

Determination of preservice special education teachers' views on early childhood intervention

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Abstract

Experiences in early childhood have a great influence on a child's physical and mental development. Early childhood interventions are widely accepted as an effective way to prevent learning difficulties and to promote healthy development for children with special needs. For this reason, it is important for teachers who will work with children with special needs or children who are at risk to have sufficient knowledge about early childhood intervention and be competent in this area. Therefore, the present study aims to determine the views of preservice special education teachers about early childhood intervention. This study used quantitative research method and a questionnaire form was used to collect the data. The results are discussed in detail with reference to relevant literature. Implications and recommendations for further research are also provided in order to improve the quality of education policies, programs and practices related with early childhood intervention and increase awareness and knowledge related with early childhood interventions among teacher candidates.

Keywords: Early childhood, early intervention, preservice special education teachers, views

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1. Introduction

Childhood years are the years in which development and learning are really rapid and experiences in this period constitute a basis for future years. The child is ready to learn many skills in the period of early childhood and it is known that they learn better in the period of early childhood (Oncul, 2014; Hursen & Salaz, 2016). In this respect, early childhood education programs become more important in order to support basic areas of child development including physical, social, cognitive, emotional and language development. 0-6 age period is regarded as early childhood period and language, mental, social, emotional, motor and self-care skills are gained in this period as well (Celebioglu & Morkoc, 2011).

Early childhood education can be defined as all the things that will be held for the child to live, grow up, develop and maintain self-care (Ural & Ramazan, 2007). In addition, early childhood education includes years between the birth of the child and the day in which the child starts formal education and it plays an important role in the future years of the child. Early childhood education is the education which is provided in families and institutions; physical, psychomotor, social, emotional, mental and language developments are completed to a great extent and personality is shaped (Ma, Shen, Krenn, Hu & Yuan, 2016; Aral, Kandir & Yasar, 2002). On the other hand, early childhood programs are crucial in terms of reducing the effects of negative environmental conditions in the early years of life, raising awareness among families about child development and education and increasing academic achievement of children especially from disadvantaged regions or children who are at risk (Kartal, 2007).

According to Birkan (2002), early childhood special education includes educational services for children who have developmental delays or who are at risk and their families. These educational services aim to identify and assess children who have developmental delays or who are at risk, support their development and reduce the differences between them and their peers (Sucuoglu, 2001). According to regulation of Turkish Ministry of Education, early childhood special education services include informing and supporting families and planning educational services for children with special needs (Special Education Services Regulation of Turkey, 2006).

The child explores the world with experiences through interaction with the environment and develops. Therefore, early childhood special education programs emerged because of the need for children with special needs to acquire the necessary skills through more systematic ways (Oncul, 2014). Nevertheless, Portage, Small Steps Early Intervention Program, Precise Early Childhood Education (PEECH), Parent Action in Childhood Education (PACE), The Murdoch Early Intervention Program and Early Head Start (EHS) are the most frequently used early childhood programs (Pinar, 2006).

Early intervention is very important for children with developmental delay or at risk. Evidence-based early interventions provide the best opportunity for improving developmental and educational outcomes of children with special needs. Early childhood interventions are widely accepted as an effective way to prevent learning difficulties and to promote healthy development in early childhood. When early intervention programs are examined, it is seen that the programs are generally based on home visits, institution-centered early childhood programs and institution-centered programs within the body of primary education schools and health services (Perloff et al., 1998).

Early intervention programs aim to identify children with special needs and to develop appropriate intervention programs based on their disability, current performance level, interest and requirements. It is also known that early childhood interventions programs increase later academic performance, decrease delinquent or risky behavior, increase socio-economic level and have a potential for prevention of developmental risks (Ou & Reynolds, 2004; Campbell, Conti, Heckman, Moon, Pinto, Pungello & Pan, 2014). Therefore, it can be inferred that if the child benefits from early childhood intervention programs, then his or her development can be assessed and developmental delays are also assessed in essential cases. Accordingly, emotional problems, capabilities, potentials and

disabilities can be determined as well and this might positively affect the outcomes for special education need.

As mentioned before, research highlights the importance of early childhood intervention for children with special needs and there is an increasing interest in making early childhood education intervention more prevalent and accessible for all children (Spodek & Saracho, 2014). Successful early childhood interventions in special education require high level of home and school cooperation. Teachers need to have educational qualifications and professional competence in order to be able to prepare and apply appropriate programs for children with special needs. Therefore, it can be stated that it is very important for teachers of children with special needs to have sufficient knowledge about early intervention programs' objectives and contents. Knowledge and experience of special education teachers about the content and aim of early childhood education programs are crucial in providing qualified educational services for children with special needs.

