

THE MISSING PIECE OF A PUZZLE OR AN UNWANTED CHILD: METAPHORICAL PERCEPTIONS OF TURKISH PRIMARY TEACHERS ABOUT INCLUSION STUDENTS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the metaphorical images of 184 Turkish primary teachers about inclusion students. With this aim, the following research questions were the focus of the study: (1) What metaphorical images do primary teachers have about inclusion students? (2) What conceptual themes (categories) can be derived from these metaphorical images? (3) What are the implications of the research findings related with primary teachers' inclusive practices? Data were collected through the participants' completion of the phrase of "An inclusion student is like... because..." by focusing on only one metaphorical image and reflecting their opinions in the format of a composition. Data were analyzed through the content analysis technique. The metaphorical images produced by participants were grouped under the following eight different conceptual categories: (1) A valuable person (pearl, etc.), (2) A person needing love and care (seedling, etc.), (3) A person encountering and struggling with obstacles (novice driver, etc.), (4) A person deserving a new opportunity (orphan, etc.), (5) An individual that society needs (the missing piece of a puzzle, etc.), (6) An individual who helps a teacher develop (North Star, etc.), (7) An individual needing support (a newborn baby, etc.) and (8) An individual whose special needs could not be met (unwanted child, etc.). The study concludes that the success of the inclusive education is directly related to the attitudes and approaches of teachers towards inclusion students.

Keywords: primary teachers, inclusion student, metaphorical images, qualitative research

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is an essential educational practice that gives opportunities to students with special needs to continue their education with their normally developing peers (Sucuoğlu & Kargın, 2008). It supports all areas of development in early childhood by preventing problems that might emerge in the later periods of life (Sucuoğlu & Bakkaloğlu, 2016). Teacher is one of the key elements in the successful implementation of inclusive education. Conceptions of teachers towards inclusion students play an important role in this educational practice by affecting their behaviors and approaches.

Teachers working in primary education encounter with inclusion students most among other teachers. Primary teachers have a great role in developing a positive atmosphere of classroom, ensuring that all students establish and maintain positive communication and interaction within the classroom, meeting their social needs, supporting their social acceptance in the society, etc. The perceptions of primary teachers towards inclusion students directly influence their attitudes towards these students and, hence, the quality and success of inclusive education. Therefore, it is important to understand the perceptions of primary teachers about inclusion students

From this point of view, this study examined the metaphorical images of 184 Turkish primary teachers about inclusion students. Specifically, the following research questions were the focus of the study:

1. What metaphorical images do primary teachers have about inclusion students?
2. What conceptual themes (categories) can be derived from these metaphorical images?
3. What are the implications of the research findings related with primary teachers' inclusive practices?

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This study was conducted within the phenomenological research design. Phenomenology aims to reveal peoples' perceptions of a phenomenon based on their experiences with this phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

2.2. Participants

The participants included 184 primary teachers (112 females and 72 males) working in the cities of Gaziantep and Konya (in Turkey) during the second term of the 2017-2018 academic year. Their ages ranged between 22 and 60 (with a mean age of 33) and their teaching experience ranged between one and 31 years (with a mean year of eight).

2.3. Data collection

Data were collected through the participants' completion of the phrase of "An inclusion student is like... because..." by focusing on only one metaphorical image and reflecting their opinions in the format of a composition.

2.4. Data analysis

The study data (compositions written by participants) were analyzed through the content analysis technique. Content analysis requires a detailed analysis of data and hence developing certain categories as well as identifying the main characteristics of each category to the extent that one is able to distinguish the differences between them (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013).

3. RESULTS

According to the findings, primary teachers reflected their attitudes related with inclusion students based on their previous education and personal/professional experiences. They produced 71 metaphorical images about inclusion students. Some metaphors have been developed by more than one participant. The metaphorical images produced by participants were grouped under the following eight different conceptual categories (see Table 1).

3.1. Category 1: Inclusion student as a valuable individual

This category is represented with 19 metaphors. The characteristics of this category include the following.

