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Metaphorical perceptions of pre-service teachers about inclusive education and the effects of an inclusive education course on perspectives about the teaching profession in Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine teacher candidates' perceptions of inclusive education (IE) and to investigate the reflections of IE courses on their perspectives on the teaching profession. The research was designed using a phenomenological approach. The study group for the research consisted of 130 pre-service teachers studying at a state university in the Central Anatolian region of Türkiye. Results of the research show that pre-service teachers had positive perceptions about IE. Pre-service teachers stated that they learned the meaning and scope of the concept of IE better due to the IE course, and their awareness of the importance of inclusive schools increased after taking this course. They stated that the IE course improved their teaching skills suitable for individual differences, and increased their positive attitudes towards teaching; they realized the importance of teachers in accepting the differences between individuals, developed their classroom management skills suitable for individual differences, increased their awareness of the characteristics of inclusive schools, and increased their level of knowledge about contemporary teaching practices. In line with the results, it is deemed necessary and beneficial to update teacher training programs to develop an inclusive perspective among pre-service teachers with both theoretical and applied courses.

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metaphor; self-perception;
pre-service teacher

Introduction

Inclusive education (IE) has been a global priority education policy from the 1994 Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) to the present day, which enables students with many different characteristics, disadvantages, interests and needs to receive equal educational opportunities and be educated alongside their peers in mainstream schools (UNESCO, 2020).

In international conferences about inclusive education, education reports, research, and teacher training programs are shown to be one of the priority areas of application for the dissemination of inclusive education in schools (UNESCO, 2009). IE requires the restructuring of teacher training and educational services so that mainstream schools can meet the needs of all students (Hopkins et al., 2018). Pre-service teachers are the future leaders who will

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shape inclusive education and make decisions that will directly or indirectly affect individuals with disabilities or special educational needs (Byra & Domagała-Zyśk, 2022). It is stated that teacher competencies, collaboration, and classroom behaviour management are the three key components of inclusive teaching practices (Sharma et al., 2012). For IE to be effectively implemented, teachers must have positive attitudes (Martínez, 2003; Sharma et al., 2006; Sharma & Sokal, 2014), high self-efficacy perceptions (Charles et al., 2023; Forlin et al., 2014; Paneque & Barbetta, 2006; Sharma et al., 2012) and low anxiety (Bradshaw & Mundia, 2006); these are known to be the three dominant factors. It has been observed that pre-service training provided to enhance teachers' competencies in inclusive education increases their inclusive attitudes and competencies, and significantly reduces their concerns (Ginja & Chen, 2023; Gómez-Marí et al., 2023; Hassanein et al., 2021; Koliqi et al., 2023; Sharma & Nuttal, 2016; Sharma et al., 2008).

Findings indicating that teacher training programs in many countries are inadequate in preparing teachers for IE are noteworthy. This highlights the structural and content-related shortcomings of teacher education as an important area of research. Indeed, Sharma et al.'s (2013) study conducted in 13 countries in the Asia-Pacific region points to four key issues in the context of IE: a shortage of qualified teachers, limited teacher training, negative teacher attitudes, and the absence of a specific approach focused on inclusivity. These findings indicate that teacher training processes must be addressed in a multifaceted manner for IE to be effectively implemented. In addition to studies that highlight the positive effects of pre-service teacher education, there are also studies that reveal the shortcomings of teacher education in this context (Forlin et al., 2009; Ginja & Chen, 2023). In other words, the education a teacher receives is seen as an important variable that influences their perspectives, perception, attitudes, and beliefs in successfully implementing inclusivity.

Equipping teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to create inclusive classrooms, and developing positive attitudes, awareness and perspectives towards IE, is largely the responsibility of teacher training programs (Sharma & Nuttal, 2016). The inclusion of content related to inclusive education in pre-service teacher education programs reduces uncertainty among pre-service teachers and contributes to the development of positive attitudes towards inclusive pedagogies, teaching competence and approaches that are sensitive to individual needs (Ben-Yehuda et al., 2010; Florian & Linklater, 2010; Florian & Rouse, 2009; Forlin et al., 2010; Golder et al., 2005; Pearson, 2007; Romi & Leyser, 2006; Sharma et al., 2009). Furthermore, these programs increase the ability to cope with resistance to inclusivity in education and motivate pre-service teachers to adopt inclusive practices (Beacham & Rouse, 2012; Slee, 2010). In this regard, the focus of the present study is to determine pre-service teachers' metaphorical perceptions of inclusive education and how the inclusive education course they took before entering service reflects on their perspectives on teaching.