When the literature is examined, it is seen that there are studies which recently examined preservice special education teachers' views on qualification of undergraduate programs of special education (Ergul, Baydik & Demir, 2013), views of teaching the mentally retarded teacher candidates on the difficulties in internship period (Bural, 2010) and self-efficacy perceptions of the mentally retarded teacher candidates who took internship course (Oksuz & Coskun, 2012) in Turkey. However, it is seen that there is limited number of studies which examined the views of preservice or in-service special education teachers on early intervention in early childhood.

Early childhood teachers are expected to be competent in four basic dimensions including personal, social, educational and professional experience dimensions and they need to be professional in terms of both care and education such as rules and regulations of the government for early childhood education practices, health, security and nutrition, prevention and reporting of child abuse and child growth and development (Morrison, 2003; Diken, 2012). Given these expected high level of competencies of early childhood teachers, it is considered that views of preservice special education teachers become important since if they know more about intervention in early childhood special education, they would feel more competent and provide more benefit for children with special needs. In this respect, it is considered that it is important to identify the views of preservice special education teachers on early intervention in early childhood. When literature is examined, it is seen that no studies examined the views of preservice special education teachers in North Cyprus before. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the views of preservice special education teachers about early childhood intervention. It is expected that this study would increase the knowledge about perspectives of teacher candidates about early childhood in order to guide further practices and policies especially at universities in North Cyprus.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total number of 180 students who were currently enrolled in Teaching the Mentally Retarded and Teaching the Hearing Impaired undergraduate programs in the Faculty of Education at Near East University in North Cyprus participated in this study. Participants were informed that completing the survey is based on voluntariness. The survey was administered to the students during the lecture hours and it took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete the survey. Demographic characteristics of the participants are provided in detail with tables below.

Table 1. Gender of the Participants

Gender	N	Percent
Male	113	62,8
Female	67	37,2
Total	180	100,0

Table 1 shows the gender distribution of the participants. As it can be seen from the table, 113 of the participants (62,8%) are male and 67 of them (37,2%) are female. In other words, the number of male students is greater than the number of female students.

Table 2. Age of the Participants

Age	N	Percent
18-25	160	88,8
26-35	20	11,2
Total	180	100,0

Table 2 shows the age distribution of the participants. According to the table, 160 participants of this study (88,8%) were between the ages of 18 and 25 and 20 of them (11,2%) were between the ages of 26 and 35.

Table 3. Departments of the Participants

Department	N	Percent
Teaching the Mentally Retarded	152	84,4
Teaching the Hearing Impaired	28	15,6
Total	180	100,0

A total number of 180 preservice special education teachers from 2 different departments participated in this study. Table 3 provides a detailed information about the departments of the participants. As it can be seen, 152 students (84,4%) were studying in Teaching the Mentally Retarded and 28 students (15,6%) were studying in Teaching the Hearing Impaired.

Table 4. Class Levels of the Participants

Class	N	Percent
1	87	48,3
2	38	21,1
3	30	16,1
4	25	13,9
Total	180	100,0

Table 4 provides a detailed information about the class levels of the participants. As it can be seen, 87 of the students (48,3%) were in their first year, 38 of them (21,1%) were in their second year, 30 of the students (16,1%) were in their third year and 25 of the students (13,9%) were in their fourth year of study.

Table 5. Taking a Lecture on Early Childhood Before or Not

Lecture	N	Percent
Yes	96	53,3
No	84	46,7
Total	180	100,0

Taking a lecture on early childhood before was considered to be related with the views of the participants on early childhood. Table 5 shows information on whether participants took a lecture on early childhood before or not. According to the table, 96 preservice special education teachers (53,3%) took a lecture on early childhood before and 84 of them (46,7%) did not take a lecture on early childhood before.

2.2. Data Collection Tool

Demographic information form and a survey named as "Perceptions of Teacher Candidates on Early Intervention in Early Childhood" were used to collect data in this study. Demographic form included questions on age, gender, nationality, department, class level and taking a lecture on early childhood before or not. The survey used in the study was developed by Yumus and Tanju (2015) and their permission was obtained to use the survey in the present study. Yumus and Tanju (2015) developed the survey by firstly conducting a literature review in order to obtain the views of undergraduate students from the departments of preschool teaching and child development. Then, the survey was formed based on the views of academicians from these departments. The survey has a 3-point Likert scale response format including agree, disagree and undecided and it includes 15 statements about views on the aim and content of early intervention. Five statements are related with aim of early intervention and ten statements are related with content of early intervention.

