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## EXAMINATION OF PERCEPTION OF PEERS CONCERNING INDIVIDUALS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS BASED ON NARRATIVE EXPRESSION

*Teachers, school management and families have important impact as factors on the success of inclusive teaching which can be explained in general as providing education to students with special needs in the same environment with their peers without any incompetency. Probably one of the most important factors is the perception, attitude and opinion of students concerning their peers with special needs and the inclusive education who show normal development sharing the same classroom with students with special needs. The purpose of this study is to determine the attitudes, behaviours and perceptions of peers in elementary schools with inclusive education towards individuals with special needs and to identify the ways of ensuring sustainable social acceptance by peers. Data collection was based on qualitative approach in the study, and the opinions of 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students of an elementary school with inclusive education on peers with special needs were determined through examinations based on completing an unfinished story. According to the findings obtained in the study, it can be claimed that perception and attitude towards individuals with special needs is positive in elementary schools in Northern Cyprus but it should be supported with law and training.*

**Keywords:** *peer, sustainability, special education, inclusion, special needs, Northern Cyprus.*

### Introduction

The fact that education and teaching requirements of individuals with special needs have undergone important changes throughout ages, the structure of education and teaching institutions has changed as well. Today in *inclusive/integrated education environments* which are accepted as the most modern and contemporary teaching, required support should be provided on equal basis. The perception and attitude of peers as regards students with special needs who share the same education environment with their normal peers are essential in managing a successful and beneficial inclusion programme. In addition, peer relations and acceptance play an important role in ensuring the integration of individuals with special needs with the society beginning from small ages (Batu, Çolak, and Odluyurt 2012; Ahmetoğlu 2015). It is observed that the most effective factors in peer acceptance are the transformation of peer perception and attitude into behaviours.

In general terms, perception is the process with which we catch, process and actively understand the information that our senses acquire. According to Foley & Matlin (2016, 2); emotions and feelings obtained through our senses are effective functions in the operation of sensory systems of people. They express the operation of our sensory system. Perception, on the other hand, includes the interpretation of these senses and acquiring their meaning and organization. In order to give meaning to the world that we live in, perception and cognition work

together (Foley and Matlin 2016, 2). It is known that based on the cooperation of perception and cognition individuals develop evaluations towards objects, people, events and situations and that these evaluations play effective role in the formation of attitudes.

Vogel and Wanke (2016, 2) define attitude as a “summarized evaluation of opinions towards an attitude object” and state that the attitude object indicated in the definition can be anything, person, group or abstract idea that a person differentiates or keeps in mind.

Bohner and Dickel (2011, 412) emphasise that developed attitudes are effective on information processing, social memory and behaviour.

Various studies can be found in the literature in several fields including special education which examine the ways with which attitude of individuals affect their behaviours. Ayril et al. (2015, 221) examined the basic concept of this study, which is peer attitudes towards individuals with special needs, and argued that negative peer attitudes have a far more drastic impact on students with special needs than their incompetencies.

This study in the field of special education attempts to analyse the peer perceptions and attitudes towards students with special needs through the expressions used in completing unfinished narrative texts.

Students with a disability in inclusive classes often face problems with peer acceptance, friendships and peer interactions (Petry 2018). As a result of these analyses, an

effort has been made based on peer perceptions to perform identifications and examinations as regards the way which should be followed in the sustainable social acceptance of students with special needs. This is due to the fact that social acceptance of students with special needs, who constitute an important special group of the society, can be made sustainable by adapting the members of this group and their parents to the society in all aspects and ensuring equality of opportunity in education. Only in this way the problems in this area can be overcome. Improvement and enhancing of quality of life of individuals with special needs and their parents depend on social acceptance by peers especially in school environment through sustainable education policies. Ensuring this is very critical in terms of human rights (Armstrong and Barton 1999). In order to create this result, sustainability concept should be understood very well and adapted to education systems.

“The term sustainability has become popular in policy-oriented research as an expression of what public policies ought to achieve” (Kuhlman and Farrington 2010, 3437). However, it found chances of being applied in a variety of fields later. One of these fields is education in general and special education in particular (Sindelar et al. 2006). Performing peer education in special education will reinforce the infrastructure of a sustainable inclusive education and ensure that the quality and ratio of sustainable human resources increased. One of the three dimensions (Holmberg and Sandbrook 1992) of sustainable development is social dimension and a socially sustainable system must ensure sufficient level of social services including equality distribution; health and education services, gender equality, political responsibility and participation (Seidler and Bawa 2016). One of the most important pillars of education services is inclusive education where peers are effective on a one-to-one basis.

