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Pre-school special education practices in European Union Countries and Turkey

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Abstract

Pre-school period is the first stage to gain experience in terms of various learning environments. This period which can serve as a springboard for future accomplishments is very important for every child, and therefore, should provide equal opportunities for every individual. This descriptive study aims to identify the existing situation by comparatively looking into variables such as the age student with disabilities start preschool, educational model, support provided to families and support personnel. In most of the European Union countries, during preschool years, mainstreaming, inclusion or segregated education model is used.

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1. Introduction

Pre-school education is a process in which children between 36-72 months are supported to improve their physical, emotional, social and mental development in educational environments suitable for their developmental level and personal characteristics. Preparing children for elementary education, and being an important part of overall education process, pre-school education is crucial for not only individuals but also for the community they live in. During the early years (0-6), habits and mental capacities have the potential to develop so fast and to such an extent that it is vital for every individual to receive equal education which pays attention to individual differences and provides opportunities to everyone to receive such an education with his/her peers in mainstreaming environments. Since children who attend pre-school mainstreaming environments show greater improvement in terms of learning outcomes, accommodations to meet the future generation needs and help them be successful have become inevitable (Jenkins, Speltz, & Odom, 1989; Sucuoğlu, 1996). Moreover, support services provided to the child and the family are crucial in the quality of pre-school education. The analysis of cooperation based services, supports not only the models based on equal opportunities but also helps to identify quality indicators in education (Marcon, 1999; Pretis, 2009).

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2. Method

The purpose of this study is to compare and analyze the pre-school institutions that the students with special needs attend, the education model being implemented, education starting age, personnel number of the institutions and support services provided to the family. The study is a descriptive and aims to identify and define the present conditions. The data used in this study about the variables of EU countries and Turkey is obtained from Agencies of the European Union, European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, Eurydice- Network on Education Systems and Policies in Europe, Eurybase-Descriptions of National Systems and Policies. The findings were retrieved by analyzing the countries' National Educational System Descriptions and the results were organized and interpreted with the use of tables.

3. Results

3.1. Pre-school education system and special education in Turkey

In Turkey, under the umbrella of Early Childhood Special Education services, children with special needs are provided with mainstreaming opportunities to prepare them to school, and their families are provided with the necessary information and knowledge. With Ministry of National Education (MEB) 573 Special Education law, children between 0-36 months receive early childhood education, while those between 36-72 receive pre-school special education support (MEB, 2011). During this period in order to expand the education services provided to those accepted eligible by special education evaluation committee to continue to receive special education services in mainstreaming environments, "Expanding Mainstreaming Education in Pre-school Period Project" was prepared and in 2009-2010 it was implemented in 32 pilot cities. Within the scope of this project 847 students were placed in mainstreaming environments. Moreover 1798 teachers and 894 administrators received in service training regarding special education. According to the data obtained from the Ministry of Education, in 2009-2010 education year a total of 26.681 public and private pre-school education institutions 980.654 students received education, while in 2010-2011 education year the total number of pre-school education institutions increased to 27.606 and the students' number reached 1.115.718. According to this data it can be assumed that the expected increase in the number of pre-school students has not been achieved yet. Therefore, while establishing new education goals or arranging the previous ones, priority should be given to promoting pre-school education. Another factor that affects the schooling of children is the number of personnel. In order to promote pre-school education, pre-school teacher training departments are allocated more quotas. The 2008-2009 higher education statistics data show that among the graduates of teacher training programs the lowest number is of special education teachers (632), while the number of pre-school teachers is 2512.

However, since the number of pre-school teachers is not enough in the country different solutions were developed. For instance, both English language teacher training and pre-school teacher training programs were established within the scope of Open University. According to 2008-2009 data 5009 pre-school education teachers graduated from this program. While only 400 quota was allocated to pre-school education teachers, this number increased to 1063 in 2011 (MEB, 2011).

3.2 Pre-school education institutions, educational model and education enrolment age of students with special needs in Turkey and EU countries.

