

## Promoting Engagement for Inclusion in Action: An Autoethnographic Journey of a Researcher-Preschool Teacher Experience

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Supporting children's engagement is essential for creating inclusive educational environments in early childhood. During early childhood, inclusive learning environments should provide all children with opportunities to engage in the learning process actively. This study aims to explore practices that encourage children's engagement in such environments, to identify challenges encountered during this process, and to examine solutions to these challenges. A qualitative research method, specifically an autoethnographic approach, was employed. The researcher assumed dual roles as both educator and researcher. Data were collected through reflective journals maintained by the teacher-researcher and were subsequently analysed and interpreted using content analysis. As a result of this study, it was concluded that the environmental differentiation made to support children's engagement, along with the differentiation of the learning environment, content, and products, is effective. Additionally, it was observed that challenges arise from stakeholders, an inclusive perspective, and the resources of the school while supporting children's engagement. The researcher-teacher presents solutions to these challenges by offering training and consultations related to stakeholders, creating experiential opportunities linked to the inclusive process, and collaborating with institutions. Findings suggest that environmental arrangements, alongside the differentiation of learning processes, content, and products, significantly support children's engagement.

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### Introduction

Research on inclusive education practices are increasingly growing worldwide. Researchers emphasize that it is crucial for these practices to begin in early childhood (Jensen, Broström, & Hansen, 2010). Graham (2020) defines inclusive education as a rights-based, systematic reform process aimed at removing barriers to ensure the engagement of all students in the learning process. The key factor that distinguishes inclusive education from other teaching approaches is how teachers respond to differences in the classroom (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). An inclusive learning environment includes all children in the same classroom, offers an appropriate educational program, and can support every child's development while providing teacher assistance to help all children achieve success (Kasman, Kaseng, Hanafie, & Daeng, 2014). In other words, an inclusive education environment supports the engagement of all children in the learning process.

Inclusive education is a multidimensional concept that has developed in various ways across

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different countries (Artiles & Kozleski, 2016). The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020) report indicates the importance of centering educational processes and ensuring that all children have access to quality inclusive education. It states that quality and inclusive education should primarily be supported at the early childhood education level (OECD, 2020). During early childhood, inclusive learning environments should provide all children with opportunities to actively engage in the learning process (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016). Therefore, as mentioned in the report, children's engagement should be supported during the early years.

Engagement forms the foundation of the learning process as it fosters meaning-making and knowledge construction (Barriault & Pearson, 2010). Rangvid (2018) defines the concept of engagement as a broad term that encompasses children's participation in school, their level of commitment, and their motivation for learning. Reeve, Cheon and Jang (2019) identify four dimensions of engagement: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and agentic engagement. Behavioral engagement includes factors such as effort, attention, persistence, and positive behavior. Children exhibit behavioral engagement through their active participation in the learning process (Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016). Emotional engagement refers to the experience of positively valued and energizing emotions during a learning activity. Emotionally engaged children feel positive emotions and derive enjoyment from their involvement in the learning process (Reeve et al., 2019). Cognitive engagement focuses on children's interest in learning and their use of self-regulation strategies. Cognitively engaged children work toward mastering challenging skills by constructing complex ideas with a goal-oriented approach (Fredricks, 2011). Finally, agentic engagement represents children's proactive contributions to the learning process, aimed at enriching the educational experience for themselves and their peers. Agentially engaged children recognize the value of seeking support to activate their intrinsic motivation and further their development (Patall, 2024).

Engagement involves children's interactions with adults, peers, or materials in a manner suitable for their development (McWilliam, Trivette, & Dunst, 1985). Furthermore, children's engagement is related to their willingness to be active participants in the learning process (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). To foster engagement, it is crucial to provide teachers with information and support regarding their critical roles in this area, ensuring that differences within the classroom are viewed not as obstacles but as opportunities by all teachers (UNESCO, 2009).