Metaphors in educational research

Metaphors based on cognitive linguistics are powerful tools that enable individuals to make sense of abstract and concrete concepts; they generate insight by conceptualising one mental domain in terms of another, and offer the possibility of framing and restructuring different perspectives (Charteris-Black, 2004; Gibbs, 2011; Kim & Maher, 2020; Kövecses, 2016; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), one of the most influential approaches in metaphor research over the past 40 years, argues that metaphor

is not merely a linguistic form of expression but a fundamental component of human thought (Gibbs, 2011). According to this theory, many metaphorical expressions used in everyday language are reflections of pre-existing conceptual metaphors. CMT is based on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) work *Metaphors We Live By*, which provided systematic linguistic evidence for the mental foundations of metaphors and initiated a significant transformation in the field. Since the 1980s, numerous studies across various disciplines have established CMT as the dominant theoretical framework in metaphor research.

In short, conceptual metaphors from the CMT perspective make abstract concepts more concrete and understandable. However, metaphors are not merely the product of individual mental processes; they should also be considered as discursive structures influenced by socio-cultural and political contexts (Charteris-Black, 2011; Refaie, 2003; Ritchie et al., 2018; Smith, 2019). Therefore, in this study, which aims to examine pre-service teachers' perceptions of IE through metaphors, it is accepted that metaphors are nourished by social and linguistic contexts. Indeed, Corcoran et al. (2023) emphasise that IE approaches must be considered in conjunction with social structures; teachers must develop their capacity to make contextual assessments and act accordingly, rather than seeking a single, absolute truth in understanding differences. This perspective shows that teacher candidates' metaphorical expressions regarding inclusive education are closely related to the cultural and educational context in which they find themselves. Indeed, in metaphor studies that can be interpreted in a socio-cultural context and that reflect the mental processes of individuals, it has been observed that inclusive education metaphors reflect individuals' attitudes and perceptions on this subject. For example, in Erol-Sahillioğlu's (2020) study with preschool teachers, teachers associated inclusive education with concepts such as 'sun,' 'umbrella,' and 'connector.' These metaphors seem to evoke a perspective that is unifying, integrating, and non-exclusionary in relation to inclusive education. In addition, other metaphors used by teachers reveal that they tend to view inclusive education as a strengthening, resilient, and sustainable educational approach. Through these metaphors, teachers conceptualise inclusivity as an element of unity and solidarity based on tolerance and equality towards differences. Similarly, in the research by Amaç et al. (2025), inclusive education is expressed through metaphors such as the rainbow, the world, and the flower garden. Teachers view inclusive education as an environment that accepts and respects diversity and differences. Therefore, metaphors such as rainbow or mosaic indicate that education brings together different elements to represent a holistic and rich structure. In many studies, the metaphors that teachers associate with inclusive education are those that allow for adaptations in teaching that prioritise student needs (Yazıcıoğlu, 2019) allowing for adaptations in teaching (Erol Erol-Sahillioğlu, 2020; Firat, 2021; Temur & Uslu, 2024; Tuzcuoğlu & Aydın, 2023), emphasising unity and togetherness (Temur & Uslu, 2024), in other words, as a positive concept. However, research results also show that teachers evaluate inclusive education as a limited approach that only addresses certain disadvantages, such as those of students with special needs and refugee students (Firat, 2021; Öztürk & Başkonuş, 2022). Analysing the meanings individuals attribute to inclusive education through metaphors can make important contributions to the structuring of inclusive education policies, curricula, and teacher education based on inclusivity.

The inclusive education course in teacher training programs

In Türkiye, the Council of Higher Education (CHE) updated the General Competencies of the Teaching Profession in 2017 and published a Teacher Strategy Document. These documents aim to improve teacher training programs in order to produce high-quality teachers. In line with the objectives of this document, the teacher training degree programs were renewed in 2018, pedagogical courses related to the teaching profession were reorganised, and new elective courses related to the teaching profession were added to the program. One of the added elective courses is the inclusive education course, which is the subject of this research (Council of Higher Education [CHE], 2018).

Before this regulation, pre-service teachers in Türkiye did not take a course or training related to inclusive education during their education in education faculties (Kula, 2020). In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in interest in inclusive education in Türkiye. In particular, over the last 10 years, the Ministry of National Education has placed emphasis on in-service teacher training through various projects carried out in collaboration with UNICEF. In this context, various programs have been implemented, such as 'Training for Syrian Teachers,' 'Training for Teachers with Foreign Students in Their Classrooms,' 'Inclusive Education,' and 'Inclusive Early Childhood Education Project for Children with Disabilities' (Ministry of Education, 2018). It can be argued that the rapid increase in the migrant population has been a significant factor in the growing interest in inclusive education in Türkiye over the past decade. With the outbreak of war in Syria in 2011, the mass migration movement deepened and turned into a humanitarian crisis (Şimşek & Kula, 2018; UNICEF, 2022). During this period, the number of Syrian children alone reached 1.2 million (UNICEF, 2022), while the total number of foreign students of school age in Türkiye, including children from other countries, was reported to be 1.4 million (Ministry of National Education [MONE], 2022). As in many areas of social life, increasing cultural diversity in schools requires the adoption of inclusive, culturally sensitive pedagogical approaches. In this regard, teachers' support for all students in an inclusive manner, acting with an approach based on unconditional acceptance, empathy and love, are among the basic conditions for creating an effective teaching environment. On the other hand, the inclusion of inclusive education as an international goal within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) has contributed to increasing awareness and policy-level orientations in this area, not only on a global scale but also in Türkiye in particular.