Inclusion student is unique and precious. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*a four-leaf clover, a daisy among roses, a sparrow flying among storks, a white rose among red roses, blessing of God*) point to the fact that all inclusion students have exceptional characteristics that need to be valued. Inclusion students may not have similar characteristics to other students. What is important here is to recognize and appreciate the value of these characteristics and make them feel unique among their peers and the society. As one teacher states:

"Inclusion student is like a four-leaf clover. Because it is a rare plant that is so difficult to find. This makes it special just like the inclusion student."

Inclusion student has a special talent. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*pearl, diamond, an unread book, an ugly duckling*) draw attention to the fact that each inclusion student has a different talent and that it is important to recognize this talent earlier. Otherwise, it may be possible that they will be forced to leave their education (which is their legal right) and be abandoned by the society. When their differences are carefully taken into consideration, it is only then their self-actualizations can be possible. As one teacher states:

"Inclusion student is like a pearl. If a pearl is recognized and well-treated, it can become an invaluable jewel. Otherwise, its real value can never be known. This situation is also true for the inclusion student."

Table 1. Metaphorical images of inclusion student

Category/Theme	Codes/Characteristic	Metaphors representing the characteristic
1. A valuable individual	Inclusion student is unique and precious	A four-leaf clover, a daisy among roses, a sparrow flying among storks, a white rose among red roses, blessing of God (5)
	Inclusion student has a special talent	Pearl, diamond, an unread book, an ugly duckling (4)
	Individual differences of inclusion student should be well-cared	A guitar in a musician's hands, the youngest child in the family, a reverse-printed page of a book, a carnation in a rose garden, an aquarium in a funfair, volcano (6)
	Inclusion student should not be perceived as a disability or handicap	A tree unable to give its fruits on time, a piece of dough ready to be shaped, a disordered item over a stand in a supermarket, a leafless tree of fall (4)
2. A person needing love and care	Inclusion student needs special attention and effort	The clay used in the making of a pot, an offended crane, a very tasty fruit but not good looking like others, a tree that needs to be grafted, a carpet ready to be woven (5)
	Inclusion student needs special concern and patience	A delicate and attractive flower (like orchid, violet, snowdrop, poppy, etc.), a seedling, a seed, a homesick person, a bamboo tree, cocoon (6)
3. A person encountering and struggling with obstacles	Inclusion student faces difficulties and obstacles like everyone else	Life itself, a short sunflower among long ones, a new/inexperienced driver (3)
	Inclusion student should struggle with difficulties and obstacles	An idealist teacher, the only female child of a family with four children, a person left alone in a deserted island, a newly transferred athlete in a team (4)
4. A person deserving a new opportunity	Inclusion student should have the right to receive education with his/her peers	A kiwi better ripening with apples and pears in the same fruit basket, an orphan child, a bird in a cage, a wild horse (4)
5. An individual that society needs	Inclusion student has an important place in the society	The last missing piece from a puzzle, the person who makes other people realize the differences in life (2)
	The role of inclusion student in the society cannot be replaced by others	An ingredient in Ashura, a vegetable in a mixed-vegetable meal, one of a pair of shoes (3)
	Inclusion student provides the unity and integrity in the society	A piece of color drop on the white paint, a reflection of the community, an aquarium fish living in the sea, the harmony of differences, the rings of a chain, the keyboard of a piano, migrating birds (7)
	Inclusion student is a source of peace and hope for the society	A tiny light beam in the darkness, rainbow, looking at the nature from different windows (3)
6. An individual who helps a teacher develop	Inclusion student contributes to teachers' professional knowledge and skills	North Star, water in a cracked glass, life coach (3)
7. An individual needing support	Inclusion student needs a different kind of support	A starfish, a bud, a broken-winged pigeon, a steam train among high speed trains, a guest visiting our home the first time, a newborn baby (6)
8. An individual whose special needs could not be met	Inclusion may fail because of the professional inadequacy of teachers	A meal made by an insufficient cook, stinging nettle, unwanted child (3)
	If inclusion student is neglected, his/her abilities and skills may disappear	A red cloth mixed into the laundry of white clothes, an unripe fruit, a castle difficult to be conquered (3)

Individual differences of inclusion student should be well-cared. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*a guitar in a musician's hands, the youngest child in the family, a reverse-printed page of a book, a carnation in a rose garden, an aquarium in a funfair, volcano*) draw attention to considering each inclusion student's special needs. Inclusive education requires more efforts. If only inclusion students are thoughtfully dealt with, the obstacles can then be removed to help them become better-educated and successful individuals who have a higher standard of life. In this regard, teachers should make enough effort to take care of their inclusion students without discriminating them. As one teacher states:

"Inclusion student is like a guitar in a musician's hands. When the guitarist touches the strings of the guitar skillfully, it sounds like a music festival. But if it is the otherwise it can be so disturbing and rough that even the strings can be harmed."