### **The Aim of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to determine the attitudes, behaviours and especially perceptions of peers in elementary schools with inclusive education concerning the individuals with special needs and to determine the ways with which sustainable peer social acceptance can be provided.

### **Research Methods**

#### *Research Model*

In this study data were collected applying a qualitative approach. Qualitative research can be defined as “research which uses qualitative data collection tools such as observation, interview and document analysis, where a qualitative process is followed with a view to display perceptions and events in a realistic and holistic manner in their natural environment” (Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013, 45). In this study conducted on peer perception, elementary school students were asked to complete unfinished stories as they wished and document analysis technique was employed in order to analyse the obtained stories.

Document examination “includes the analysis of written materials which constitute information on the phenomena which is the target of research” (Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013, 84).

#### *Study Group*

The universe of the study consists of students of elementary schools in Northern Cyprus, and the sample of the study includes 40 students studying at these elementary schools. The students included in the study were chosen from an elementary school in Famagusta region of Northern Cyprus. Sample groups were chosen among three different levels, namely third, fourth and fifth grades according to “purposive sampling” method and based on “convenience case sampling”.

#### *Collection of Data*

An unfinished story titled “What happened next?” was provided as data collection tool and students were asked to complete this story. The unfinished story is briefly about the following: the teacher told that a new student would join the class that day but did not mention that he had disabilities. When the child named Ali came to the classroom children were surprised to see that he had disabilities. The teacher took him inside and gave him a seat next to another student. His peer examined Ali, sitting next to him, until the break time and when the break time came he got up to leave the classroom; this is when their eyes met. The story went like “right at that moment, my eyes met Ali’s eyes, who was sitting next to me with his disabilities, and....” and the students who participated in the study were asked to complete the remaining part. This filled section constitutes the data of the study.

#### *Analysis and Interpretation of Data*

Content analysis, percentage and frequencies were used in the analysis of the data of this study which is based on qualitative research pattern.

In addition, the texts written by participants as regards peer perception were separated into conceptual categories and analysed. In order to ensure reliability in this study, written texts, their reasons and conceptual categories were presented to an expert in the field of special education and an academician in the field of education sciences. After the texts and categories were matched, these data were compared with the matchings performed by the researcher. The results obtained in this manner were found sufficient in terms of reliability of our study.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

Based on the obtained findings, perceptions of elementary (3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> grades) students as regards their peers with special needs were grouped into 6 conceptual categories. These categories are friendship, helping, playing, protection, pitying and rejection (see table 1). According to the table, it is found out that the most emphasised concept by the peers is *friendship* and the least emphasised concept is *rejection*.

Table 1.

**Conceptual Categories Belonging to the Perception of Normally Developed Students Concerning their Peers with Special Needs:**

Conceptual categories	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
a. Friendship	16	40
b. Helping	9	22,5
c. Playing	8	20
d. Protection	4	10
e. Pitying	2	5
f. Rejection	1	2,5

### **Friendship**

The fact that friendship is the concept most emphasised by peers (f:16) is seen as a positive result and it is believed that it is an indicator that peers have a positive perception towards their peers with special needs in the school environment. Here, it is seen that peers wanted to establish close relations with individuals with special needs and were happy to be friends with them and even tended to protect them from other peers who displayed negative behaviours. For example, in the story written by the student coded (Ö1), a classmate mocks him by displaying negative behaviour: “how come you play with that child?” and another student protects Ali by saying “He is a kid just like us, you do not have to sideline him, he is a good kid, you must be friend with him, too”. It is observed that the student in this study displayed a good friendship example by protecting Ali against his classmate. Another remarkable finding of the study is that the peer who sees Ali as a friend tries to change other schoolmates who do not socially accept individuals with special needs and tries to ensure their social acceptance. In his story, (Ö3) uses the expressions: “everyone understood that Ali was one of us...Everyone was used to Ali now, everyone began to behave Ali as they should”. In some stories (Ö1, Ö3, Ö8,) it is seen that many students who display negative attitude towards him, mock and reject the student with special needs, change in the end of the story their attitudes with the impact of their peers with positive opinions and make friend with him for one reason or another. In addition, it is seen that students coded (Ö1,Ö4, Ö5,Ö6, Ö7, Ö8, Ö9, Ö16) continued friendship with Ali in their stories not only at school but also after school, shared free time with him, and visited him at his house.