Research shows that teachers do not have sufficient knowledge in the field of inclusive education (Bal & Pamuk-Kahriman, 2019; Bayram & Öztürk, 2021; Boer et al., 2011; Hankebo, 2018; Sakız, 2016) and are unable to implement effective inclusive practices (Bayram & Öztürk, 2021).

Inclusive teacher behavior (Boer et al., 2011), conceptual knowledge of inclusion (Tangen & Beutel, 2017) and confidence levels about being an inclusive teacher (Forlin & Chambers, 2011) increase among teachers who have received training on inclusion. For this reason, it is thought that including inclusive education content and courses in teacher training programs will support positive inclusive teaching attitudes and behaviors among pre-service teachers. Teachers and pre-service teachers also consider that inclusive education is necessary in order to provide effective inclusive practices and equal educational opportunities (Akbulut et al., 2021; Asamoah et al., 2018; Bailey et al., 2015; Dooley, 2009; Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011; MacNevin, 2012; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2016). Positive perceptions, expectations and

attitudes of teachers towards this field are seen as the first condition for inclusive education practices to be effective and successful (Cook, 2002; Loreman et al., 2007). Thoughts, intuitions, expectations and perceptions that affect pre-service teachers' decisions, actions and confidence form a part of the tacit knowledge of pre-service teachers (Blasco, 2015; Richardson, 1996). In research, perceptions of inclusive education among pre-service teachers have been defined on a conceptual basis that plays an important role in pre-service teachers' thinking and future actions (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Silverman, 2010).

In Chaaban's (2025) study reviewing the literature on preparing teachers for educational equity and social justice, it is observed that publications in this field are largely concentrated in Global North countries, with the United States, Australia, and Canada among the countries that contribute the most. This situation reveals a clear imbalance in the geographical distribution of research on preparing teachers for inclusive education, with the topic being less studied in the Global South or countries with different socio-cultural structures. Mendoza and Heymann (2024), in their systematic review of studies on IE interventions in 19 low- and lower-middle-income countries, found that research in this area is quite limited and that more scientific studies are needed. From this perspective, the concept of inclusivity can take different forms and be applied in different ways depending on the unique social, cultural, and economic context of each country. This is because interpreting teacher standards in relation to context and locality encourages more equitable and inclusive educational practices (Corcoran et al., 2023). Therefore, high-quality research conducted in different contexts will not only fill the gaps in the inclusive education literature, but the integration of these findings into teacher training programs will also make important contributions to the reshaping of education policies and the transmission of inclusive values to future generations. This study aims to take a meaningful step towards addressing the aforementioned global research gap by examining pre-service teachers' metaphorical perceptions of IE in the Turkish context and the impact of their education on their professional perspectives. A literature review reveals the limited research on teacher candidates' perceptions of inclusive education and the effects of their education in this context. To fill this gap, the study aims to determine teacher candidates' perceptions of inclusive education and the effects of inclusive education courses on their perspectives on the teaching profession. In this context, the present study can help policymakers, education program creators, education administrators, teachers, and pre-service teachers to better understand IE, develop teacher training programs from an inclusive perspective, and plan ways to improve IE practices. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

- What are the metaphorical perceptions of inclusive education among pre-service teachers?
- How does the inclusive education course affect the perspective of pre-service teachers about teaching?

Method

Research design

The research was designed using a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is a powerful form of qualitative research for inquiry that focuses on examining an individual's

experiences in the world (Neubauer et al., 2019). The basic logic of phenomenological research is that people interpret the world as a result of their experience and that there is an essence of shared experience (Van Manen, 2016). For this reason, the experiences of different people about a phenomenon are analyzed and compared within a common bracket (Patton, 2014). For this purpose, in this study, inclusive education was considered as a phenomenon and pre-service teachers' perceptions of inclusive education were examined.