### ***Conceptual framework***

The conceptual framework guiding this study is based on the understanding of inclusive education for early childhood. Inclusive education aims to ensure that all children receive high-quality education. To achieve this goal, teachers need to possess the knowledge and skills necessary to provide quality inclusive education to all children in their classrooms (Ayan Ceyhan, 2016). One of the primary challenges faced by teachers who wish to create an inclusive classroom environment is responding to processes that support all children's engagement in the learning process (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). These challenges can hinder children's engagement in their learning process. In this study, considering the values based on social justice and equal participation rights, the principle that all individuals, regardless of their interests or performance abilities, should participate in a community has been comprehensively emphasized. This principle entails recognizing the importance of group differences and individualizing within the community context (Stukat, 1995). From this



perspective, differences in the engagement process of children in their learning are viewed not as problems, but as worth. In addition to this framework, the works of Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2007), which focus on interactive processes, provide an important conceptual framework for understanding children's engagement in the learning process during early childhood. The researchers emphasize that preschool children actively engage in learning because of their social interactions with adults and their immediate environment.

Lawson and Lawson (2013) state that children's engagement emerges from the interactions between their thoughts and feelings about school, their behaviors, and the quality and characteristics of their social environment. In this study, the term children's engagement is used broadly to refer to their attitudes toward the learning process and their participation in classroom activities. This understanding encompasses the dimensions of behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and agentic engagement (Reeve et al., 2019). To support children's engagement and enhance teachers' practices within the classroom, the framework developed by Yılmaz Atman (2023) and Moore et al., (2021) was utilized. The researchers highlight that creating an inclusive learning environment involves making environmental arrangements, differentiating learning content, processes, and products, and implementing instructional accommodations. Accordingly, the figure created for the conceptual framework of this study is presented below.

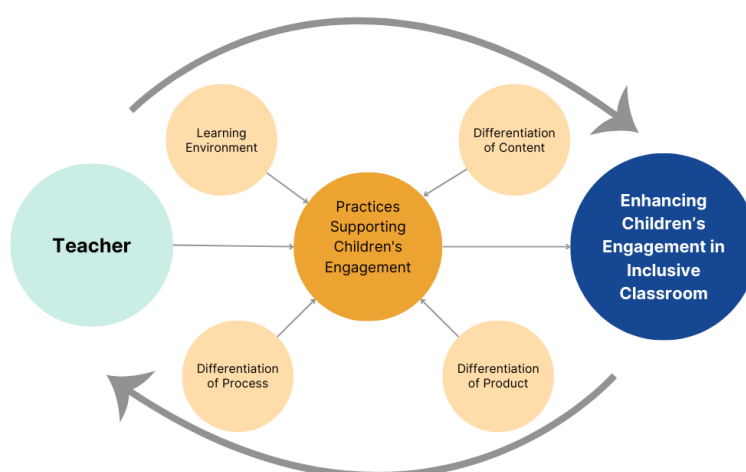


Figure 1. Research's Conceptual Framework

### ***Present study***

There are studies on the factors that influence children's engagement in the learning process. Some of these studies focus on the effects of child-adult relationships on engagement. Research indicates that children's interactions with adults (Ihmeideh, 2019; McWilliam & Bailey, 1995; Pietarinen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2014; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Taylor, Alamos, Turnbull, LoCasale-Crouch, & Howes, 2023; Williford, Vick Whittaker, Vitiello, & Downer, 2013) and interactions with peers (Bohlmann et al., 2019; Harper & McCluskey, 2003; Taylor et al., 2023) significantly impact their engagement in the learning process. Additionally, there are studies demonstrating the effects of environmental factors on children's engagement (Montes & Risley, 1975; Moody, Justice, & Cabell, 2010; Pietarinen et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2022). Unlike other studies, this research is based on the personal experiences and practices of practitioner-researchers working as a preschool teacher. In the study conducted by Sjöman, Granlund and Almquist (2016), teachers' sensitivity toward

