

15th European Conference on Developmental Psychology

23-27 August 2011 - Bergen - Norway



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Beliefs and attitudes of typically developing preschoolers towards Children with Special Educational Needs: Acceptance or Rejection?

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Summary

This study examines factors, which may influence the acceptance of young children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). The participants were eighty nine (89) typically developing preschoolers. Children's attitudes towards children with SEN were assessed by the Acceptance Scale for Kindergarten-Revised (ASK-R). The findings suggest that the attendance of children with SEN in the regular preschool classroom and father's educational level affect positively the beliefs and attitudes of typically developing preschoolers towards them.

Introduction

Research worldwide includes a variety of studies which focus on the attitudes of typically developing children towards children with SEN. Even though there are studies that show negative attitudes of children without SEN towards children with SEN (e.g. Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002), there are also research efforts which show positive attitudes of preschool (e.g. Nikolarazi, Kumar, Favazza, Sideridis, Koulousiou, & Riall, 2005) and school-aged children (e.g. Bunch & Valeo, 2004). The present study aims to explore factors that may influence the acceptance of young children with SEN such as the gender of typically developing children – a factor extensively explored by previous studies, but also some other factors overlooked in the existing literature such as parental educational level. More specifically, the present study aims to answer the following research

questions: 1.Does the gender of typically developing preschoolers affect their perception of children with SEN? 2.Does the presence of children with SEN in class along with typically developing children affect the latter's perception of children with SEN? 3.Does the educational level of their parents play a role on their perception of children with SEN?

Methods

Sample

A total of eighty nine (89) typically developing preschoolers (4-6 years old) participated in the study. These children were enrolled in five different preschool classrooms from three kindergartens situated in two cities on Crete, Greece. Out of the total 89 children, 40 were boys (44.9%) and 49 girls (55.1%). 23 children (25.8%) were enrolled in an inclusive kindergarten classroom, whilst 66 (74.2%) were distributed in non-inclusive classrooms.

Measures

Beliefs and attitudes of typically developing preschoolers towards children with SEN were assessed by providing the Acceptance Scale for Kindergarten-Revised (ASK-R) according to the guidelines of the greek adaptation (Nikolarazi et al., 2005). The ASK-R is an 18 item, three point scale that requires children to respond yes, no, or maybe to questions that measure acceptance and non-acceptance of children with SEN (e.g. Would you like to be good friends with a kid with special needs?).

Results

We calculated the sum of the 18 questions of the scale, which involve behavior toward children with SEN. Two questions were used with reversed scores because they express a negative view. Therefore, a high total score of a respondent is interpreted as a general acceptance of children with SEN. In order to test whether there is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of boys and girls, we used the t-test for two independent samples. The difference of the mean values was not statistically significant ($t=0,229$, $df=86$, $p\text{-value}=0,819$). In order to test whether the presence of a child with SEN in the classroom affects the mean scores of the scale, we used the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test (because of the large difference in sizes of two samples). The difference between the mean values was statistically significant at significance level $\alpha = 0,05$ ($U = 441,5$, $p\text{-value} < 0,05$). (See Figure 1). Furthermore, we

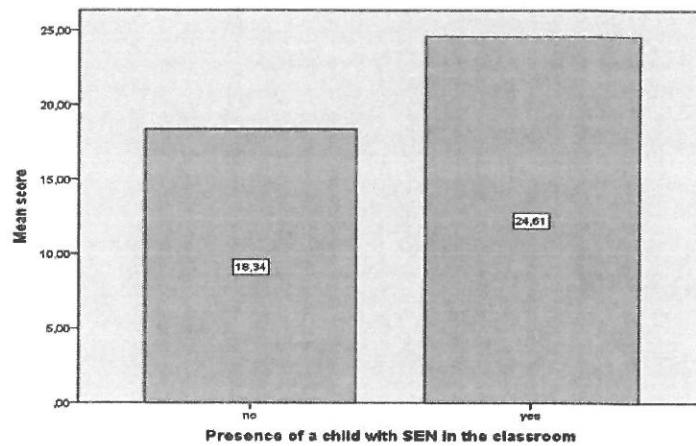


Figure 1: Bar charts of the mean scores by presence or absence of a child with SEN in the classroom

| Education | Father | | | Mother | | |
|------------------------------------|--------|-------|------|--------|-------|-------|
| | n | Mean | Std | n | Mean | Std |
| compulsory education or below | 15 | 13.33 | 7.43 | 12 | 17.17 | 8.57 |
| high or technical school completed | 41 | 19.32 | 9.17 | 41 | 19.34 | 10.33 |
| bachelor or above | 31 | 23.65 | 8.96 | 31 | 21.13 | 8.52 |

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the scores by parents' educational level

tested whether the educational level of the parents affects the mean score of children with SEN's acceptance. We grouped the data into three categories of educational level and we examined the father and mother educational level separately. The sample sizes, mean values and standard deviations are given in Table 1.