Inclusion student should not be perceived as a disability or handicap. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*a tree unable to give its fruits on time, a piece of dough ready to be shaped, a disordered item over a stand in a supermarket, a leafless tree of fall*) draw attention to the fact that inclusion students should not be perceived as a disability or handicap. Inclusion students, like all children, have the right to establish social relationships with people around them, to be valued by them and live independently. These students can succeed as much as their peers or even more if supported by their teachers, parents and friends. As one teacher states:

"Inclusion student is like a tree unable to give its fruits on time. However, they can still meet human beings' oxygen needs and give some fruits although not plentiful like other fruit trees. Therefore, the specialties of the inclusion student should not be seen as an obstacle but rather a difference."

3.2. Category 2: Inclusion student as a person needing love and care

This category is represented with 11 metaphors. The characteristics of this category include the following.

Inclusion student needs special attention and effort. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*the clay used in the making of a pot, an offended crane, a very tasty fruit but not good looking like others, a tree that needs to be grafted, a carpet ready to be woven*) draw attention to the fact that each inclusion student needs a special care and effort. Being academically behind their peers does not mean that they are lack of something but only different. Teachers should arrange their teaching based on their students' individual differences and characteristics. They should also design a special program for inclusion students in order to support their learning and show patience for them as they progress. As one teacher states:

"Inclusion student is like the clay used in the making of a pot because his/her teachers and the social environment in which he/she is engaged affect his/her personality and relationships with other people. Just like the slightest touch of a potter makes a big difference in shaping the pot, the development of the inclusion student also depends on the mastery of the teacher."

Inclusion student needs special concern and patience. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*a delicate and attractive flower (like orchid, violet, snowdrop, poppy, etc.), a seedling, a seed, a homesick person, a bamboo tree, cocoon*) draw attention to the fact that working with inclusion students requires teachers to be more concerned and patient. Teachers should also be more sensitive towards these students' feelings and thoughts. These traits of teachers have a lot of positive effects on inclusion students in term of their motivation, socialization and/or integration. As one teacher states:

"Inclusion student is like a delicate and attractive flower. We should pay attention to the distinctive features of this flower, such as when and how much we should water it, how much sunlight, love and care we should provide for it, etc. Teachers also should treat all of their students equally without neglecting their special needs students. For example, they should try to discover their real potentials, be patient with them and encourage them to participate in class activities."

3.3. Category 3: Inclusion student as a person encountering and struggling with obstacles

This category is represented with 10 metaphors. The characteristics of this category include the following.

Inclusion student faces difficulties and obstacles like everyone else. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*life itself, a short sunflower among long ones, a new/inexperienced driver*) draw attention to the fact that inclusion students face certain difficulties or obstacles. These difficulties require more effort and struggle of inclusion students than their peers. Yet they can get over these difficulties more easily if teachers, families and others in the close environment provide adequate support. As one teacher states:

“Inclusion student is like the life itself because s/he naturally survives despite all the difficulties of life. For instance, inclusion students have to experience their educational life with their peers in the same classroom environment although this may be very difficult for them.”

Inclusion student should struggle with difficulties and obstacles. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*an idealist teacher, the only female child of a family with four children, a person left alone in a deserted island, a newly transferred athlete in a team*) draw attention to the fact that inclusion students should not give up struggling with difficulties or obstacles they face. In spite of their differences, they are expected to perform in the same way or at the same speed as their normally developing peers in the classroom. However, this process occurs gradually. As one teacher states:

“Inclusion student is like an idealist teacher because s/he must continually try to improve himself/herself and make more effort to catch up with his/her peers. S/he should never give up when s/he meets difficulties.”

