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Enhancing Early Intervention Services for Children with Special Needs in the Middle East: A Turkish Initiative

Abstract

At a conference hosted by the Association of Turkish Educators entitled "Early Intervention from Interdisciplinary Perspectives," discussion focused on enhancing and designing best practices in early intervention special education for the Turkish region. Governmental representatives, post-secondary educators, educational specialists, teachers, administrators, parents and concerned citizens grappled with past, current and future educational practices in an attempt to enhance educational services for students with special needs in the Turkish region. Five critical discussion themes spotlighted assessment and diagnosis, early intervention, educational strategies, professional development and community awareness. Keynote speakers were educational specialists with expertise in best practices from the United States and Europe. As a result of the presentations and discussions, recommendations were compiled for implementation.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Early intervention, special education, developmental disabilities

Introduction

From February 1-5, 2012, the first National Interdisciplinary Early Intervention Congress on Disabilities in Turkey, titled "Early Intervention from Interdisciplinary Perspectives," was held in Antalya, Turkey. It was sponsored and hosted by the Association of Special Education Teachers and was jointly funded by special education centers and publishing houses. The 2012 Interdisciplinary Congress on Early Intervention focused specifically on assessment and diagnosis, early intervention, educational strategies, professional development and community awareness. The purpose of this article is to report on the 2012 conference, provide historical perspective and background information, summarize the participants' recommendations and give some authors' conclusions.

Early intervention special education practices in the Turkish region have been evolving slowly, and only in the last ten years has the importance of early intervention come to the forefront of educational concerns. This 2012 conference focused on a range of

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special education early intervention concerns and allowed participants to acquire a better perspective on how to move the field of early intervention forward in the Turkish region.

Turkish Region Background and Content

Historically, education of young children with disabilities in this region has encountered problems caused in part by the nature of the education system, cultural values, and personnel problems, specifically educational training and assessment practices in early intervention services.

One of the major issues in early childhood special education is the assessment and diagnosis of the disability. Early childhood education should start with a reliable assessment in order to define the needs of children and parents. There is no early screening or diagnostic system and tools are limited for children at risk of developmental delay in Turkey. Child-Mother Health Centers provide child health services, but they do not screen properly for developmental disabilities. Developmental disorders that have no specific physical characteristics, such as autism, can often be missed. In Turkey, typically the child is assessed only when the parent, the physician or the teacher becomes aware of developmental delay. Parents who compare their child to other children or who understand the typical timing of developmental milestones will frequently come to the conclusion that something is wrong with their child and will seek medical intervention. During visits to physicians or other health professionals, the parents can be alerted of potential developmental disabilities.

Unfortunately even after parents have been informed that their child may be at risk of developmental delay, indications of disability which are based upon developmental milestones are sometimes ignored or go unnoticed by the parents, especially when the condition of the child is not physically apparent. A recent study by Ertem et al. (2007) revealed that mothers often do not know the timing of important developmental milestones related to specific domains such as language development. These parents incorrectly assume that skills such as smiling and vocalization occur later than the actual normative ages. Although this study was conducted with parents who had normally developing children, it explained why late diagnosis is widespread in this region of the world. In Turkey, when a child exhibits delayed verbal expression, it is common to hear assurances such as “His father also spoke late, so you shouldn’t worry.”

To further exasperate the need for early intervention services, many children are not diagnosed until their delays are detected by their primary school teacher. By this time, the academic skills gap between the child with delays and normally developing peers has widened, so another important reason for the relatively late diagnosis is the nearly nonexistent availability of early childhood education services. According to the Turkish Ministry of Education, the schooling rate is only 30.5% for children three to five years of age, 43.5% for children four to five years of age, and 65.1% for children age five. Since speech delays are frequently readily apparent to the parent and teacher, the main developmental delay identified is late speech development (Diken, 2006). Other developmental delays that are not directly observable, such as socio-emotional development or academic skills are more likely to be missed by parents. Because

preschool teachers and other specialists most often wait for the child to attend primary school, screening for signs of developmental delay and taking precautions is often not possible.

Turkish culture has a heterogeneous structure. Depending on the region or socioeconomic status, the parents of a disabled child may have different conceptions of what they believe is best for their child. A parent's perception of their child's disability can be affected differently by differing worldviews, cultures, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Both traditional and modern approaches to children with disabilities can be observed in Turkey. Diken (2006) revealed that some parents' perceptions of disability are mainly influenced by cultural and religious values and are not based upon medical explanations. He determined that although parents sought formal education for their children, their understanding of their child's disability was mainly attributed to religious teachings. Parents in Turkey frequently seek out alternative treatments involving religious rituals and practices in addition to seeking educational services to help their child.