Due to the small sample sizes, and the differences of the sample sizes among the three groups, we used the non parametric test Kruskal-Wallis, in order to examine if there are statistically significant differences among the mean values of the three groups. We found that the father's educational level affects the mean scores significantly ($X^2=11.27$, $df=2$, $p\text{-value}<0.01$). That is, the higher the

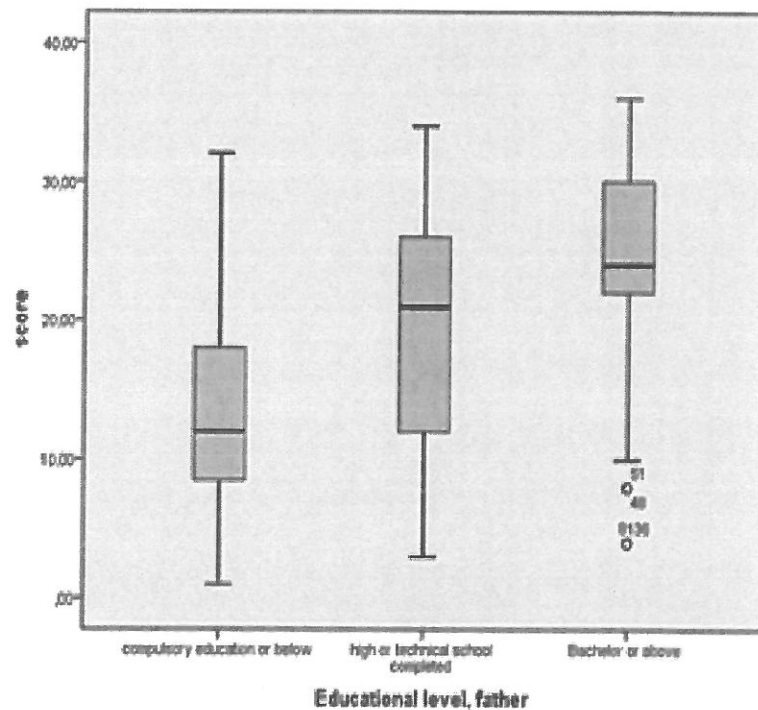


Figure 2: Boxplots of the scores by father's educational level

educational level of the father is, the higher the mean acceptance score will be. Figure 2 depicts the findings graphically.

On the other hand, the mean scores are not influenced by the educational level of the mother ($X^2=1.55$, $df=2$, $p\text{-value}=0.46$).

Conclusions

Our results showed that beliefs and attitudes of typically developing preschoolers towards children with SEN are positive. These findings are in agreement with other research findings (e.g. Diamond et al. 1997; Nikolarazi et al., 2005). Moreover, the results of the present study did not show any gender difference regarding young children's attitudes towards children with SEN. These findings are in line with Nikolarazi et al.'s study (2005) that also used ASK-R to measure children's attitudes, although there are other studies that indicated gender differences, by showing that girls held more positive attitudes than boys (e.g. Nikolarazi & De Reybekiel, 2001). Our results showed that the attendance of children with SEN in the regular preschool classroom affects positively the beliefs and attitudes of typically developing preschoolers towards them, a finding which educators and policy makers should take into account as far as school inclusion of children with SEN is concerned. This finding is in line with other research findings (e.g. Diamond et al., 1997).

The present study showed that father's educational level affects the acceptance of children with SEN and extends the results of previous studies that explored other factors. This might be due to the role the father displays in the greek family-as he is the dominant figure-, and contributes as breadwinner, moral guide and emotional supporter. The higher also the educational level of the father is, the higher is his awareness, sensitivity and social acceptance of children with SEN. The findings of the present study are important as they show that the existing positive beliefs and attitudes of typically developing children towards children with SEN may lead to the improvement of actual interaction between typically developing children and children with SEN.

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