children and children's positive interactions with peers were found to indirectly affect the relationship between hyperactivity and engagement. The study concluded that positive interactions within a group of sensitive teachers and children contributed to children's engagement despite hyperactivity. Based on this research, it is suggested that the differentiations made by teachers during the learning process can influence children's engagement. Rangvid (2018) highlights that for children to benefit from the advantages of inclusive education fully, they must actively participate in school and classroom activities. Research shows that engagement is higher in classrooms where children build strong relationships with their teachers and peers, teachers support students' autonomy, hold high expectations, provide consistent and clear feedback, and design tasks that are varied, challenging, interesting, and meaningful (Fredricks, 2011). To assess engagement at multiple levels (e.g., school, classroom, and learning activities), it is crucial for researchers to incorporate additional quantitative and qualitative methodologies that enable the evaluation of long-term engagement, variations across activities, and engagement in both individual and group contexts (Fredricks et al., 2016). The processes that support engagement through these experiences and practices have been addressed holistically, like the learning process in an autoethnographic study. Therefore, it is believed that this study will provide implementations and recommendations for teachers working in the field to support children's engagement, as well as guide them in finding practical solutions to the challenges faced, including both problems and proposed solutions. Additionally, this study is intended to offer some implementations and recommendations for researchers focused on supporting children's engagement.

The researcher aims to provide insights into how teachers interact with children and contribute to the development of professional development programs that support teachers in promoting children's engagement in early childhood education. The purpose of this study is to explore practices that support children's engagement in creating an inclusive educational environment, examining the challenges encountered in this process and proposing solutions to these challenges. Accordingly, the research seeks answers to the following questions: 'What practices have I implemented to support children's engagement in creating an inclusive educational environment? What challenges have I faced while supporting children's engagement, and what are my proposed solutions to these challenges?'

## **Methodology**

The starting point of this study is my curiosity about how to support children's engagement in creating inclusive preschool classrooms, based on the education and knowledge I have acquired over time. Therefore, this study employs a qualitative research method that allows for an in-depth exploration of this change and development from the past to the present. A fundamental characteristic of qualitative research is the detailed and comprehensive investigation of a situation, examining the environment, events, individuals, processes, and other factors that influence the situation through a holistic approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this research, the qualitative research method of autoethnography has been utilized. Autoethnography can be defined as a personal experience study in which the researcher is actively involved in the process and documents their cognitive processes as well (Pek, 2023). In other words, autoethnography is understood as the researcher reflecting on themselves within the context of the events or phenomena they are experiencing (Çelik, 2016). The autoethnographic method in this study has provided the opportunity to discuss broader contexts by establishing personal connections among my experiences in supporting children's engagement and creating inclusive classrooms (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2016).



### *Self as a researcher and personal perspective*

This research is an autoethnographic study. Therefore, as the researcher-teacher, I play a central role in this research. I have completed my bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in early childhood education. For eight years, I worked as a preschool teacher in various regions of Türkiye. I am currently working as a preschool teacher and conducting research in the field of inclusive education. My focuses are extensively about children's literature and inclusive education practices. Due to the inadequacy of inclusive education practices in Türkiye, my curiosity about how I support children's engagement through my own practices serves as a foundation for this study. As a researcher-teacher, I have utilized methods such as recalling past experiences to explore my previous practices, like the work conducted by Nasim (2017). The data sources are reflective journals, comprising nine entries kept over nine weeks, the photo archive, and records of previous practices.

### *Data collection and process*

Starting from the beginning of the 2024-2025 academic year in Türkiye, I documented the practices I implemented in my classroom in my reflective journal. Over nine weeks, I wrote daily notes regarding the learning process in this journal. Each Friday, I added reflections based on my teaching experiences to the journal. Throughout this process, I created an online archive using the photographs I took. By the end of the nine weeks, I had completed nine reflective journal entries. I analysed these journals to identify categories. In a similar manner, I asked a researcher who has completed a doctoral program in early childhood education to create categories related to reflective journals. I established subcategories through expert opinion by comparing the categories we created. I revisited all the journals related to the subcategories to identify codes and example expressions. Finally, I interpreted the data obtained. The categories and subcategories of the research are shown in Figure 1.