Participants

The participants for the research consisted of 130 pre-service teachers studying at the Faculty of Education of a state university in the Central Anatolian region of Türkiye who volunteered to participate in the research. These pre-service teachers were being trained to serve as regular education teachers in the future. Participants were determined by criterion sampling method, one of the purposive sampling methods. In this sampling method, participants are selected according to predetermined criteria in line with the purposes of the research (Patton, 2014). Since the aim of the study was to determine pre-service teachers' perceptions of inclusive education, the sample selection criteria were set as follows: participants must be enrolled in pre-service teacher training; must have taken a 14-week course on inclusive education; and must have voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. In line with these criteria, participants consisted of 130 pre-service teachers who completed inclusive education courses. Of the participants, 76.9% ($n = 100$) were female and 23.1% ($n = 30$) were male. The ages of the pre-service teachers varied between 20 and 43 years and the average age was 22.82. Of the pre-service teachers, 40.8% ($n = 53$) were studying social sciences teaching, 37.7% ($n = 49$) preschool teaching, 19.2% ($n = 25$) psychological counseling and guidance, and 2.3% ($n = 3$) science teaching. In order to conceal the identity of teacher candidates, individuals have been coded as 'Pt1', ... 'Pt2', etc.

Data collection and analysis

Before the data collection process, all participants were informed about the scope and content of the research and that the results would be evaluated scientifically. In the light of these explanations, the participants who agreed to participate in the research were included in the process. All of the pre-service teachers participating in the research completed a face-to-face inclusive education course for a total of 28 hours, two hours per week for 14 weeks. The curriculum included IE literature, legal regulations, philosophical, sociological and psychological foundations, classroom practices, disadvantaged groups (disabled people, children with broken families, etc.), students in need of special education and refugees. A number of pedagogies such as group activities, discussion, and inclusive classroom practice videos from different countries were used in the teaching process. In addition, participants attended six hours of classes on a specific day of the week and had the opportunity to observe and try out what they had learned at the university in the field by attending mainstream schools for 12 weeks as part of the 'Teaching Practice' course. In IE courses, pre-service teachers' experiences and observations with students during their internships and teaching skills appropriate to individual differences were also discussed. In order to determine the IE perceptions of the pre-service teachers through metaphors, a form containing the statement 'Inclusive education is like ... because, ...' was given to

them. They were asked to fill out this form according to their views on inclusive education. These figurative expressions used to obtain data have been used as metaphors. Metaphors attempt to describe meaning through an object, symbol or sign (Audi, 1999). In addition, the form asked 'How did what you learned about inclusive education affect your perspective on teaching?' With this question, the aim was to obtain in-depth views of pre-service teachers about inclusive education. Data were collected online in the 2021–22 fall semester. At the beginning of the data collection process, the participants were given detailed information about the purpose, scope and use of the data. Assurances were made that identities of the participants would be kept confidential.

The data were analyzed using content analysis. The data collected in the content analysis were first conceptualized, then these concepts were organized in a logical way and the situations that explained the data were thematized (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). Content analysis was conducted in four stages (Saban, 2008):

Coding and extraction: The data obtained from the pre-service teachers were read and data not related to the context or missing data were excluded from the analysis.

Category development: While pre-service teachers' metaphors about inclusive education were listed alphabetically, their views were categorized in accordance with codes. The metaphors with common features were gathered into the same group. Themes and categories were determined by content analysis.

Validity and reliability: No intervention was made to guide the participants as they produced metaphors and expressed their views. Credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are important concepts to ensure the validity of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this context, the researcher included the views of the participants with direct quotations and conveyed all the processes in the research to the reader in detail in the research report. The aim was to ensure transferability by including rich and dense descriptions in the findings section (Merriam & Turan, 2013).

In order to ensure inter-coder reliability in the research, the metaphors divided into conceptual categories and the comprehensive education views of the pre-service teachers were presented to two educational science experts who were competent in qualitative research, and consistency analysis was conducted. The formula $[(\text{Agreements}) / (\text{Agreements} + \text{Disagreements})] \times 100$ was used for inter-coder reliability. A value of .90, which is above the critical level, shows the consistency of coding among the two researchers (Miles & Huberman, 2002).

Interpretation of data: Findings were produced by interpreting the data obtained from pre-service teachers to form meaningful wholes.

Results

Metaphors of pre-service teachers for inclusive education

The metaphors of pre-service teachers about IE and the conceptual categories expressed by these metaphors are given in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that pre-service teachers created 71 metaphors in 14 different conceptual categories related to inclusive education. The conceptual categories related to inclusive education metaphors created by the pre-service teachers are provided in Figure 1.

