

# Preservice Special Education Teachers' Democratic Tendencies and Attitudes towards Children Rights

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**Abstract:** It is important for special education teachers to have sufficient levels of democratic tendencies in order to have respect for cultural values and have positive attitudes towards children rights to defend rights of children with special needs and their families. In this study, it is aimed to examine preservice special education teachers' democratic tendencies and attitudes towards children's rights according to demographic characteristics. The sample of the study, which was prepared in accordance with the relational survey model, consisted of 251 preservice special education teachers. As a data collection tool, Attitude Scale towards Children Rights and Teacher Candidate Democratic Tendency Scale were used. The data obtained from the study were analyzed by using SPSS 22.0 statistical program using Mann Whitney U, Kruskal Wallis, Pearson Chi-Square, Phi and Cramer's V test techniques. Results were discussed with relevant literature and recommendations for further research and practices are presented.

**Keywords:** *Preservice special education teachers; democratic tendency; children rights; children with special needs.*

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## 1. Introduction

The most important element that comes to mind when it comes to education is the teacher. The quality of the teacher determines the quality of education. Even if the most effective educational programs, schools, tools, methods and techniques are used; when teachers do not have the desired qualities, the outcomes would be inappropriate (Demir & Köse, 2016; Nilson, 2016; Stronge, 2018). The role of teachers in the development of societies and education system is at the forefront. In today's teacher, role models and leadership are prominent. Education is a process that takes into account the differences and needs of each child, adopts some universal values and aims to make them productive individuals. Education, which is a recognized right to all people in the world and an indispensable tool for the acquisition, protection and development of rights, should value children, provide them with life skills and try to apply them in a way that is worthy of the child's dignity. In developed societies, in order to fulfil this function of education, protecting the rights of the citizens and providing an equal education environment is seen as very important (Prachagool & Nuangchalerm, 2019; Yurtseven & Altun, 2015).

One of the most important issues that need to be treated in schools is respect for differences and this means that education is carried out by considering the cultural characteristics of individuals. It is very important for teachers to be able to respond to the cultural and democratic needs of students as well as academic issues, and primarily to be humanistic, fair, patient and respectful to different views (Forlin, Sharma & Loreman, 2007). Cultural discrimination can prevent equality in education, which is one of the child's fundamental rights. The consequences of inequality in educational settings might lead to frustration, misunderstanding, intercultural conflict and ultimately school failure (Le Roux, 2002). For this reason, it is important for teachers to develop their democratic tendencies and understanding towards cultural tendencies and children rights.

Teachers with a high awareness of intercultural sensitivity can avoid possible discrimination and conflict. The importance of intercultural sensitivity and the use of this skill in every area of life is a priority for the students to gain the intercultural sensitivity which is seen as one of the skills that increase the importance of interpersonal communication. The task of acquiring democratic life culture and democratic values are the main tasks of the school and the education program as well. Dimitriadis and Carlson (2003) associates the development of a democratic culture of life with the

democratic system of education. In this respect, students from pre-school education, including higher education; gain critical thinking, questioning and discussion skills.

The most important thing for the education of individuals who have turned democratic values into a lifestyle is the school environment and teachers who have adopted these values. Within this structure, the beliefs and values system of the teachers who are the beginning of the system and how they perceive and interpret the structure in which they exist are important. In order for individual freedom to be realized, it is clear that there is a need for a democratic education program that will develop the student laying the ground for the individual to think freely in a way that satisfies his motivation by supporting his imagination (Hotaman, 2010; Stavroussi, Didaskalou & Greif-Green, 2020). Democratic education is a way of education that focuses on improving interpersonal and intercultural relationships in classrooms (Akyildiz, 2018; Biesta, 2015; Rowland, 2003).

Children with disabilities could not benefit from their rights on education, rehabilitation, appropriate health care, play or job opportunities, and being with other children in the past. Today, in some societies, many children with disabilities are still unable to benefit from their rights. Lundy and Kilpatrick (2006) stated that the educational needs of children with disabilities were not adequately met, although they were not mentioned in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In fact, children with disabilities are the most frequently abused by adults responsible for them.