2.3. Data Analysis

The collected data of the study were entered to SPSS 20.0 program by the researchers and analyzed. Descriptive statistics and chi-square analysis were applied for data analysis and results are provided with numbers and percentages in the tables. Responses to demographic questions were analyzed with descriptive statistical methods including frequency and percentage. Chi-square t-test was applied in order to determine whether there is a difference between the views of the participants based on their status on taking a lecture on early childhood before or not. Significance level was accepted as 0,05 in comparing the data of the study.

3. Results

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Each Statement

Statements	Agree		Disagree		Undecided	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Early childhood programs are prepared to get information about developmental levels of children.	168	93,3	4	2,2	8	4,4
Early childhood programs are generally developed for children with autism.	57	31,7	86	47,8	37	20,6
Early childhood programs are curriculum-based programs.	171	95,0	4	2,2	5	2,8
Application programs can be planned based on the activities which children show interest.	148	82,2	7	3,9	25	13,9
Home visits are involved in early intervention program.	115	63,9	19	10,6	46	25,6
Appropriate programs are prepared for children based on their interests and needs through assessing their developmental levels within early intervention programs.	172	95,6	3	1,7	5	2,8
Early intervention programs involve regular follow-up and assessment of children.	165	91,7	5	2,8	10	5,6
Early intervention might include different activities.	135	75,0	9	5,0	36	20,0
Standard educational tools are used within early intervention programs.	157	87,2	6	3,3	17	9,4
Early intervention programs enable children to achieve their aims in daily routine activities of their families.	135	75,0	16	8,9	29	16,1
Early intervention programs require collaboration between different groups and people (teachers, relative, friend etc.) who interact with the child.	162	90,0	5	2,8	13	7,2
Early intervention generally focuses on attention deficit, imitation skills, language and social skills.	102	56,7	26	14,4	52	28,9
Special locations are required for early intervention programs to be applied.	89	49,4	47	26,1	44	24,4
Aims are formed for children to learn new skills and use them for different purposes at different locations within early childhood programs.	140	77,8	14	7,8	26	14,4
An instructive counselling is provided to families in making decisions about their children and interacting with their children within early intervention.	162	90,0	7	3,9	11	6,1

Table 6 provides detailed information about descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages for each statement in the survey which aims to determine the views on early intervention in early childhood. According to Table 6, it is seen that 93,3% of the preservice special education teachers reported that early childhood programs are prepared to get information about

developmental levels of children and 2,2% of them indicated that they disagree with this statement. For the second statement, 31,7% of the participants indicated that they early childhood programs are generally developed for children with autism and 47,8% of them indicated that they disagree with this statement. In addition, 95,0% of the participants reported that early childhood programs are curriculum-based programs and 2,2% of them indicated that they disagree with this statement. 82.2% of the participants indicated that application programs can be planned based on the activities which children show interest and 3,9% of them indicated that they disagree with this statement. Besides, 63,9% of the participants indicated that home visits are involved in early intervention program and 10,6% of them indicated that they disagree with this statement. 95,6% of the participants reported that prorate programs are prepared for children based on their interests and needs through assessing their developmental levels within early intervention programs and 1,7% of them indicated that they disagree with this statement. 91,7% of the participants indicated that early intervention programs involve regular follow-up and assessment of children and 2,8% of them indicated that they disagree with this statement.

Furthermore, 75,0% of the participants reported that early intervention might include different activities and 5,0% of them indicated that they disagree with this statement. As it can be seen from Table 6; 87,2% of the participants reported that standard educational tools are used within early intervention programs and 3,3% of them indicated that they disagree with this statement. 75,0% of the participants indicated that early intervention programs enable children to achieve their aims in daily routine activities of their families and 8,9% of them indicated that they disagree with this statement. In addition, 90,0% of the participants indicated that early intervention programs require collaboration between different groups and people who interact with the child and 2,8% of them indicated that they disagree with this statement. 56,7% of the participants indicated that early intervention generally focuses on attention deficit, imitation skills, language and social skills and 28,9% of them indicated that they are undecided about this statement. 49,4% of the participants reported that special locations are required for early intervention programs to be applied and 26,1% of them reported that they disagree with this statement. 77,8% of the participants reported that aims are formed for children to learn new skills and use them for different purposes at different locations within early childhood programs and 7,8% of them reported that they disagree with this statement. 90,0% of the participants indicated that an instructive counselling is provided to families in making decisions about their children and interacting with their children within early intervention and 3,9% of them indicated that they disagree with this statement.