Pre-service teachers' perceptions about IE suggest that it is a structure that prevents separation, is unifying, sensitive to differences, egalitarian, based on unconditional acceptance, explores differences, protects, guides, is vital, remedial, makes education meaningful, is the responsibility of the teacher, can create a chain reaction and affects society. Examples of metaphors used by pre-service teachers who emphasized the unifying and preventive nature of inclusive education are as follows:

Inclusive education is like the world. Because people of different nationalities, races and characteristics live together in harmony in the world. Pt20

Examples of metaphors by pre-service teachers who thought that inclusive education was a concept that emphasizes sensitivity to differences are as follows:

Inclusive education is like a colourful flower garden. Because each flower has a different scent, need for water, and need for time in the sun. Just like children, each of them has different intelligence, learning style and ability. Pt31

It is like a rainbow because it contains all the beautiful colours. Pt11

A metaphor example from pre-service teachers who thought that inclusive education was an egalitarian concept is as follows:

Inclusive education is like scales because everyone is equal no matter how the student fares. Pt35

A metaphor example from pre-service teachers who perceived that inclusive education was based on the unconditional acceptance of individuals is as follows:

Inclusive education is like the sun, because the sun reaches all people without discrimination and barriers. Pt62

A metaphor example for pre-service teachers who thought that inclusive education was a concept that explores differences is as follows:

Inclusive education is like a game of blinds because it touches every person without knowing their specifics. Pt53

Effects of the inclusive education course on the pre-service teachers perspectives about the teaching profession

The findings regarding the effects of the inclusive education course on pre-service teachers' perspectives about teaching are provided in [Table 2](#).

In [Table 2](#), the views of pre-service teachers about teaching were grouped under three sub-themes: personality characteristics, professional characteristics and perception of inclusive education. The inclusive education course affected the personality characteristics according to the views of the pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers stated that due to this course, they were more unprejudiced, more sensitive to differences, accepted their students unconditionally, and were egalitarian, empathetic, patient, tolerant, loving, devoted, compassionate, fair, and democratic. Examples of these views of pre-service teachers are as follows:

Table 1. Metaphors created by pre-service teachers about inclusive education.

Category	Metaphor	f	Category	Metaphor	f	
Anti-segregation, unifying	1. world	4	Egalitarian	33. mother	8	
	2. family	4		34. scales	3	
	3. universe	4		35. fingers of a hand	2	
	4. puzzle	3		36. the foundation of the house	1	
	5. sea	2		37. seesaw	1	
	6. tree	2		38. military service	1	
	7. integral part of the whole	2		39. equality	1	
	8. tree roots and branches	1		40. justice	1	
	9. picture	1		Unconditional acceptance	41. mother	3
	10. clothing patch	1			42. unconditional acceptance	3
	Sensitive to differences	11. religion	1	Exploring differences	43. love	2
		12. rubber band	1		44. rainbow	2
		13. bridge	1		45. sun	2
		14. space	1		46. salad	1
		15. mixed ice cream in a cone	1		47. water	1
		16. soil	1		48. open air concert	1
		17. integration	1		49. liquid	1
		18. octopus	1		50. rose	1
		19. bookshelf	1		51. sun	2
		20. hug	1		52. storybook	1
21. ocean		1	53. glasses	1		
22. biosphere		1	54. sky	1		
Vital		23. rainbow	8	Protective	55. unknown music	1
		24. life	5		56. blind game	1
		25. material accumulated by the stream	1		57. umbrella	2
		26. colours in nature	1		58. mother	1
		27. world children's day	1		Pathfinder	59. tree
	28. sky	1	60. guide			2
	29. book	1	61. star			1
	30. flower garden	1	62. resource book			1
	31. colourful sugary gums in the box	1				
	32. a tree that bears more than one kind of fruit	1				
Remedial	63. life	3				
	64. water	1				
Making education meaningful	65. curative guidance	1				
	66. medicine	1				
Objective view	67. salt	1				
Teacher responsibility	68. water	1				
Chain reaction	69. conscience	1				
Influence society	70. domino	1				
	71. beaver	1				

There were many refugee students at the school where I did my internship. I broke through my previous prejudice against refugees, thanks to the inclusive education course, and entered the classroom. I looked into the eyes of the students, and there I saw not refugees but children with bright hope for the future. Pt31

Pre-service teachers stated that the inclusive education course also affected their professional characteristics. They stated that this course developed teaching skills suitable for individual differences, increased their positive attitudes towards teaching, emphasized the importance of teachers in accepting the differences of individuals, developed their classroom management skills based on individual differences, increased their awareness