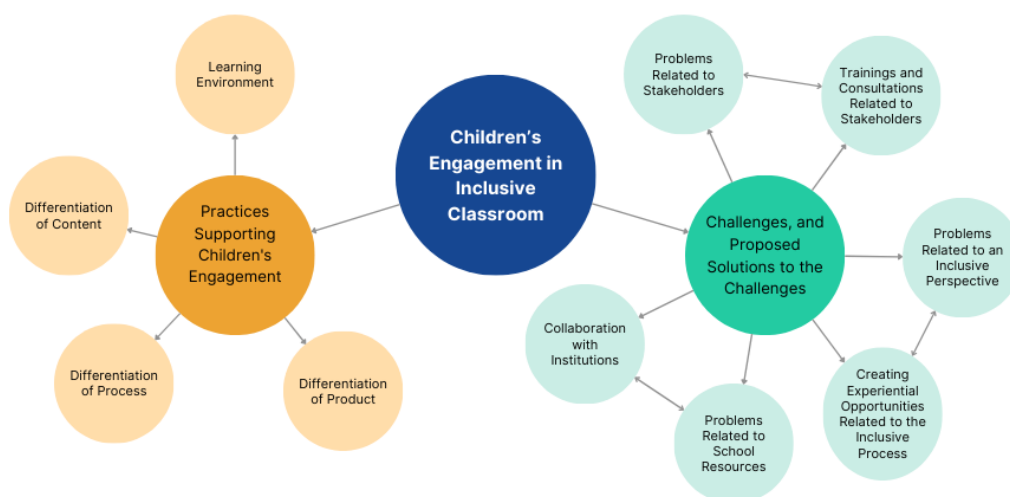


Figure 2. Research Categories and Subcategories

### *Data analysis*

In this research, the content analysis method was employed to provide an in-depth examination of the reflective journals (Creswell, 2017). The analysis process followed the four stages developed by Bailey (1994) for analysing the journals within the scope of content



analysis. In the first stage of this analysis process, the selection of journals was conducted, and all journals written by me were included in the process. Subsequently, categories were developed through a review of the literature and by obtaining expert opinions. In the data analysis, a combination of pre-determined codes and codes that emerged during the analysis was utilized (Creswell, 2017). During the stage of identifying subcategories prior to the analysis, the frameworks of Yılmaz Atman (2023) and Moore et al. (2021) regarding differentiation and instructional adaptations were employed. Following this, the analysis continued with the coding process by incorporating the relevant subcategories into the codes that emerged from the text examination. In the third stage, the analysis units were identified and presented. Accordingly, two main categories were determined in this research: 'Practices Supporting Children's Engagement' and 'Challenges, and Proposed Solutions to the Challenges.' Throughout the analysis process, new categories were created, and the findings obtained were interpreted. All identified categories and subcategories are presented in the findings section.

### ***Ethical considerations***

This autoethnographic study discusses routine work practices and does not involve any human subjects. In autoethnographic studies, the relational ethical dimension emphasizes the importance of personal experiences that may also concern others, potentially violating their privacy (Çelik, 2016). Therefore, the expressions written in my journals do not include any details about institutions, organizations, or individuals. The names of the children mentioned in the findings are entirely fictitious and do not reflect real identities. This approach ensures that the children, individuals, and institutions referenced in my journals are protected. With this strategy, I aim to minimize speculation among my readers regarding whom I am writing about.