Children's rights in Turkey is guaranteed by both national and international law. In the context of national law, various provisions on the rights of the child were included in the 1982 Constitution. It is emphasized that cognitive, physical, social, emotional, moral and spiritual development of children is ensured by the principles of non-discrimination and respect for the child's views (Akar, 2013; Brownlee, 2003; Yüksel, 2019). Therefore, students should be assured that their rights are respected in the school environment and teachers play an important role in undertaking this task. Therefore, teachers should be informed with some competence and positive attitudes as well as pedagogical education and field knowledge. The rights of all students, regardless of their cultural background, identity, achievement and individual characteristics, should be known and protected in schools where students from all walks of society are together. Diversity should be approached positively, cultural pluralism should be encouraged, and students should develop multicultural and global perspectives. Based on all these points, the aim of this study is to examine preservice special education teachers' democratic tendencies and attitudes towards children rights and

reveal whether there are differences according to these variables and demographic characteristics.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research Model

Relational survey model was used in this study. Relational survey models are research models which aims to determine the existence and / or degree of change between two and more variables (Karasar, 2006). In the study, no control group was used for comparison; multiple relationships between dependent and independent variables were sought.

### 2.2. Participants

In accordance with the distribution in the population, the sample consists of a total of 251 voluntary students who were randomly selected from Department of Special Education. Demographic characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1. As it can be seen from the table, 91 of the participants were female (36.3%) and 160 of them were male (63.7%). Most of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 22 (f=159; 63.3%), 23 and 27 (f=77; 30.7%) and 28 and above (f=15; 6.0%). It is seen that majority of the participants were second year students (f=126; 50.2%) and most of them reported that they did not receive a lecture on special education laws before (f=165; 65.7%).

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the participants

Characteristic		n	%
Gender	Female	91	36.3
	Male	160	63.7
Age	18-22	159	63.3
	23-27	77	30.7
	28 and above	15	6.0
Class level	1st year	19	7.6
	2nd year	126	50.2
	3rd year	78	31.1
	4th year	28	11.2
Status on receiving a lecture on special education laws before or not	Yes	86	34.3
	No	165	65.7

### ***2.3. Data Collection Tools***

Demographic information form, Attitude Scale towards Children's Rights and Teacher Candidate Democratic Tendency Scale were used to collect the data of the study. Demographic information form was developed by the researchers by examining the related literature in order to reveal the demographic characteristics of preservice special education teachers. The form included questions on gender, age, class level and status on receiving a lecture on special education laws before or not. Teacher Candidate Democratic Tendency Scale is a 5-point Likert type scale and has a total of 18 items. The scale was developed by Akbaşı, Yanpar-Yelken & Sunbul (2010). The responses were "Completely Disagree", "Slightly Agree", "Partly Agree", "Completely Agree" and "Exactly Agree". The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the general scale was found to be .74 (Akbaşı, Yanpar-Yelken & Sunbul, 2010).

Attitude Scale towards Children's Rights was prepared in a 5-point Likert form. There are 22 items on children's vital, developmental, protection and participation rights. For these expressions, there are response options of "Completely Agree", "Agree", "Undecided", "Disagree" and "Completely Disagree". The responses to the statements were scored as 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 in the same order, and the high score obtained from the scale indicates a negative attitude. The lowest score to be taken from the scale is 22 and the highest score is 110. Karaman-Kepeneci and Baydik (2006) showed that the scale was single factor, the items total scale correlation coefficients ranged between .32 and .61, Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient was determined as .85 and half test reliability coefficient was .77.

### ***2.4. Data Collection Process***

This research was approved by Scientific Research Ethics Committee of the university. After obtaining the necessary permissions for the study, the researchers asked to the instructors in the Department of Special Education for their permission to apply the data collection tools during the lecture hours. Informed consent forms were presented to the preservice special education teachers who were reached within the scope of the study. They were informed that participation in the study is on a voluntary basis and they can withdraw from the study if they want. It took approximately 20-25 minutes for the participants to complete the forms.