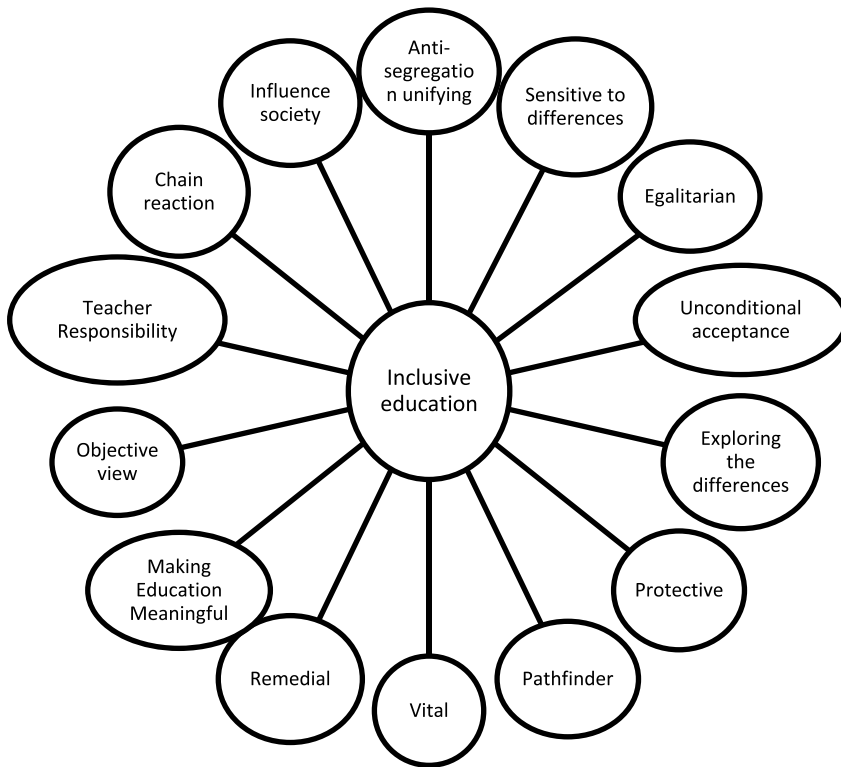


Figure 1. Conceptual categories related to inclusive education metaphors of pre-service teachers.

Table 2. Reflections of the inclusive education course on pre-service teachers' perspectives about the teaching profession.

Theme	Sub-theme	Code	f
Reflection on the teaching profession	Personality characteristics	unprejudiced	24
		sensitivity to differences	22
		unconditional acceptance	21
		egalitarian	11
		empathy	3
		patience	2
		tolerance	2
		love	1
		devotion	1
		compassion	1
		fairness	1
		democratic	1
		Professional characteristics	teaching skills suitable for individual differences
	positive attitude towards teaching		8
	teacher's role in accepting differences		7
	classroom management skills suitable for individual differences		2
	awareness of the physical conditions of inclusive schools		1
	Perception of inclusive education	contemporary teaching practices	1
		meaning and scope of inclusive education	17
		awareness of the importance of inclusive schools	9

of the characteristics of inclusive schools, and increased their level of knowledge about contemporary teaching practices. Some examples of pre-service teachers' views about these sub-themes are as follows:

I can say that this course has affected my perspective not only on teaching but also on humanity. I realized once again that when you accept everyone, you make yourself and others happy. I have seen that accepting not only special needs but different children and taking action for them will be enough for them to reveal their potential. A person really does bloom when they are understood. As I try to understand my students, they will become flowers, open their petals and continue to bloom. Pt56

This course helped me to better understand that my job is not just to teach students, but that I am in a position to touch their lives. Pt77

The last finding obtained from the views of pre-service teachers about the inclusive education course is that this course affected the inclusive education perceptions of the pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers stated that they learned the meaning and scope of the concept of inclusive education better thanks to this course. In addition, pre-service teachers stated that their awareness about the importance of inclusive schools increased after taking this course. Here are a few examples of these views:

Until a while ago, the concept of inclusiveness corresponded to education given to individuals with special needs in my literature. With the awareness I have gained, the disadvantaged groups we have mentioned include refugee children, child workers, those who have experienced neglect and abuse, children whose parents are divorced, dependent children, etc. I learned that it is a universal concept that includes many groups. Pt109

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to determine pre-service teachers' metaphorical perceptions of IE and how the inclusive education course they took influenced their perspectives on teaching. Perceptions of inclusive education among pre-service teachers suggest that it prevents separation, is unifying, respects differences, is egalitarian, is based on unconditional acceptance, explores differences, protects, guides, is vital, remedial, gives meaning to education, is a responsibility of teachers, has a chain reaction, and affects society. When the inclusive education literature in the introduction part of this research is examined, the metaphors put forward by pre-service teachers offer conceptual categories that overlap with this literature (see, for example, Armstrong et al., 2011; Mayer et al., 2017; Sakız, 2019). As a result of similar research conducted with preschool teachers, the metaphorical perceptions of teachers about inclusive education are included in the categories of equality, adaptation, being unifying, vital and togetherness, and therefore, they are similar to the results of this research (Erol-Sahillioğlu, 2020). Gerosimou and Messiou (2023) also emphasise that teachers need to develop pedagogical approaches to student diversity and that treating all children as equal is a fundamental principle of IE. However, the study reveals that teachers still evaluate students based on 'deficit thinking'. In this regard, our research highlights the transformative potential of current teacher value systems by reminding us that pre-service teachers are able to evaluate IE from a positive, constructive, and transformative perspective.