### **Helping**

It is seen that in the stories of peers in this group helping individuals with special needs comes to the forefront (f:9). The help given in these texts can be classified as social and physical. The concept of helping here can be considered along with the concept of friendship as the peers who helped Ali also made friends with him in time. In one of the remarkable texts on helping (Ö18) Ali’s peer helps him accept his own situation and tries to ensure his social acceptance at school. He says “Ali, nobody wants to be stared but if you know that people will not change, would it not be a good idea to change conditions and the way of thinking?” and tries to help him accept his own

situation and be happy, and supports him in his social acceptance at the school. In addition, other types of helping in the texts are helping the friend with special needs in his lectures (Ö19), helping him climb up the stairs (Ö20), helping him play an instrument (Ö21), helping him get up when he falls and in his treatment (Ö21, Ö22), helping him go to the canteen (Ö23, Ö25), resisting the tantalizers and helping (Ö24) and giving morale and helping (Ö25).

### **Playing**

In the stories of peers in this category, it is seen that peers play games with their friends with special needs (f:8). In the story, hide-and-seek, blind man’s bluff, relay race, Chinese whispers and dodgeball were among the games played with the student with special needs. As the case in the concept of helping, it is seen here that peers who play games are also friends with the students with special needs. In one of the stories in this category (Ö32) the peers other than the child in the story refused to play with Ali, which is remarkable. In this story (Ö32) Ali asks the children *may I play with you?* Just when the acquiescent peer was to say “yes”, all other peers cry “no, this game is not for you, and you are not our friend”. However, the peer who wrote this text accepts playing with Ali. In another text (Ö29) a peer planned to play hide-and-seek, but considering that Ali was unable to run, he thought of another game that Ali could play and decided to play Chinese whispers with him. In yet another story (Ö31) a peer comforts Ali for not being able to run in the game and tells that there are things that he can do very well (like drawing). The expression in the story went like this: “Ali drew very good pictures. Being disabled does not mean that he cannot do anything.”

### **Protection**

In the concept of protection which is given with the concept of friendship, the main focus in the text is protection (f:4). It is usually about protecting the student with special needs from the teases of other peers. In the text prepared by peers, a peer figure appears who reacts to the peers who mock with the appearance and behaviours of the individual with special needs and protects his friend who has special needs. In three of the four texts, the student with special needs enjoyed social acceptance thanks to the peer who also had positive impact on other peers and he could find a place for himself in that class/school. In one of the texts, the conversation goes like this (Ö37): “when my classmates saw that I stuck around with Ali, they laughed at me. They were laughing and saying “are

you sticking around with Ali?” Ali burst into tears and cried. When I saw him crying, I asked them *if you were disabled, and I behaved like this, would you like it?* and asked them to apologize. Then, one week later, everyone began to get on well with Ali. During break time everyone was playing the games he liked”.

#### **Pitying**

In terms of the concept of pitying, it can be seen that peers who meet Ali feel pity for the situation he is in (f:2). For example, (Ö38) offers Ali to go to canteen together who does not accept. In the story, he explains Ali’s rejection of this offer as follows: “Because if I go to the canteen everyone there will laugh at me.” The reaction of the peer to this explanation is feeling sadness, embarrassment and pity. In another text (Ö39) classmates are mocking the peer who becomes friends with Ali. For this reason, when Ali notices this situation and feels sad, his friend pities him.

#### **Rejection**

There is only one text regarding the concept of rejection (f:1). However, even this only text is an indicator that there are other children with this perception at school or in the social environment. In this fictionalised text (Ö40), Ali offers his peer to play games together. But the peer says: “I said I had things to do but I did not have any. I just did not want to play with him” explaining that he did not want to play with Ali although he had nothing else to do. In the same story, the peer rejects a second offer made by Ali for playing games. In maths class, when Ali asks for a pencil, he says that he did not have any, which was a lie: “In maths class he asked for my pencil, and I said that I did not have, but actually I had one”. In the story, it is seen that the peer does not want to communicate with the individual with special needs in any way whatsoever and totally rejects close relationship with him.

#### **Conclusions**

When the conceptual categories are examined (friendship, helping, playing, protection, pitying and rejection) it can be seen that with the exception of rejection category all categories are positive and accepting. The categories with the highest frequency in the stories are friendship (f:16), helping (f:9) and playing games (f:8) which shows that the perception of peers towards individuals with special needs is positive. This is the fundamental requirement for sustainability of the social acceptance by peers.

