

THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION: THE TURKISH PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract – *This paper summarises the past, present and future prospects of Special Education in Turkey with reference to the legislation and attitudes in society. The aim of this paper is twofold: initially, to provide a historical overview of the governmental and official provisions initiated and developed in relation to the needs and demands of the individuals with special needs in Turkey. Following this, societal perspectives and the attitudes of the Turkish society of the individuals with special needs and 'Education for All' is discussed and future prospects are proposed.*

Introduction

Turkey is a country in constant flux, with important changes taking place at the social and economic level. Such transformations have triggered off developments not only in the socio-economic structures of society, but also created new needs in the spheres of science and technology, needs which have posed new challenges to education, which is increasingly having to respond to a broadening and diversified range of expectations. To meet these expectations, reforms have been initiated at different levels and in different fields, while new institutions have been set up and new programmes have been developed. The developments and initiatives in the area of special education will be the focus of this paper.

The aim of this paper is twofold: first, it will provide a historical overview of the governmental and official provisions initiated and developed in relation to the needs and demands of the individuals with special needs in Turkey. Secondly, it will focus on societal perspectives and the attitudes of Turkish society regarding individuals with special needs and the *Education for All* movement.

The Turkish educational system and the history of special education in Turkey: a synopsis

The policies and the strategies that concern national education are determined and executed through the government programmes, with the Turkish National education system consisting of two main parts, namely, 'Formal Education' and 'Non-formal education'. Formal education is represented by the school system

and is made up of four levels: pre-school education, primary education, secondary education and tertiary education. Non-formal education covers the education and training system that provides employment opportunities to those citizens who have never followed formal education (or who are presently not in formal education, or have left formal education). The *Education for All* objectives and targets have been defined on the basis of several target dimensions. These dimensions are summarised below:

- Expansion of activities in early childhood care and development is within the domain of pre-school education.
- Progress in learning achievement is among the objectives and targets of primary education.
- Full development of primary education by the year 2000 is within the domain of primary education.
- Having the values, skills and knowledge necessary for a better life acquired by more and more individuals and families through all possible channels of education is within the domain of non-formal education.

Within the details of the targets listed above, '...providing equal educational, and social opportunities for all children, considering the individual differences, love and affection without any discrimination, and never assessing penalties' and '...carrying out actions aimed at realising education activities that respond to the needs of children who have different qualities and have these students receive education together with other children' summarise the Turkish perspective on mainstreaming and inclusion, the terms used interchangeably by the Turkish government for the actions summarised (Ministry Report, 1999).

Based on the above framework, the history of special education in Turkey can be traced back to the 1880's, when two special schools for children with visual and hearing impairment were established. Until the 1950's, with a few schools here and there, a department within the Ministry of Education tried to serve a small group of children with special needs. After that time, there was a new perspective and a rapid change in the educational system and support in various spheres of the governmental and public sectors. Special schools and classes became part of the educational system. In relation to this, society and the government started to develop increased awareness and sensitivity towards the needs and demands of children and individuals with disabilities and to a small extent towards their families. As a consequence, in the 1961 constitution, specific items were added in regard to the implementation of the services for individuals with special needs. This Act promoted the preparation of the rules and regulations for the educational provision for children with special needs. However, the philosophy of *Education*

for All and inclusion movement were not clearly understood within the state and public sectors.

Up to that time there was no trained personnel in special education and related fields. In one of the leading Teacher Colleges, a department was established to train students and teachers in the area of special education. In the second half of the 1960's a group of educators were sent to the United States to get further training on becoming trainers of teacher educators for children with special needs. Different departments in various universities started to offer undergraduate and graduate degree programmes for specialisation in the field. With the latest modifications of the Faculties of Education in 1998, programmes offering degrees in the education and training of individuals with hearing impairment, mental disabilities, visual impairment, multiple disabilities and the gifted and talented were opened in many Universities. In the Turkish constitution, there are items with regard to the principle of *Education for All*, emphasising the role of the State in the process. In 1983, a further major step was taken. Inclusion was accepted as an important means of provision. 1993 was nominated as the year of Special Education, aiming to raise awareness and consciousness for the needs of individuals with special needs. This attempt initiated the following developments:

- Turkish media and television started to pay more attention to the needs and services of this group of individuals. In this way they have been contributing to the awareness-raising process, without, however, always offering the most appropriate messages.
- The number of special schools in Turkey climbed up to 150. All State schools were encouraged to make modifications for students with physical and orthopedic needs. Moreover, the Ministry of Education increased salaries for special education teachers at a rate of 50%.
- Along with these awareness-raising efforts, an individual with visual impairment was appointed at a high civil service post in the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, student teachers with special needs began to be hired as teachers, unless, that is, their disability hindered their teaching.
- Moreover, in 1992, the mainstreaming and inclusion provisions were modified for improvement. Some pilot schools were chosen and the teachers, students, administrators and parents in those schools were provided with training on how to facilitate the mainstreaming process and to develop it effectively.

Meanwhile, with national and international meetings being organised, better means for exchange of ideas and new experiences were made possible. On the other hand, efforts for the vocational development and career opportunities of

individuals with special needs were initiated. Vocational schools were established for this purpose. For gifted and talented children at elementary school level (which is an 8 year mandatory school period), pilot centres were established to conduct special programmes. However, this is still a neglected group in Turkey and few opportunities have been developed for gifted and talented children at the elementary school level. However, for those who are gifted and talented in science or different branches of art and music, there have been many special schools operating for many years.

A new provision was made for hospital-bound children, with the initiation of hospital schools, which today number 26 in 13 cities.

The special schools serve the needs of the following groups:

- Children with visual impairment
- Children with hearing impairment
- Children with orthopaedic and physical impairment
- Children who are gifted and talented
- Children with mental disabilities

Today, the quality and the quantity of the special education provision in Turkey can be gauged on the basis of human development indices.

Parental involvement

The importance of parental involvement and parental training and counselling for families of children with special needs became apparent in the first half of the 1990's. The author of this article initiated such services in Turkey, both as topic for academic study and as a public service (Akkök, 1994). As a consequence of this, parental organisations and support groups were established by parents. As active parents, they started to inform both the wider public and the relevant state sectors about the characteristics, educational and life needs of their children and about their own needs. Parents have contributed significantly and distinctly to the quality and the quantity of the services in Turkey and they continue to do so. The associations and the foundations established by parents and the non-governmental organisations initiated new programmes – such as early intervention – and have been striving hard to contribute to changing societal attitudes. One area which, as in many other countries, is still underdeveloped, is that of catering for the siblings of children with special needs. This is an important area, which needs to be examined and supported more strongly.

Early intervention programmes

Early intervention programmes for babies and children at risk are still at their inception. Academics and other professionals have been developing and conducting effective programmes, even though this is not, for the time being, at the level desired and needed. In a pioneering work (Sucuoğlu, Küçükler & Kobal, 1998) involving 23 infants/young children and their parents, children showed marked improvements in the targeted skills, and parental needs decreased.

1997 could be mentioned as a major year for the reorganisation and updating of governmental provision in this area. Parental involvement in educational provision, individualised educational programmes, the importance of early intervention and the effective implementation of inclusion were the major areas of focus in the Act 573 of 1997. With this Act, Turkish legislation and policy seems to be at a very similar level to that of countries with well developed services around the world (Ministry Report, 1999). But, what about societal attitudes and implications of all those well-designed policies? This will be the theme of the next section of this article.

Is legislation sufficient for attitudinal change in society?

We are all aware of the fact that the quality and the quantity of services in a country is directly proportional to people's ideas and the attitudes in that society (Gargiulo, 1985). In Turkish society, the majority of the people do not concentrate on the strengths of individuals with special needs but focus more on their weaknesses. Most people still use labels for these individuals and concentrate on their differences rather than the similarities they share with the rest of society.

Whenever teacher attitudes have been examined, they appear to be positive towards inclusion. They are however characterised by a definite lack of information and training on how to educate students with special needs. This, unfortunately, leads to a mere physical integration of those children within educational settings (Batu, 1998; Diken, 1998).