### ***Validity and reliability***

This autoethnographic study discusses routine work practices and does not involve any human subjects. In the autoethnographic for the reliability studies of the research, strategies outlined by Özkan (2023) were followed, as used in documents like reflective journals. The reliability strategies were adapted from Krippendorff's (2018) work, as presented by Özkan (2023). In this research, the stability strategy was utilized as a reliability strategy. Regarding the stability strategy, the data obtained in this study were re-coded by the researcher after one month. Analysing the results of the two coding processes indicates that the research is reliable in terms of the stability strategy. For reliability, the reflective journals were independently examined by two researchers, and the analyses related to the categories and subcategories were checked to ensure coordination and consistency (0.83 agreement; intercoder reliability; Miles & Huberman, 1994)

In the validity studies of the research, an in-depth description strategy was employed Creswell (2017). This strategy included detailed examples related to the categories created. Providing detailed examples is seen as an important factor in ensuring credibility by defining details and conveying contexts (Shenton, 2004). It is known that credibility is a crucial condition for meeting internal validity in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) Another way to enhance credibility is for the researcher to possess relevant experience and qualifications related to the research topic (Patton, 2002). The researcher's master's and doctoral topics, which include instructional adaptations, differentiation, and inclusive education, along with the focus of their work in these areas, are believed to positively influence the credibility of the research.



## Results

The results are discussed in this title under two main categories: Practices Supporting Challenges, and Proposed Solutions to the Challenges.

### *Practices supporting children's engagement*

Based on the findings obtained from the reflective journals, four subcategories have been established for this category. These subcategories are differentiations of the learning environment, differentiation of content, differentiation of process, and differentiation of product.

#### *Learning environment*

Learning environment arrangements refer to the intentional differentiation of the physical, social, and instructional aspects of the classroom to accommodate diverse learners. In the reflective journals examined, the category of environmental arrangements includes codes such as physical environment, social environment, differentiation of materials, special material support, routines, and transitions.

Examples of expressions found in physical environment arrangements are as follows: *'Some of the children were having difficulty putting toys in the correct boxes and restoring the classroom to its previous order during clean-up time. Therefore, I realized that they did not want to pick up the toys. We opened a discussion on how we could make it easier to collect the toys. We attached cards with pictures of the materials to all the boxes in our classroom (e.g. Figure 3). I observed that even the children who were reluctant to clean up engaged in clean-up time after seeing those pictures.'* Another example is: *'While reading a storybook, I noticed that Ayşe was not looking at the book but was focused on her friends. This week, I moved Ayşe's chair to a spot where she could see the book better and be closer to me. Ayşe engaged in the process both emotionally and physically.'*



Figure 3. Environmental Arrangements from the Author's Photo Archive

Examples of expressions found in social environment arrangements are as follows: *'Today*

*while determining the groups for the game I would play with the children, I placed those who could support each other in the same group. Thus, they were able to engage in the game activity by supporting one another during the process.'*

Examples of expressions related to the differentiation of materials include: *'Some of the children in my class are struggling to cut details while doing cutting activities. Some children find it easier to cut the details, while others enjoy cutting items with more intricate details. To support children's engagement in the art activity, I organized this week's art project with the help of a computer. In the activity, I simplified the areas that needed to be cut for some children, left others as they were, and enriched the tasks for the remaining children. When I observed all the children's engagement in the art activity, I noticed that the children in the class generally engaged in the event. However, one child in my class struggled with the simplified task. I went over to provide physical support to help him complete the activity.'* Additionally, *'Some children in my class were having difficulty holding the pencils. As a result, I observed that they did not want to engage in early literacy activities. I thickened the circumference of some pencils with sticky foam and noticed that the children found it easier to hold these pencils.'*

Examples of expressions related to special material support are as follows: *'In my class, my student who uses their left arm was struggling with cutting activities. Despite contacting his family last week, they did not purchase an appropriate pair of scissors for him. Today, I had another meeting with his family, during which I showed them affordable scissors that I found online and discussed the importance of using suitable materials for children. The family then provided the scissors for him.'* In the following week's journal entry, the importance of special material support for children's engagement is emphasized: *'The family provided the scissors. My student stated that he could perform the cutting activities much more easily and that his hand did not hurt. I observed that his engagement increased while using the proper scissors.'*