3.4. Category 4: Inclusion student as a person deserving a new opportunity

This category is represented with four metaphors. The only characteristic of this category includes the following.

Inclusion student has the right to receive education with his/her peers. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*a kiwi better ripening with apples and pears in the same fruit basket, an orphan child, a bird in a cage, a wild horse*) stress the need and importance of inclusion students' rights to receive education with their peers. Their needs for special education should not lead to any discrimination of them in educational environments or prevention of their educational rights. In fact, this opportunity should be given to them and their education should be supported so that they can fully make use of it. As one teacher states:

“Inclusion student is like a kiwi better ripening with apples and pears in the same fruit basket. When the kiwi is picked and placed in a basket next to apples and pears it starts to be fully ripened in time. So it becomes a better tasting fruit. This is also what an inclusion student needs. Inclusive education requires the active involvement of students with special needs with their normally developing peers in the same educational environment.”

3.5. Category 5: Inclusion student as an individual that society needs

This category is represented with 15 metaphors. The characteristics of this category include the following.

Inclusion student has an important place in the society. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*the last missing piece from a puzzle, the person who makes other people realize the differences in life*) draw attention to the role that every inclusion student has in the society. For example, having an inclusion student in the classroom could be beneficial for other students in terms of helping them develop sensitivity toward individual differences in the society. Also, inclusion students can benefit from their peers through interacting with them. For example, they can discover their strengths as well as accept their weaknesses. As one teacher states:

“Inclusion student is like the last missing piece of a puzzle. Because if only one piece is missing in the puzzle, it never becomes complete and that missing piece is always looked for.”

The role of inclusion student in the society cannot be replaced by others. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*an ingredient in Ashura, a vegetable in a mixed-vegetable meal, one of a pair of shoes*) draw attention to the fact that the role of the inclusion student cannot be fulfilled by others. For example, inclusion students can help their peers to overcome their prejudices. As one teacher states:

“Inclusion student is like an ingredient in Ashura because different tastes come together to create a new taste without losing their essence. Like this, each student has a unique trait with which they contribute to the unity in the classroom.”

Inclusion student provides the unity and integrity in the society. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*a piece of color drop on the white paint, a reflection of the community, an aquarium fish living in the sea, the harmony of differences, the rings of a chain, the keyboard of a piano, migrating birds*) underline the contribution of inclusion students to the unity and integrity of the society. For example, they teach the importance of looking at life positively, helping each other, having sincere relationships with others and encouraging wholeness in the society. As one teacher states:

“Inclusion student is like a piece of color drop on the white paint. Maybe this new combination of colors is not white, but it brings a different harmony. The teacher is here in the role of brush and s/he helps all students to interact with each other and to be included in the classroom.”

Inclusion student is a source of peace and hope for the society. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*a tiny light beam in the darkness, rainbow, looking at the nature from different windows*) draw attention to the contribution made by every inclusion student to the community. For example, the inclusion student can encourage believing in oneself, having hopes for life and never giving up whatever gets in the way. As one teacher states:

“Inclusion student is like a tiny light beam in the darkness because s/he lightens the society in which we live by allowing us to be familiar with and respect our individual differences.”

3.6. Category 6: Inclusion student as an individual who helps a teacher develop

This category is represented with three metaphors. The only characteristic of this category includes the following.

Inclusion student contributes to teachers’ professional knowledge and skills. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*North Star, water in a cracked glass, life coach*) draw attention to the contribution of inclusion students to professional development of teachers. Through working with inclusion students and finding out the different characteristics of them, teachers can get experiences of developing communication skills and using various teaching methods. As one teacher states:

“Inclusion student is like the North Star because it helps people to find their location and/or direction. Like this, the inclusion student also helps teachers to find their ways of teaching and develop a better understanding about their profession and teaching roles. For example, the teacher may adjust the lesson plan and the classroom environment bearing the inclusion student in his/her mind.”

3.7. Category 7: Inclusion student as an individual needing support

This category is represented with six metaphors. The only characteristic of this category includes the following.