### ***2.5. Data Analysis***

The data obtained from the study were analyzed with the SPSS 22.0 program. Descriptive statistics related to participants were examined with frequency and percentages. “Single Sample Kolmogorov Smirnov Test” and “Levene Homogeneity Test” were used in order to determine whether the participants had normal distribution or not for the analyzes related to the total score obtained from the related scales according to demographic characteristics. As a result, it was found that not all of the data groups obtained as a result of the application showed a normal distribution and only some data groups had homogeneity characteristics. Nonparametric Mann Whitney U and Kruskal Wallis Test techniques were used for the analysis of the research data and regression analysis could not be performed because of the same reason, in order to use the parametric tests, the sample group should show a homogeneous and normal distribution (Eymen, 2007).

Chi-Square Independence Test is an analysis method which is used to reveal whether there is a co-change between two variables. The chi-square distribution is often used to test two independent qualitative criteria. Zero hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>) means that two criteria are independent and research hypothesis (H<sub>A</sub>) means that the relationship between the two criteria is expressed (Gungor & Bulut, 2008).

### **3. Results**

Table 2 summarizes the results of the analysis of the relationship between preservice special education teachers' attitudes towards children's rights and democratic tendencies, teacher's democratization, student-oriented democratization, classroom management and freedom of expression and some demographic characteristics. As shown in the table, when gender, age, department and grade level of the preservice special education teachers are examined, no significant difference was found. A significant difference was found between the preservice special education teachers' status on receiving a course on special education laws before or not. When the average of the rankings were examined, it was found that the total score of democratic tendencies and teacher's democratization score were higher among the teacher candidates who received courses about special education laws before.

Table 2. Results on Preservice Special Education Teachers' Attitudes Towards Children's Rights and Democratic Tendency

Variables***	Attitudes towards children rights		Total scores on democratic tendencies		Teacher Democracy		Student democratization		Classroom management		Freedom of expression	
	Z	P	Z	P	Z	P	Z	P	Z	P	Z	P
Gender	.973	.331	-.075	.940	-.285	.776	-1.317	.188	-.360	.719	-2.632	.008
Status on receiving lecture on special education laws	-2.728	.006	-3.086	.002*	-3.040	.002*	-2.924	.003**	-1.355	.175	-1.289	.197
Variables***	Attitudes towards children rights		Total scores on democratic tendencies		Teacher Democracy		Student democratization		Classroom management		Freedom of expression	
*	X <sup>2</sup>	P	X <sup>2</sup>	P	X <sup>2</sup>	P	X <sup>2</sup>	P	X <sup>2</sup>	P	X <sup>2</sup>	P
Age	.169	.919	.050	.975	.832	.660	.227	.893	1.821	.402	.185	.912
Class level	3.125	.373	2.297	.513	2.462	.482	4.840	.184	3.157	.368	3.090	.378

\*\*\*Statistical analysis: Mann Whitney U Test \*\*\*\* Statistical analysis: Kruskal Wallis Test  
N=296, \*p< 0.05, \*\*p< 0.01

Table 3 shows the results of the analysis of the relationship between pre-service special education teachers' status on receiving a course on special education laws before and some demographic characteristics. As it can be seen in Table 3, significant correlation was found between .456 and .137 with age, .185 with age, .579 with class, and gender of the prospective teachers regarding the course of law. When the rank averages are examined; it was determined that female students have a higher rate of law-related courses than male students; that the age group taking the law-related courses is 28 years of age and older, and that the rate of taking courses increases as the age increases.

Table 3. Results on the Analysis of the Relationship between Preservice Special Education Teachers' Status on Receiving Lecture on Special Education Laws and Demographic Characteristics

Status on Receiving Lecture on Special Education Laws		Yes	No	Total	Pearson X <sup>2</sup>	Sd	P	Phi	Phi P	
Gender	Female	Count value	39	52	91	4.681	1	.030**	.137	.030**
		Expected count value	31.2	59.8	91.0					
		%	% 42.9	% 57.1	% 100					
	Male	Count value	47	113	160					
		Expected count value	54.8	105.2	160					
		%	% 29.4	% 70.6	% 100					
Age	18-22	Count value	44	115	159	8.618	2	.013**	.185	.013**
		Expected count value	54.5	104.5	159.0					
		%	% 27.7	% 72.3	% 100					
	23-27	Count value	36	41	77					
		Expected count value	26.4	50.6	77.0					
		%	% 46.8	% 53.2	% 100					
	28 and above	Count value	6	9	15					
		Expected count value	5.1	9.9	15.0					
		%	% 40.0	% 60.0	% 100					
First year	Count value	3	16	19	52.196	3	.000*	.456	.000*	
	Expected count	6.5	12.5	19.0						