The findings regarding the pre-school education institutions, educational model and education enrolment age of students with special needs in Turkey and EU countries are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Pre-school education institutions, educational model and education enrollment age of students with special needs in Turkey and EU countries.

Countries	Educational Institutions	Education Models	Start Age (year)
Austria	special and integrative kindergartens	mainstreaming	3
Belgium	buitengewoon kleuteronderwijs (special pre-primary)	mainstreaming	2,5-6
Cyprus	kindergarten	mainstreaming	3
Czech Rep	mainstream classes or separate class	mainstreaming/separate	2
Denmark	nurseries, kindergartens, integrated institutions	mainstreaming	1 or 3
Finland	separate pre-primary group or integrative pre-primary	mainstreaming	3
France	pre-school	mainstreaming	3/under
Germany	mainstream schools pre schoolclass integrative <i>Kindergärten</i>	mainstreaming	3
Greece	special education nipiagogeia (in the general pre-primary school class)	mainstreaming	4
Hungary	kindergarten (<i>óvoda</i>)	mainstreaming	3
Iceland	mainstream schools	mainstreaming	6
Ireland	special or mainstream classes, separate special primary schools	mainstreaming	2-2.5
Italy	scuola dell'infanzia (pre-primary school)	mainstreaming	2
Lithuania	early education, pre-school educational institutions, pre-primaryclass	mainstreaming/separate	3
Luxembourg	" <i>écoles fondamentales</i> " pre-primary schools	mainstreaming	8m
Malta	mainstream kindergartens	mainstreaming	2,9
Netherlands	speciaal onderwijs (special schools) mainstream schools	mainstreaming	3
Norway	kindergarten institutions, special kindergarten institutions	mainstreaming	0-2 3-5
Poland	mainstream and integration classes, special class mainstream school	mainstreaming	6
Portugal	pre-school education, special schools classes	mainstreaming	3
Slovenia	pre-school institution, special units within pre-school institutions	mainstreaming	1
Spain	special education, special classroom, mainstream school	mainstreaming	0
Sweden	mainstream school, pre-school class, the open pre-prschool)	mainstreaming	3
Turkey	ana okulu, ana sınıfı and uygulama sınıfı, özel özel eğitim kurumları	mainstreaming	3

As can be seen in Table 1, except Czech Republic and Lithuania, in many EU countries mainstreaming education model is commonly used for children with special needs. In Cyprus and Italy mainstreaming is dominant model, while in Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta and Portugal, after early childhood service, pre school education is provided for children starting from ages 2 or 3. In Ireland, the Netherlands and Poland the deaf, the blind, those with physical needs and the ones with speech and language deficiency receive education among their peers; in Lithuania where mainstreaming education model is implemented, health and social services are provided by different institutions. In Czech Republic students with mental retardation and multiple handicaps or the ones within autism spectrum receive education in segregated environments named special *mateřská škola*; the ones with hearing, visual and physical impairments receive mainstreaming education in schools named *logopaedie mateřská škola*. In Turkey with the report of Special Education Evaluation Committees established within the Counselling and Research Centres, children between 36-72 months and who are placed in pre-school education institutions receive mainstreaming education provided that they do not have multiple impairments or severe mental retardation. According to 2009-2010 data the schooling percentage in pre-school education is 26.92 % for ages 3-5 and 38.55 % for ages 4-5, while in 2010-2011 statistics it can be seen that there was a slight increase to 29.85% for ages 3-5, and 43.10% for ages 4-5.

While between 2003 and 2004, 344.741 individuals received pre-school education, between in 2010-2011 education year 1,115,818 individuals attended pre-school education institutions. However, when these numbers are analyzed in terms of special education, out of 1134 special education institutions 612 are within formal education system and about 89 of these institutions serve as kindergartens in which 727 individuals with special needs attended. In 2009-2010 education year MEB conducted a pilot study in pre-schools in 32 provinces and 847 children received education. Even in the pilot study the number of students having attended a pre-school education institution is higher than the number of students who attended pre-school institutions in 2010-2011 education year. Thus, it is of utmost importance to develop mainstreaming in pre-school institutions. Lack of institutions which can provide education to students with special needs among formal institutions, causes some difficulties for students in enrolling and participating effectively in mainstreaming environments. While in elementary school 84.580 and in secondary level 7775 students attended mainstreaming classes, this number is the lowest for pre-school level. Ministry of National Education mandates that mainstreaming is obligatory in elementary school level, but the real success of mainstreaming lies in the quality of the pre-school education. Seeing the big number of students (84,580) in

elementary school mainstreaming classes, MEB is doing studies to promote mainstreaming practices in pre-school institutions (MEB, 2011).