Early special education services are organized in Turkey by Guidance and Research Centers. These facilities conduct the assessment and suggest the appropriate educational placement for the child when the family applies to a center for services. These centers also have the responsibility for providing parent training, which is especially critical during the first stages of diagnosis. Still, acquiring correct information about a specific disability is an ever-problematic concern for families. Koydemir- Ozden and Tosun's (2010) study with mothers of autistic children provides some insight. In their study, the mothers indicated that they were uninformed about indications of autism during the early stages of their child's development. Once a diagnosis was made, they still lacked sufficient information about the disability. While parent training programs are the responsibility of the schools, these efforts are severely limited and the most common form of parental training entails the teaching of self-care needs for their child.

Identification and disclosure of disability carry such significant social consequences that some families, especially those with children of low incidence disabilities, keep their child at home and hidden from society because they want to avoid the negative consequences of a disability label. Also, some parents have difficulty moving from the denial stage to the acceptance stage. In addition, many families with disabled children deem it important to actively work with civil rights organizations, but civil rights movements in Turkey are not as effective as in western industrial countries in their ability to bring attention to the rights of people with disabilities. Disability awareness, especially pertaining to early childhood education, is extremely lacking in this region.

School attendance rates are very low for children ages three to six years who require special education services. According to Turkish Ministry of Education 2011-2012 statistics, there are only 890 students attending kindergarten programs located at special education schools. According to Decree 573: Decree about Special Education (1997) and the Legislation of Special Education Services (2006), for children three to six years

of age, special education services are based on inclusion and mainstreaming. Unfortunately, the mainstreaming percentages are very low and many children receive services from private sector rehabilitation centers. These rehabilitation centers actively identify children with special needs and guide the family in acquiring necessary special education services. The incentive is a government subsidy for each child educated in these rehabilitation centers because most families cannot afford additional educational services for their preschool aged children. The government pays for eight hours of individual services and four hours of group study per month (Turkish Ministry of Education, 2012). Unfortunately, this level of services is very limited compared to recommended educational standards. Elementary and higher level special education schools are available for most children, but since most children under age six are not formally educated in early childhood special education programs, the prognosis for successful educational attainment in later years is severely restricted.

Gül and Diken (2009) reviewed 24 graduate theses on early childhood special education. They grouped the theses into three categories -- skill acquisition, preschool inclusion, and teaching families skills to help their child. The first study was written in 1989 and evaluated the effects of preschool inclusion outcomes. Considered novel for its day and for many countries in this region, there were no further studies completed until 1995. Early intervention programs such as "Small Steps" and "Portage" were implemented by universities in the 1990's. These programs were conducted with the participation of civil rights organizations and local governments and reached many families. In recent years, other early childhood programs such as "Responsive Teaching" have been adapted for use in Turkey and now universities in Turkey have assumed responsibility for supporting early childhood special education studies. Universities teach intervention strategies for early childhood special education teachers and promote the importance of early screening and assessment. The first master's program emphasizing early childhood special education in Turkey was established by Anatolian University in 2011.

Legal Aspects

To our knowledge, the passage of Law 2916: Law about Children who Need Special Education (1983) by the Turkish government was the first of its kind to explicitly state that special education services must be provided to children with special needs as early as possible due to the importance of early intervention services to later educational outcomes. Unfortunately, this law did not have any significant effect on the provision of early childhood services, perhaps because these services were so limited in number. After several years, Decree 573: Decree about Special Education (1997) replaced the 1983 law. It provided a more comprehensive requirement that special education services for the early childhood period should emphasize family education and support, and it mandated that preschool education be obligatory in the public or private sectors. In 2006, the Turkish government enacted legislation about special education services pertaining to early childhood special education in an attempt to ensure that these services were being provided. The legislation of 2006 further addressed the importance of inclusionary education practices for children three to six years of age and provided for the implementation of early childhood services for children ages zero to three. This

legislation further stressed that the early childhood services which provide family support and education to children with special needs must be coordinated by special education services boards.

Both the 1983 and 1997 laws addressed fundamental issues but they did not address the underlying problems related to concerns with implementation of programs and the lack of personnel who could provide early intervention services. Thus far, this law has served as a catalyst in promoting the rights of the disabled, but it has not brought about the necessary support for early interventions that can improve the quality of life for children. To date, some programs in early intervention educational services are offered by government and private schools to students with disability, yet confusion abounds because there are no intermediary interventions for children that teachers suspect may be at-risk of having difficulty. There is no middle ground initiative like that of the RTI (Response to Intervention) program in the United States that prevents unnecessary labeling of children who are not disabled but who are simply struggling academically.

Students with disabling conditions such as severe and profound mental handicaps, hearing loss, visual impairments, and autism are typically educated in schools serving only the disabled or in centers overseen by the Turkish Ministry of Education. Some private schools have begun serving both regular and special education students in the same school setting due to increased effort to mainstream special education students with mild to moderate disabilities in the general education setting. Most special education settings do not reflect the philosophy of inclusion due to a lack of professional knowledge by teachers, incomplete information provided to parents, and the negative attitudes toward disability held by parents of non-disabled children.