Positive perceptions of pre-service teachers and teachers about inclusive education play a considerable role in the successful implementation of inclusive education in schools (Boer et al., 2011; Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Kim, 2014; Meijer, 2003). Pre-service teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards IE are important determinants of their future approaches to students with special needs and diverse characteristics; these attitudes are considered to be a major predictor of whether inclusive practices will be implemented (Ruppar, 2017; Sze, 2009). There are many studies in the literature that reveal that teachers generally have positive attitudes towards IE (Caurcel Cara et al., 2021; Chaudhary, 2016; Chiner & Cardona, 2013; Hoskin et al., 2015; Logan & Bogart, 2020). These findings indicate that teachers embrace the principle of inclusivity at a principled level and support the right to education for all students. However, despite these positive attitudes, it is noteworthy that teachers tend to be reluctant to have disadvantaged or special needs students in their classrooms (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Ismiatun & Atika, 2020; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). This situation shows that, although attitudes towards IE are positive at a theoretical level, difficulties encountered in practice, such as inadequate equipment, lack of resources and limited support mechanisms, may make teachers reluctant to implement inclusive classroom environments. In other words, this inconsistency between positive attitudes and actual practice reveals that inclusive education is not merely a value-based acceptance but also requires systematic support, professional development, and appropriate conditions.

Research findings revealing that there are also some negative attitudes towards inclusive education are known (Boer et al., 2011). For example, it is accepted that it is not appropriate for students who need special education and students whose Turkish is not sufficient to attend regular schools. It was determined that the idea of being educated in the same class with non-disadvantaged students was approached more positively for other disadvantaged groups (for example, gypsies, street children, children from traumatized and broken families, etc.; Bayram & Öztürk, 2021). In research conducted by Bešić et al. (2020), an exclusionary perception towards refugees in Austria was mentioned. One of the main obstacles arising from teachers about inclusive education is their negative attitudes and behaviors towards disadvantaged students (Bayram & Öztürk, 2021). The incomplete and inadequate education given to teachers both before and during employment can be listed among the main reasons for this negative attitude.

The pre-service teachers stated that they had gained a better understanding of the meaning and scope of IE thanks to the inclusive education course. In addition, pre-service teachers stated that their awareness of the importance of inclusive schools increased after taking this course. It is a finding that IE courses increase individuals' knowledge and awareness of inclusive literature, which is also found in other research results (Tangen & Beutel, 2017). It is known that pre-service teachers who have not taken any course or training related to inclusion before perceive inclusive education as a limited concept that includes only students who need special education (Kula, 2020). In a study conducted with teachers in Romania, teachers did not know the meaning and scope of inclusive education sufficiently, but they thought that they knew the concept well. It was stated that teachers have very serious conceptual confusion about inclusive education and integrated education and they confuse both concepts (Maria, 2013). This lack of knowledge about inclusivity may be due to the lack of pedagogical training and courses in this field in teacher education (Leiva-Olivencia et al., 2021; Loreman et al., 2013; Ocloo &

Subbey, 2008). The results of the research reveal the necessity of including inclusive education in teacher education programs and in-service training.

Pre-service teachers perceived positive changes in their personalities through the IE course. Pre-service teachers stated that thanks to this course, they were more unprejudiced, more sensitive to differences, accepted their students unconditionally, and were egalitarian, empathetic, patient, tolerant, loving, devoted, compassionate, fair, and democratic. Studies have shown that pre-service teachers think that a teacher in inclusive education should have many affective characteristics such as being fair, tolerant, respectful to individual differences, patient, understanding, sensitive, loving, democratic, having high communication skills, empathetic, caring and compassionate (Kula, 2020). Gerosimou and Messiou (2023) emphasise that most teachers have prejudiced attitudes towards students, particularly labelling them based on academic achievement, family structure and ethnic origin. In this context, Gerosimou and Messiou (2023) argue that teachers' personal value systems need to be transformed through professional development. Our current research findings, however, reinforce the belief that an effective structured IE course can transform not only the pedagogical but also the ethical, emotional, and human aspects of pre-service teachers.

