.

The coding process was conducted iteratively, with themes regularly discussed and reviewed by the research team to ensure consistency and validity.

Results

The findings from teachers' perspectives revealed four key themes:

Opening the Gates
of Inclusion

Walls Against
Belonging

The Silent Burden of
Self-Stigma

Teachers as Agents
of Change

Theme 1. Opening the Gates of Inclusion



Learning Knows No Bounds

Teachers believe that:

- Inclusive education, which has only recently become more widespread in Türkiye, is crucial for the **social, emotional, and academic participation** of children with disabilities.
- Inclusive classroom environments are valuable in supporting the development of **social skills** and strengthening students' **sense of self-worth**.
- In a society where perspectives on disability are still evolving, inclusive education offers a **unique and transformative experience** for both children with disabilities and their peers.

Theme 2. Walls Against Belonging

- **Overcrowded classrooms** represent one of the primary barriers to the participation.
- The current education system prioritizes **exam-oriented learning**, forcing students to adapt to a **fast-paced and stressful environment**.
- **Individual adaptations are insufficient**, including limited flexibility in lesson duration, lack of alternative assessment methods, and inadequate adaptation of instructional materials.
- **Negative attitudes from peers** (e.g., exclusion, teasing, bullying) significantly hinder students' classroom and social participation.
- **Societal attitudes** involving other teachers, school administrators, and parents create additional barriers.
- Therefore, teachers stress the need for **policy-level support** for inclusive education.

Theme 3. The Silent Burden of Self-Stigma

Teachers emphasize that:

Discussions on disability often focus on **environmental and structural barriers**, while **self-stigma is frequently overlooked**.

Students may **internalize negative societal prejudices**, leading them to withdraw and hesitate to participate.

Some students attempt to **make themselves “invisible”** in the classroom by adopting passive roles.

To enhance participation, teachers should work on **addressing these internal barriers**, not only external ones.

Creating a **supportive, safe, and empathy-based classroom climate** is essential for reducing self-stigma and promoting participation.

Theme 4. Teachers as Agents of Change

Teachers' **knowledge, attitudes, and experiences** play a decisive role in the success of inclusive education.

Experienced teachers and those with prior involvement in inclusive education are better able to **cope with challenges** and develop **creative and effective strategies** to support student participation.

The most critical factor is teachers' **willingness to make an effort** and their **motivation to ensure equal participation** for all students.

When teachers are open to self-improvement, barriers can be overcome; however, without such effort, teachers themselves may become a **barrier to inclusion**.

These findings highlight the importance of **strengthening teacher training and support mechanisms** to promote inclusive education.



Conclusion

This study highlights that inclusive education is perceived by teachers as a fundamental right; however, its effective implementation is constrained by structural barriers, exam-oriented curricula, negative peer attitudes, limited teacher preparedness, and the often-overlooked burden of self-stigma among students with special needs.

From an occupational therapy perspective, these findings emphasize that participation in education is shaped by the dynamic interaction between the individual, the environment, and the activity.

Occupational therapists can play a critical role in inclusive schools by supporting environmental and activity-based adaptations, addressing psychosocial factors such as self-stigma and self-worth, and collaborating with teachers to promote participation-focused classroom practices.

Strengthening school-based occupational therapy services, enhancing teacher–therapist collaboration, and integrating participation-oriented interventions are essential to fostering inclusive, supportive, and empowering educational environments for children with special needs.

Thank you for attention.

Medine Nur Özata Değerli

mnurozata06@gmail.com



<https://www.linkedin.com/in/medine-nur-özata-değerli/>

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https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Medine-Nur-Oezata-Degerli?ev=hdr_xprf

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