Educational leaders, legislators, and professional organizations are committed to providing more effective early intervention special education services for students throughout Turkey. This effort arose from increased understanding of the unique needs of children with disabilities in the region as well as the passage of the 1997 law concerning special education. A concerted effort among university professionals has also heightened awareness, access, and participation in special education programs. Extensive and continuing discussions focus on issues related to assessment and identification, early intervention, educational strategies, professional development and community awareness.

2012 Interdisciplinary Congress on Early Intervention

Prior to the 2012 conference, a one-day symposium sponsored by Anatolian University was held in September 2009 in Eskisehir, Turkey. Participants were predominantly from the European Union (EU) and the symposium focused on prevailing professional opinions about common early childhood practices being implemented throughout Turkey and the E.U. This symposium was one of the first major efforts in Turkey specifically dedicated to early childhood.

The 2012 conference was the first national interdisciplinary effort which focused on early intervention practices and policies in Turkey as well as other countries throughout Europe. Invited speakers from the Netherlands, England and the United States shared

best practices in assessment, early intervention, individual education plans, professional development, and community awareness. Presenters from the Netherlands, Canada, Portugal, Spain, Hungary, Iran and Turkey reported on a wide range of topics from specific training programs to the need for early identification of children considered to be at-risk. They offered expertise in psychological and educational perspectives, roles of family and schools, metacognitive strategies, and general education. Conference attendees were predominantly college and university faculty, teachers from both public and private institutions, and parents of children with disabilities.

Similar to the 2009 Symposium, calls for papers reflecting the topics of successful inclusion of students with severe disabilities and intervention methodologies were solicited for this educational gathering. A 90-minute featured speaker provided in-depth information on a given topic each day. Conference attendees were afforded the opportunity to meet with the featured expert immediately following the presentation. The conference format had selected speakers present their papers in the mornings, and afternoons were typically breakout sessions and workshops. Immediate translation was provided to ensure accuracy of the wording of the presentations.

In attempting to demonstrate educational priorities, the Advisory and Program Committee selected the title of the conference "Early Intervention from Interdisciplinary Perspectives" for two reasons. First, screening for disabilities in early stages of childhood development is critically lacking in Turkey and hence "early intervention" was given priority placement in the title. In addition, while educational regulations support inclusion practices, teachers show limited understanding of how to mainstream children with disabilities. To highlight the significance of an interdisciplinary approach in addressing timely service delivery, the word "interdisciplinary" followed. Consideration was given to current special educational practices and to necessary modifications which could be used to assist children in their daily academic progress. Finally, speakers presented on the role of families, schools, and professional and community organizations to enhance the lives of individuals with disabilities.

Emerging Areas of Concern

At the conclusion of the 2012 conference, speakers and participants together developed a comprehensive list of suggestions which echoed many of the same concerns identified at the beginning of the conference. Early interventionists in the Turkish region are more aware of the role early childhood special education can play in identifying children who are at-risk and in providing services. The breadth and depth of the following recommendations reflect the perception of the field of early intervention special education held by the participants.

(1) Special education practices focusing on early intervention in the Turkish region have been evolving slowly and only in the last ten years have they come to the forefront in educational concerns. This slow development derives from the nature of the education system, cultural values, and personnel problems, specifically educational training and assessment practices in early intervention services.

(2) Early childhood special education lacks early screening assessment and diagnostic tools that can identify children at risk of developmental delay. Without reliable assessment protocols, early childhood education has limited opportunity to evaluate the needs of children and their parents.

(3) Universities are explicitly teaching interventions effective for early childhood special education students because public school teachers apparently lack the necessary knowledge to support the inclusionary efforts currently underway.

(4) Perceptions of some parents pertaining to disability are influenced by cultural and religious values and are not based on educational best practices. Identification and disclosure of disability carry such significant social consequences that some families, especially those with children of low incidence disabilities, keep their child at home and hidden from society because they want to avoid the negative consequences of a disability label. This prevents these children from obtaining educational services.

Authors' Conclusions

The conclusions offered by the authors encourage educators in this region to adhere to best practices in areas of early intervention, educational strategies, professional development, and community and parental awareness. For children identified as at-risk for academic delay, early intervention and educational programs must be designed to minimize future developmental disabilities, help families make smooth transitions from home to school, and prepare children to move toward independence and mastery of academic skills. Classrooms which accommodate students with disabilities in inclusionary environments will increase interactions among children with and without disabilities. And finally, parents must be taught how to advocate for their child, participate in educational planning, and set realistic goals for their children.

Many educational professionals in the Turkish region receive their advanced degree training from institutions located in the United States. Upon returning to their home countries, many of these individuals have been able to successfully apply their training when they modify it to correlate with the differing norms and values of the Turkish people. Turkish educators who combine training in educational best practices with cultural traditions and values have been highly effective in helping children with disabilities to reach their fullest potentials.

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