Due to the inclusive education course, the pre-service teachers who participated in the study stated that they developed teaching skills suitable for individual differences, increased their positive attitude towards teaching, realized the importance of teachers in accepting the differences of individuals, developed classroom management skills suitable for individual differences, increased their awareness of the characteristics of inclusive schools, and increased their level of knowledge about contemporary teaching practices. In summary, pre-service teachers who took the IE course believe that their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness regarding disadvantaged students have increased. Although self-perceptions may be limited in that they may not fully reflect individuals' actual application skills, Sharma and Nuttal's (2016) experimental study shows that these perceptions are based on certain objective grounds. The study experimentally demonstrated that the IE course positively changed pre-service teachers' attitudes, reduced their concerns about inclusive practices, and increased their competence levels. Similarly, Sharma et al. (2015) confirmed that attitudes toward IE are the strongest predictor of pre-service teachers' intentions to teach in inclusive classrooms. Specifically, by the end of the course, attitude alone became the only variable that significantly predicted teacher candidates' 'intention to teach in an inclusive classroom.' In other words, the findings support the idea that positive attitudes can be a strong indicator of future inclusive practices. These findings support the consistency of self-perception-based results obtained from qualitative data with experimental research and reinforce the idea that inclusive teacher training is an effective intervention area. As pre-service teachers gain more practical experience and extend their training periods, their awareness, attitudes, and self-efficacy beliefs regarding inclusivity increase (Charles et al., 2023; Chhetri et al., 2023; Friesen & Cuning, 2020; Hoskin et al., 2015; Koliqi et al., 2023). These findings indicate that, in addition to systematically offering courses on IE in teacher training programs, increasing opportunities for practice-based learning can also strengthen pre-service teachers' awareness of inclusivity and their perceptions of their own competence. Therefore, it is important that IE courses in teacher training programs are designed in a long-term structure that integrates theoretical knowledge with practical

experience. Studies in the literature confirm that teachers who receive in-service training about inclusive education give more space to inclusive education in their classroom practices (Kozikoğlu & Yıldırımoğlu, 2021). According to the studies by Oswald and Swart (2011) and Forlin and Chambers (2011), pre-service teachers who take IE courses become more willing to include students with disabilities in their classrooms; however, despite this positive attitude, it is noteworthy that their concerns about practical difficulties related to inclusive practices increase after the course. This situation demonstrates that theoretical knowledge and awareness alone are not sufficient to eliminate practical difficulties. Therefore, it can be said that pre-service teachers need more supportive internship processes in which they can experience inclusive practices in real classroom environments.

In addition, it is known that teachers' inclusive education attitudes, perceptions and practices are supported by different courses. For example, teachers who take a special education course have more positive perceptions of inclusive education than those who do not (Avsar Tuncay & Kizilaslan, 2021; Boer et al., 2011; Van Reusen et al., 2000). In addition, the experience of working with disadvantaged students positively affected teachers' perceptions of inclusive education (Avsar Tuncay & Kizilaslan, 2021; Boer et al., 2011; Temel, 2000). Therefore, it is considered beneficial to include more practice courses in teacher training programs, where pre-service teachers can increase their experience of working with students with different characteristics. In addition, studies with mainstream teachers show that teachers also consider it necessary to receive pre-service and in-service training about inclusive education (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Avramidis et al., 2000; Khochen & Radford, 2012; Nwoko et al., 2022; Page et al., 2019). However, teachers do not receive adequate training on inclusion (Bailey et al., 2015; Nwoko et al., 2022).

Limitations

There are many obvious limitations to the study. The fact that the pre-service teachers participating in the research had taken courses on inclusive education may have positively affected their perceptions. In previous studies, pre-service teachers who have not taken any courses or training about inclusion before did not have sufficient knowledge and awareness about inclusive education, and they perceived inclusive education as a limited concept that includes only students in need of special education (Kula, 2020). Pre-service teachers have this perception of inclusive education from the lessons they take and their limited classroom practice experience. Undoubtedly, research should also be designed to determine the inclusive education views and experiences of teachers who are actively involved in practice and who work with students with many different characteristics. This research was designed by using a qualitative method with pre-service teachers studying at a state university in the central Anatolian region of Türkiye. The research results were obtained from the self-perceptions of pre-service teachers. No analysis was conducted prior to the research. In order to obtain more generalisable results, studies should be designed that are supported by experimental, screening or mixed designs involving a larger number of participants from different regions.

Conclusion

IE is emerging as a field that plays a critical role in making education systems more equitable, egalitarian, and responsive, and is at the centre of teacher training programs today. The findings of this study conducted in the Turkish context reveal that pre-service teachers' metaphorical perceptions of IE are shaped around an understanding that is respectful of differences, unifying, contributes to social transformation, and is based on teacher responsibility. They stated that this course had a positive impact on their personality traits and professional perspectives; that their prejudices had decreased and that they had developed into more empathetic, patient and inclusive teachers. They also stated that they had made progress in teaching and classroom management skills appropriate to individual differences.

Although these results are shaped by the self-perceptions of pre-service teachers, they demonstrate the transformative potential of such courses in the teacher training process. Although the research appears to be limited to the Turkish context, the ideas expressed by pre-service teachers through metaphorical narratives establish a strong connection with the universal principles of IE. As Slee (2011) also states, IE invites us to adapt to changing contexts and new times, as well as changing populations, by restructuring both ourselves and our educational approaches.

This study provides a strong rationale for the need to restructure teacher training programs around inclusive approaches, both theoretically and practically. At the same time, it reveals that metaphor-based qualitative data aimed at understanding pre-service teachers' perspectives on IE offer rich insights that can contribute to the development of IE policies at the global level.

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