Examples of expressions related to routines and transitions include: *'I believe that routines and transitions are crucial, especially when supporting verbal engagement.'* and *'I observed that making transitions in the classroom enjoyable increased the children's engagement in the next activity.'* When the journals are examined sequentially, it is evident that there are expressions indicating that routines and transitions enhance verbal engagement. For example, in the reflective journal for the second week, the entry states: *'Delen and Aydin do not communicate verbally due to language differences. However, they engage emotionally and physically in our routine activities, such as the Good Morning and Hello songs, and finger games.'* In the reflective journals for the sixth week, expressions such as *'While singing the Good Morning song, Delen engaged verbally with phrases consisting of one or two words, like "good morning" and "good morning to my hands." Delen engages in the finger game with mouth movements and her body'*. In the tenth journal, it is noted that the expressions regarding Delen and Aydin's verbal engagement in routine activities and transitions have become clearer.

### *Differentiation of content*

Differentiation of content, or learning content, involves modifying what students are expected to learn based on their readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. In the reflective journals examined, the category of differentiation of content includes codes such as



children's interests and preferences, simplifying the activity, differentiating the activity, and adapting questions.

Examples of expressions related to children's interests and preferences are as follows: *'Today, one of my students told me that he did not want to go out to the garden with us. Knowing that he loved cats, I read a story about cats. Later, I prepared a finger puppet of the cat character from the story for all the children. I told them that we would take our puppet cats for a walk in the garden. All the children put the puppets on their fingers. The student who did not want to go out also said he wanted to take his puppet for a walk in the garden.'* Another example is: *'After circle time, during the movement activities we did, one of my students was disrupting the engagement of other children and displaying some challenging behaviors. When selecting the song for the movement activity, I encouraged him to seek his friends' opinions. They all reached a collective decision to play that song together. I observed that he was more engaged in the song they chose during the decision-making process.'*

The concepts of simplifying the activity and differentiating the activity are addressed together, as both practices are included in the reflective journals. Examples of expressions related to this are as follows: *'In the activity, I simplified the areas that needed to be cut for some children, left others as they were, and enriched the tasks for the remaining children.'* This expression also appears in the codes for material adaptations, demonstrating that the materials used to support children's engagement were adapted, thereby simplifying and enriching the activity. Another expression related to this code is: *'When preparing the obstacle course, I divided the children into small groups. I broke the game down into various stages. When forming the groups, I placed students who could complete the first and second stages in the same group. Thus, during the activity, all children were able to engage at stages appropriate to their levels.'*

Examples of expressions related to the adapting questions include: *'At the end of the reading process, I differentiated the questions according to the children's levels. I use this differentiation framework throughout the entire reading process. When asking questions to the children, I pose different levels of questions, such as those they can answer with a mark or a single word, as well as questions that require detailed responses.'* Another example is: *'During the experiment, I asked a question regarding the children's predictions. I realized that this was a detail-oriented question while explaining the topic of rust. Some children had difficulty responding. After listening to the answers from the children who did respond, I differentiated the question and asked it again. This time, the children who did not answer engaged by indicating their responses.'*

### *Differentiation of process*

Differentiation of process refers to varying how students make sense of and engage with the learning process. In the reflective journals examined, the category of differentiation of process includes codes such as adult support and peer support.