3.3. The personnel in pre-school institutions where students with special needs attend

The information regarding the personnel to provide service to students with special needs in Turkey and EU member countries is presented in Table-2.

Table 2. The personnel working in pre-school education institutions in Turkey and EU countries

Countries	Personnel									
	Family Care Specialists	Health Staff	Paediatrician Special pedagogue	Physiotherapist	Psychiatrist	Psychologist	Social Workers	Pre-school teacher	Specialists counsellor audiology	Teacher assistant
Austria						√		√	√	√
Belgium	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Cyprus		√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
Czech Rep	√	√	√			√		√	√	√
Denmark		√				√		√	√	√
Finland	√	√			√	√	√	√	√	√
France	√	√				√	√	√	√	√
Germany		√		√		√	√	√	√	√
Greece			√		√	√	√	√	√	√
Hungary	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Iceland		√	√		√	√		√	√	
Ireland	√	√	√			√	√	√	√	√
Italy		√				√	√	√	√	√
Lithuania			√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Luxembourg		√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
Malta		√	√			√	√	√	√	√
Netherland				√		√	√	√	√	√
Norway						√		√	√	√
Poland	√					√		√	√	√
Portugal	√					√	√	√	√	√
Slovenia	√		√	√		√	√	√	√	√
Spain		√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
Sweden		√	√			√	√	√	√	√
Turkey		√				√		√		√

The pre-school institutions in EU countries in Table 2 employ psychologists, pre-school teacher, specialists (speech), teacher assistant, health staff, doctor, nurse etc. In countries such as Belgium, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Spain the competence of the personnel is highly correlated with the quality of the institution. It is stated that especially in those countries where a team model is common, mainstreaming is more successful and that institutions have to employ physiotherapist, psychiatrist, family care specialists, social workers who have to cooperate with the teacher. In our country it is also accepted that special education is a team work, however, since there is a lack of pre-school education teachers the number of health and educational support staff from different disciplines is not enough. Pre-school teacher preparation programs in Turkey as in EU countries include individual differences compound in their body and prepare teachers in a way so that they can teach taking individual differences into consideration. In Denmark, France and Greece assistant teachers who enrolled special education and pre-school education courses at university level help class teachers in the classroom. In our country the teachers who will work in pre-school teaching environments are expected to have taken Early Childhood development I and II, Child's mental health, Special education, Family training courses and have the competence to serve students with different needs. It is stated that in countries where mainstreaming is implemented successfully such as Cyprus, Lithuania and Spain, early childhood education is supported by children game specialists and musical therapy specialists.

3.4. The information about the support provided to families with children who need special education in Turkey and EU countries is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Individuals with special needs and support provided to their families in Turkey and EU countries.

Countries	Counselling	Education	Financial	Health	Public Transport Travelling, food	Teaching Material	Subsidised housing, fuel, electricity, telephone,
Austria	√		√	√	√		
Belgium		√	√	√			
Cyprus	√	√	√	√	√		
Czech Rep.	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Denmark	√	√	√		√		
Finland	√	√	√	√	√	√	
France		√	√	√	√		
Germany	√		√				
Greece	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Hungary	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Ireland	√		√			√	
Lithuania	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Luxembourg	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Malta	√	√	√				
Netherland	√	√				√	
Norway	√	√	√	√		√	
Poland			√		√	√	
Portugal	√	√	√	√		√	
Slovenia	√	√	√		√	√	
Spain	√	√	√	√		√	
Sweden	√		-		√	√	
Turkey	√	√	√	√	√		