When the responses of the participants are examined, it can be seen that preservice special education teachers have a general idea about the aims and content of early childhood intervention programs. Preservice special education teachers mostly reported that they are undecided about what specific skills are taught in early childhood intervention programs ($f=52$, 28,9%). This statement was the statement in which the participants mostly reported that they are undecided. In addition, it is seen that preservice special education teachers are well-informed about the statements related with the aims of early childhood intervention programs. Lastly, if there is a significant relationship between taking a lecture on early childhood before or not and the views of preservice special education teachers about early childhood was also analyzed. In addition, whether the views of preservice special education teachers differ based on the departments of the participants was also examined. According to the results, it was figured out that there is no significant difference between the views of preservice special education teachers and these mentioned variables.

4. Discussion

Raising competent teachers has acquired great importance recently throughout the world. Universities have to train teacher who can adjust to the requirements of the changing world. Teachers have a crucial role for preparing students for the future. When preservice teachers receive qualified

education, they would be able to perform well in training individuals. In this respect, the views of preservice teachers become crucial in line with the aim of the present study (Kan, 2015). It is widely known that children can learn better during early childhood and thus early childhood intervention is crucial for healthy development of children with special needs. Therefore, special education teachers need to be informed and competent on applying early childhood intervention programs. At this point, knowledge, awareness and understanding of special education teachers about early childhood intervention programs become critical.

Special education teachers need to have extensive knowledge about early childhood intervention programs and their content and application procedures in order to organize these programs in an effective way for children with special needs. Special education teachers need to be competent on providing and planning efficient and appropriate early intervention programs based on the needs of children with special needs especially during the early childhood period.

The present study was aimed to determine the views of preservice special education teachers on early intervention in early childhood. Overall results of the study showed that participants have the basic level of understanding and knowledge about early childhood intervention programs. In other words, participants basically know about the aims and content of early intervention. This result is consistent with Yumus and Tanju (2015). This might be related with the fact that majority of the participants took a lecture related with early childhood. However, results of the present study revealed no significant difference between taking a lecture on early childhood before and views on early childhood. This result is inconsistent with the results of Yumus and Tanju (2015) since it is expected that when teachers know more about individual differences, they can determine appropriate targets for children with special needs or children who are at risk of developmental delay.

Yumus and Tanju (2015) figured out that teacher candidates who took lecture on early childhood before are more informed about early intervention programs which might be considered as an expected result. When the obtained result of the present study is considered, it can be said that early childhood is an important topic in special education overall, and therefore participants can learn in all courses about early childhood education and intervention since all academic and non-academic skills can be included in early childhood special education programs.

Furthermore, there is another point which might be considered as important in terms of competencies of preservice special education teachers on early childhood. Special education teachers need to follow recent trends in special education. For instance, they need to be aware about the recent technological advances in special education and integrate these advances in early intervention as well (Abu Al Rub, 2015; Yazcayir & Selvi, 2014).

In undergraduate special education programs in Turkey and North Cyprus, early childhood special education is a compulsory course during the first or second year of the department. According to literature, it is stated that knowledge and views of special education teachers are effective in organizing early intervention programs and a collaborative approach and attitude is needed to increase the efficiency of teachers about this issue (Gebbie, 2012; Dias & Perez, 2013).

There are some limitations of the present study that should be noted. Firstly, this study was carried out at one university in North Cyprus. Therefore, the results could not be generalized to all universities in North Cyprus since the number of participants of the study is 180. Another limitation for the present study might be the data collection procedure. The students completed the surveys during their lecture hours. If they had the opportunity to complete the surveys at their homes and provide the surveys later, they would have more time to think over about the survey statements and provide more reliable answers.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the results provided sufficient information about the views of preservice special education teachers' knowledge and awareness levels of early childhood intervention programs. Results reveal the effects and importance of supporting preservice special education teachers about early intervention in early childhood who will directly study with children with special needs. Therefore, it is really important to increase social awareness on how to apply early intervention programs in the best way and provide necessary technical and occupational support and guidance to relevant professional groups. In this respect, it is expected that the results of this study may serve as a guide to future research and practices in this area.

Following recommendations are provided based on the results of the study for further research, policies and practices in early childhood education and intervention:

- There should be more courses related with early childhood intervention programs offered by the universities' faculties of education and teacher training programs in order to increase knowledge and awareness levels of teacher candidates.
- Educational policies and programs should be improved in order to increase and improve teachers' knowledge, understanding and awareness of early childhood intervention. In this way, teachers would be more beneficial for children with special needs by providing appropriate and effective early education programs and interventions.
- Early intervention models in North Cyprus should be increased and encouraged.
- Project-based studies should be carried out in order to increase the use of early intervention model and programs in North Cyprus.
- Since special education is a team-work, cooperation between special education teachers, child development specialists, preschool teachers and psychologists should be increased and encouraged in applying early intervention programs.

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