Examples of expressions related to adult support are as follows: *'When I observed all the children's engagement in the art activity, I noticed that the children in the class generally engaged in the event. However, one child in my class was struggling with the simplified task. I went over to provide physical support to help him complete the activity.'* This expression also appears in the codes for the differentiation of materials. It demonstrates that although materials were differentiated to support children's engagement, adult support was provided to those who were not engaging, allowing them to engage. Another expression related to this

code is: 'During the movement activity, I approached a student who did not want to engage. I continued the movement activity while inviting him to join by reaching out my hand. He smiled, held my hand, and we performed the movement together.' In addition to this category, the visual supports used to encourage children's engagement in Turkish language activities, as seen in the photo archive, can also be considered within the scope of adult support (e.g., Figure 4).



Figure 4. Adult Support from the Author's Photo Archive

Examples of expressions related to peer support are as follows: 'While forming groups, I pay attention to the children's preferences as well as to how peers support each other,' and 'He went over to his friend and invited him to join the game.'

### Differentiation of product

Differentiation of product refers to varying the ways students demonstrate what they have learned, allowing for multiple formats, levels of complexity, and individual expression. In the reflective journals examined, the category of differentiation of product includes codes such as different types of responses and responses at different levels. Examples of expressions related to different types of responses are as follows: 'When I ask questions to the children, I don't consider it essential for all of them to respond verbally. I try to differentiate the questions by asking those that allow children to provide their answers in different ways, in addition to their verbal engagement.' Another example is: 'We wanted to choose a name for our class together. I presented two name options. We held a vote. Some children expressed their chosen name verbally, while others came over to me and showed the picture, I drew next to their preferred name. Thus, we completed our voting.'

Examples of expressions related to responses at different levels include: 'I asked the children to bring an object from home. All the children took turns explaining the objects they brought. I asked some children detailed questions related to the objects. For those who struggled to communicate verbally, I asked questions that they could answer with a single word, such as the color of the object. This way, all the children engaged in the process by describing their objects at different levels.'

### Challenges and proposed solutions to the challenges

These subcategories are problems related to stakeholders, training and consultations related to stakeholders, problems related to an inclusive perspective, creating experiential

opportunities related to the inclusive process, problems related to school resources, and collaboration with institutions.

#### *Problems related to stakeholders*

In the reflective journals examined, the category of problems related to stakeholders includes codes such as problems related to administrators, problems related to families, limited guidance services, and a shortage of support personnel.

Examples of expressions related to these codes are as follows: *'Our school administrators stated that a child was unsuitable for school due to different characteristics and that he could not continue in the process.'*, *'We communicated with the family. I informed them about developing a common behavior and supporting engagement. The mother stated that they would not be able to provide any support at home despite the entire process.'*, *'I requested support from the family and the teacher to assist the child's engagement through guidance services. However, our guidance teacher expressed that she was not knowledgeable about this issue and could not help.'*, *'While supporting the engagement of some children, I provide adult support. For some children, this support takes longer. I notice that they need it. However, I struggle because I also need to support the other children in the process.'*, *'Ayhan was not engaging in the movement activity and was displaying challenging behaviors. I wanted to be with him and discuss the situation. During this time, other children were also asking me for support to perform the movements. I felt helpless. I thought that if we had support personnel, they could have assisted me in this situation.'*

#### *Trainings and consultations related to stakeholders*

In the reflective journals examined, the category of trainings and consultations related to stakeholders includes solutions such as informing the school administration, conducting family training sessions, receiving guidance services, and family support.

Examples of expressions related to these codes are as follows: *'I spoke with our administrators about why it is necessary for all children to engage in the educational process.'*, *'I invited an expert in the field to the school. He provided a two-hour training for all our parents on topics such as collaborating with teachers and managing the process.'* Additionally, in the reflective journal for the fifth week, under the code for receiving guidance services, it is stated: *'Due to our guidance teacher's limited knowledge on this matter, I emailed a teacher from the psychological counseling and guidance department who works in early childhood education.'* In the journal for the eighth week, the following expression related to this code is included: *'With the collaboration of our teacher, I spoke with the family again. He supported me regarding my approach to the family.'* Regarding the code for family support, the expression is: *'Due to the absence of support personnel in our class, I began family engagement activities this week. I observed that the families I invited to the class provided support throughout the process.'*

#### *Problems related to an inclusive perspective*

In the reflective journals examined, the category of problems related to an inclusive perspective includes codes such as exclusionary and discriminatory attitudes among children and exclusionary and discriminatory attitudes among families.