In Table 3 support services provided during pre-school period to families of individuals with special needs is shown. Except the Netherlands and Sweden, as in other EU countries in Turkey as well, health and financial support is provided by different institutions within the scope of social policies. In addition to these in Lithuania electricity, telephone bills and accommodation expenditure supports are also provided to the family. Similar to Finland, Belgium, Slovenia, in Turkey educational institutions have the responsibility to provide family training and counselling supports, however, the educational support provided to individuals at home varies among countries. While Public institutions in our country use books and materials advised by the Ministry of National Education, in some EU countries (Czech Republic, Finland, Norway, Portugal) families are provided with special textbooks and other teaching materials (videos, workbooks, worksheets, etc.).

Private Educational Institutions Law (5580) allows the establishment of special education institutions and provides a framework for individuals with visual, hearing, speech-language impairment, spastic, the ones with mental retardation, orthopaedic and mental problems to receive support with the guidance of Counselling and Research Centres. Handicapped Law (5378) article 35 and Ministry of National Education law (3797) amendment 3 state that, in order for a person to be supported he or she should have a minimum of (20%) handicap to receive financial support from the government and also the evaluation committee should apply an educational assessment and approve the individual’s eligibility to receive special education. Under these circumstances monthly basis educational expenditures are paid so as to support 8 hours individual and/or four hours group education of individuals with special needs (Eurydice, 2011). Whether with health security or not, every individual with special needs in different educational levels is supported with 432 TL/monthly and the number of individuals according to 2011 data is 216.048 (Çubukçu, 2011).

4. Discussion and recommendations

Special education regulations are important in terms of the development of mainstreaming practices. Today, the studies on language, culture and developmental differences show that as well as school, home is also seen as an educational environment. While through mainstreaming it is aimed to improve students' academic and social development, the support provided to families improves the quality of home environments. In EU countries where pre-school education is assumed as one of the corner stones in predicting the future success, mainstreaming practices have increased in 1990ies. During the same period due to educational environments, programs and lack of personnel, the education of individuals with special needs was negatively affected. However, with the help of educational research carried out in the field of special education and individual needs, educational environments and individuals participation in general education environments and the quality of support improved. As a result of the projects such as First Step, Mother Support Program, Pre-school Education Program "7 is too late", Pre-school Parent and Child Education Program, and those initiated by General Directorate of Pre-school Education such as "Strengthening Pre-school Education", "Home school", "Basic Education Program for Family", Kidsmart, No Child Left Behind (Matra-toy library), Mobile School and Pre-school Social Support Project, it was widely accepted that 0-6 period is one in which children develop so fast, are affected by environmental factors and grow so rapidly that early childhood and pre-school experiences are vital in the mental development of an individual. The purpose of the projects was to support mental development of children in school and home environments, prepare them for elementary education, strengthen school and family cooperation, support pre-school teachers about the use of technological equipment in pre-school environments and help them reach information and communication technologies, improve the participation of disadvantaged children and their families in day care centers by increasing the number of toy libraries (AÇEV,2011; MEB, 2011).

Strengthening Special Education Project is one of those which aim to increase individuals' participation in educational environments and improve the quality of special education services. By improving special education services between 2011 and 2013, it is aimed to improve social integration of individuals in disadvantaged groups with promoting pre-school education and mainstreaming practices. Moreover, for the free transportation of students with special needs since 2004 the government spent 136.381.000 TL for 128,326 students. In 2008-2009 education year for the first time materials to be used for students with special needs were distributed for free within the scope of "Free course Book Distribution Project." While in EU countries in pre-school education a team model which includes education, social and health service personnel is being implemented, in Turkey, there are problems due to lack of personnel. On the other hand, because during their teacher training period pre-school teachers take special education courses, they support the promotion of mainstreaming practices. In order to improve the quality of service provided in pre-school educational environments, another option that can be implemented is that, family participation can be increased and family and service personnel can cooperate more often within a team spirit and support individuals with special needs sustain their lives as individuals and reach their own maximum potential.

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