Class level		value							
		%	% 15.8	% 84.2	% 100				
2nd year	Count value	20	106	126					
	Expected count value	43.2	82.8	126.0					
	%	% 15.9	% 84.1	% 100					
3rd year	Count value	48	30	78					
	Expected count value	26.7	51.3	78.0					
	%	% 61.5	% 38.5	% 100					
4th year	Count value	15	13	28					
	Expected count value	9.6	18.4	28.0					
	%	% 53.6	% 46.4	% 100					

Statistical analysis: Pearson Chi-square Test & Phi and Cramer's V Test  
N=296, \*p< 0.05, \*\*p< 0.01

#### 4. Discussion

This study tried to examine preservice special education teachers' democratic tendencies and attitudes towards children rights and reveal whether there are differences according to these variables and demographic characteristics. In line with this aim, participants who were preservice special education teachers were administered two scale including "Teacher Candidate Democratic Tendency Scale" and "Attitude Scale towards Children's Rights". According to the results, there was no significant difference between preservice special education teachers' age, gender, class level and democratic tendencies. In parallel with these results, Bal and Yanpar-Yelken (2011) showed that the democratic tendencies of the preservice special education teachers did not differ significantly according to their gender. In contrast, Zehir-Topkaya and Yavuz (2011) found that senior students reported the highest rate of democratic values. Yazici (2011) found that university students have high democratic values and it was determined that the variables such as gender, education type, class level, settlement, mother's education level, number of siblings, graduated high school type, age and

income levels did not make a significant difference on their democratic values.

A significant difference was found between the preservice special education teachers' status on receiving a course on special education laws before or not. When the average of the rankings were examined, it was found that the total score of democratic tendencies and teacher's democratization score were higher among the teacher candidates who received courses about special education laws before. Similarly, Leblebici and Celikoz (2017) indicated that one of the factors that have an effect on the attitudes of teacher candidates is that they have read and learned the "child rights convention". Prospective teachers who read the convention on the rights of the child have a more positive attitude towards the rights of the child than those who do not. Therefore, it can be considered that teacher candidates who are informed about laws in some ways have an insight about the laws and regulations and have more positive attitudes. However, Inan and Dervent (2013) examined physical education and classroom teacher candidates who have taken classroom management course were examined in terms of their understanding of classroom management and their democratic tendencies and no relationship was found. Deb and Mathews (2012) found that teachers generally reported higher attitudes when they are more experienced in terms of profession.

It is an inevitable fact that special education teachers need to have sufficient levels of democratic tendencies in order to provide a school environment which is equal and have respect for cultural values and have positive attitudes towards children rights to defend rights of children with special needs and their families. As a result of the research, it is important to verify the findings of a research involving a larger sample group on democratic tendency and attitudes towards children rights. Based on the results, elective courses can be added to the education programs of the departments with lower democratic tendency scores. Similar studies can also be carried out with faculty members. In addition, a study can be carried out that demonstrates the attitudes towards children rights and democratic tendencies of academicians from the area of special education who prepare preservice teachers for the profession. It can be considered that adding courses about teacher education for preservice teachers about democracy education and children rights will contribute to this process.

In addition to the variables investigated in the study, further research can be conducted on different variables. In addition to this study where quantitative research method is used, qualitative research can also be conducted for in-depth investigations. Democrat teachers who are able to

give the necessary importance to democracy and rights are needed for the development, continuity of democracy and children's rights and to contribute to democracy to the desired extent. Therefore, in order for the preservice special education teachers of higher education institutions to graduate with the necessary equipment and knowledge, training can be provided on this subject.

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