When we examine which are the important values and norms in Turkish society, being protective, nurturing and affectionate seems to be the valued and accepted norms (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1990). Based on the socialisation process, we therefore expect Turkish people to be tolerant, nurturing and affectionate towards individuals with disabilities. However, due to lack of information regarding the causes, the characteristics and the needs of individuals with special needs, and also due to lack of knowledge on how to approach them, many segments of society still exhibit a bias and are less inclusive towards them. Informing the Turkish society

of the similarities between disabled and non-disabled people is still a priority in many programmes of governmental and non-governmental organisations.

Furthermore, when the value priorities of Turkish adolescents were examined in the 1990's, Turkish adolescents seemed to prefer autonomy, self-reliance and a positive relationship with the environment. They seem to be more sensitive towards their ecological environment. Therefore, in the near future, more positive attitudes towards their environment and issues such as individual differences in this environment are expected (Imamoğlu & Karakitapoğlu Aygün, 1999). In relation to this, Turkish adolescents are expected to develop a better awareness and sensitivity to the differences in society and to support provision for inclusion.

Moreover, although many adolescents are dependent on their parents in Turkey, particularly with regards to financial matters, there is a changing trend for adolescents to be more independent, both economically and socially. Therefore, being less productive or dependent – something that disabled people often are – may also influence their attitudes and perceptions of other people in society. However, Turkish adolescents appear to value self-development (Imamoğlu *et al.*, 1999). Based on this, individual needs for self-development of people with special needs are expected to be respected. Towards this end, the Turkish state initiated short term vocational training programmes for individuals with disabilities, so that they could become more productive members of society.

The general economical trends and priorities of a nation set the stage for the quality and the quantity of the services developed for individuals with special needs. In our country, the general economical trends and conditions are determining factors in that respect. The government must reconsider the financial resources and their distribution in regard to the public sector education, the money needed for buildings, equipment and teachers' salaries. This seems to be an important issue in Turkey regarding the improvement of the quality and the quantity of services for children and individuals with special needs. Early childhood care and early intervention seem to be at a fair level. In order to achieve better results however, better policies and practices for early intervention programmes and for parental education and involvement should be promoted.

The present author strongly believes that if general public knowledge in relation to exceptionalities is improved and stimulation of local community action for self-help schemes is emphasised, Turkish legislation and societal attitudes will be in a better accordance with each other.

For the new millennium, a good starting point would be to encourage friendships and mutual respect between all children, with and without disabilities.

We all believe that children with special needs are first and foremost children, and then children with special needs (Akkök, 1997). Therefore, teaching all children to understand, accept and respect difference in disability, colour, social origin, nationality and religion would be a very meaningful starting point for everyone. Since children are our future, a very significant policy would be to accept this as a main premise in our educational processes. Through this, we may enable children to be full participants in the development of their community and society.

Furthermore, it is clear that acceptance and implementation of the stated policies is needed in the new millennium both at State and community level. This is due to the fact that despite the fact that clear policies have been developed in Turkey, there is still the need for these policies to be better understood, accepted and implemented by the community. In order to achieve this, education will continue to play a significant role in the future. There will be a greater need for curriculum flexibility, physical accessibility of all settings, trained teachers, ongoing teacher training and additional support for teachers if they are to meet the newly faced requirements of children with special needs. In the new millennium, information technology will definitely help overcome many barriers and promote better practice.

Since the author perceives parental empowerment and parental activism as a very effective means for a societal change of attitude, providing services, support and advice for parents with and without children with special needs is expected to be an effective agent of change for the quality and the quantity of services for children with special needs. In the new millennium, early detection of special needs and early intervention will have a major influence in promoting healthy growth and development. Early intervention measures may reduce the impact of disability on the child and its family.

Finally, our accomplishment for the future will be for ordinary schools to seek to accommodate all children, regardless of physical, intellectual, emotional, social, linguistic and other requirements, establishing social integration in preparation for a successful transfer from school to life. In this way we shall achieve 'Education and Productivity for All' at a universal level.

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