The stories which fall under the category of friendship show that peers actually become friends with students with special needs and that they continue this friendship outside school. The most remarkable situation in friendship, helping and protection categories is that the peers who display positive attitude change other peers displaying negative attitude in positive direction and ensure that the individual with special needs is accepted. This, in turn, shows that increasing positive peer perception is essential in popularisation and sustainability of social acceptance. Increasing social acceptance ratios is one of the fundamental tools for application of human

rights, equality of opportunity in education and sustainable development. This is due to the fact that individuals with special needs who are not socially accepted by their peers cannot be integrated in education adequately, suffer from problems in inclusive education and even retire from education life completely. In this sense, steering peer perceptions to positive direction and ensuring social acceptance must be one of the fundamental objectives of education policies.

The fact that there is only one story with rejection concept among peer perceptions shows that negative attitudes and perceptions are negligible in general at school. The reason for which negative attitude is much lower than the positive one might be that inclusive education is being applied in most Northern Cyprus elementary schools including the school where the study was conducted. In order to sustain this positive perception, special education laws should be modernised, teachers and managers should be informed through on-the-job training programmes and awareness-raising activities should be conducted for peers (inside or outside classroom).

In conclusion, in line with the findings of the study, it can be claimed that perception and attitude towards individuals with special needs is positive at elementary schools in Northern Cyprus but they should be supported with laws, application and training programmes in order to ensure sustainability.

#### **Recommendations**

- Inclusive applications should be more effective and efficient to bring about positive peer perception.
- Time limits should be imposed on the use of support education rooms where the students with special needs are attending schools with inclusive education; they should not be isolated from their normally developing peers and classmates; these time periods should be organized in a careful and proportional manner so that they do not spend too much time in isolated environments.
- Social and cultural activities should be organized where individuals with special needs and their peers can share longer time periods.
- In the Turkish language and social studies classes, curricula should include more texts which explain the physical, social and emotional situation of individuals with special needs to other students.
- Special education law should be modernised to reflect sustainable development policies.
- Teachers and managers at all schools in Northern Cyprus should be informed on special education, inclusive education and sustainability through on-the-job training activities.
- Efforts will be paid to ensure that individuals with special needs and their peers socialise at school (through in-class and non-class activities). This positive environment within the school should be spread outside the school through management and civil society institutions.

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### ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ СПРИЙНЯТТЯ УЧНІВ СВОЇХ РОВЕСНИКІВ ЗІ СПЕЦІАЛЬНИМИ ПОТРЕБАМИ НА ОСНОВІ МЕТОДУ НАРАТИВНОЇ ЕКСПРЕСІЇ

Вчителі, шкільна адміністрація та сім'я мають важливий вплив на успіх інклюзивної освіти, яку можна пояснити як надання студентам з особливими потребами освіти в одному середовищі з дітьми без будь-яких фізичних незручностей. Одним з найважливіших факторів є сприйняття, ставлення та думка звичайних студентів стосовно своїх однолітків з особливими потребами. Метою дослідження є визначення сприйняття та ставлення учнів початкових шкіл з інклюзивною освітою до однокласників з особливими потребами та визначення шляхів забезпечення прийняття таких учнів однолітками. До дослідження було залучено 40 учнів 3, 4 та 5 класів початкової школи з інклюзивною освітою, яким було запропоновано текст, у якому йшлося про те, що до їхнього класу прийшов новий учень з особливими потребами. Їхнім завданням було продовжити розповідь, що відображало їхнє справжнє ставлення до таких дітей. Було виділено 6 типів сприйняття: дружба, допомога, гра, захист, співчуття, відторгнення. Найбільшу кількість студентів було віднесено до групи «дружба» та «допомога». Згідно з отриманими результатами, можна стверджувати, що сприйняття та ставлення до людей з особливими потребами є позитивними в початкових школах Північного Кіпру. За типом «відторгнення» було зафіксовано лише одну розповідь, але за умов збільшення вибірки таких учнів може бути набагато більше. У статті подано деякі практичні рекомендації щодо удосконалення системи інклюзивної освіти та покращання ставлення учнів до своїх однолітків з особливими потребами.

**Ключові слова:** ровесник, стійкість, спеціальна освіта, включення, особливі потреби, Північний Кіпр.

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