Inclusion student needs a different kind of support. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*a starfish, a bud, a broken-winged pigeon, a steam train among high speed trains, a guest visiting our home the first time, a newborn baby*) draw attention to the fact that each inclusion student needs a special support. Inclusion students should not be discriminated because of their differences. Teachers’ concern for inclusion students is vital. Like every human being, inclusion students also need to be loved, respected and valued to live independently. As one teacher states:

“Inclusion student is like a starfish because if it is helped before it reaches the land, it can recover back to the sea and continue its circle of life. Likewise, inclusion students also need support starting from the birth to be able to cope with life successfully.”

3.8. Category 8: Inclusion student as an individual whose special needs could not be met

This category is represented with six metaphors. The characteristics of this category include the following.

Inclusion may fail because of the professional inadequacy of teachers. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*a meal made by an insufficient cook, stinging nettle, unwanted child*) point how inadequacy of teachers can cause harm to inclusion students. For example, teachers' inadequate training, negative attitudes towards inclusion and/or their prejudices may result in negative experiences of inclusion students. As one teacher states:

"Inclusion student is like a meal made by an insufficient cook. Like this, in the educational system there are some teachers who are not able to get the right help and guidance for their inclusion students as well as teach them. For example, they do not individualize the educational program according to the needs of inclusion students although it is a requirement of inclusive education but rather complain that they do not have enough time and skills to prepare and apply it."

If inclusion student is neglected, his/her abilities and skills may disappear. Metaphors emphasizing this feature (*a red cloth mixed into the laundry of white clothes, an unripe fruit, a castle difficult to be conquered*) point that the neglect of inclusion students can damage their talents. If these students' specialties are not recognized and taken care by teachers in the classroom, they can be negatively affected (for example, being in a helpless/hopeless situation, loss of motivation, etc.). As one teacher states:

"Inclusion student is like a red cloth mixed into the laundry of white clothes because it can be easily noticed in white clothes. When they are washed together the red clothe can change other clothes' color in the laundry. On the other hand, it remains dirty if it is not washed. Just like this, if inclusion students are not paid attention, their skills may disappear and the whole classroom environment may be badly affected."

4. DISCUSSION

Metaphors shape human thinking about the world and reality and act as powerful mental models through which people understand their world by relating complex phenomena to something previously experienced and concrete (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In this sense, metaphors allow one to see something as something else by making one's mind move itself from a way of understanding to another. And it is this process of building linkages between two dissimilar ideas (the known and the abstract) or the projection of one schema (the source domain of the metaphor) onto another schema (the target domain of the metaphor) that makes a metaphor an effective cognitive device (Saban, Kocbeker-Eid & Saban, 2014).

The findings of this study, which examined the metaphorical perceptions of primary teachers towards inclusion students, stress several important points. First, primary teachers generally have positive attitudes towards inclusion students. For example, they have emphasized the many positive features of inclusion students in their metaphorical images (such as "inclusion student is unique and precious", "inclusion student has a special talent", etc.). Furthermore, according to the participants, inclusion students have the potential to make significant contributions to both the provision of unity and integrity of the society in which they live ("inclusion student has an important place in the society", "inclusion student is a source of peace and hope for the society", etc.) and the development of their teachers' professional knowledge and skills (such as "inclusion student contributes to the development of teachers' professional knowledge and skills", etc.).

Second, the success of inclusion is directly related to the professional competences of teachers. According to the participants, the positive attitudes and behaviors of teachers affect both inclusion students and their normally developing peers in a good way. For example, teachers' efforts and voluntariness for the practice of inclusion help all students to integrate socially and educationally in

the classroom. This practice also provides the least restrictive environment that would lead to inclusion students' achievement of life skills necessary for them to be more self-dependent.

Third, participants emphasized that some problems still exist in inclusive education in Turkey (for example, inadequate training of teachers, lack of individual support for inclusion students, poor physical conditions of schools, etc.). Similar problems are also highlighted in many research findings in the related literature (such as Kocbeker-Eid, 2016; Sadioğlu, Bilgin, Batu & Oksal, 2013).

5. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that in general, primary teachers seem to have positive attitudes towards inclusive education and inclusion students. The success of inclusion is directly related to the attitudes and approaches of teachers towards inclusion students. Metaphors can be used to understand how primary teachers approach to their inclusion students in their teaching by revealing their personal images.

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