Examples of expressions related to these codes are as follows: *'Today, during playtime in the*

*learning centers, I observed that the children did not want their peers who do not engage in verbal communication to join the game.’ ‘The family of one of my students said that they did not want this child in the classroom because he was having issues with their child.’*

#### *Creating experiential opportunities related to the inclusive process*

In the reflective journals examined, the category of creating experiential opportunities related to the inclusive process includes solutions such as the use of children's books, modeling the value of diversity, and incorporating materials that support diversity in the classroom.

Examples of expressions related to these codes are as follows: *‘We talked about the animals helping each other in the book we read. We emphasized that all our friends should be included in the play process as they wish. We concluded the process with an invitation game. I observed that the children invited their friends to play just like in the book.’* Under the code for modeling the value of diversity, in the third week, it is stated: *‘When there was a child in our class who was struggling to control his emotions, I observed that the other children looked at my reactions. I used our calming strategies.’* In the same code, in the fifth week, it is noted: *‘In our class, one child struggled to control his emotions, and his friends guided him by saying, “Now take a deep breath.” I believe my actions are important for my students’ engagement in the process.’* Regarding the code for incorporating materials that support diversity in the classroom, the expression is: *‘I read a book that included differences in our class. When my student saw a child with orange hair, he said, “Teacher, just like me.” with his engagement, the other children found children who looked like them.’*

#### *Problems related to school resources*

In the reflective journals examined, the category of problems related to school resources includes codes such as issues related to classroom facilities and limited movement spaces within the school.

Examples of expressions related to these codes are as follows: *‘Our classroom is used by two different teachers, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Today, I had to rearrange all the learning centers I had organized for the children's engagement.’ ‘Due to the limited movement spaces in the school, I am struggling to involve children who need movement in the process.’*

#### *Collaboration with institutions*

In the reflective journals examined, the category of collaboration with institutions includes solutions such as conducting out-of-school learning activities and the provision of projects and materials.

Examples of expressions related to these codes are as follows: *‘Our school's resources may be limited. But today, we took learning outside the school. Many areas can capture the children's interests and meet their needs. Organizing out-of-school learning activities in these areas makes the children very happy. Today, we visited a library and conducted our activities there. The library has a huge garden, which excited the children.’* Additionally, *‘As a result of the project we completed, we acquired many different books that we can read with the children.’*

## Conclusion

As a result of the research, it was concluded that the environmental arrangements made to support children's engagement, along with the differentiation of the learning environment, content, and products, are effective. Additionally, it was observed that challenges arise from stakeholders, an inclusive perspective, and the resources of the school while supporting children's engagement. The researcher-teacher presents solutions to these challenges by offering training and consultations related to stakeholders, creating experiential opportunities linked to the inclusive process, and collaborating with institutions. The findings of this study are limited to the experiences of the researcher-teacher.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that practitioners and researchers promote awareness and informational activities directed at stakeholders to support children's engagement in the inclusive education process. Furthermore, developing policies that support teachers can enhance the sustainability of the process and facilitate the more effective implementation of inclusive education. In this regard, it is suggested that supportive educational policies should be established to ensure children's more active engagement in their educational processes. In practice, teachers should be encouraged to provide a flexible learning environment that considers children's individual characteristics. Supporting such differentiated practices in educational processes is considered a valuable step toward increasing children's engagement in early childhood and providing an inclusive learning environment.

## Discussion

The results related to 'Practices Supporting Children's Engagement' and 'Challenges, and Proposed Solutions to the Challenges' have been discussed.

### *Practices supporting children's engagement*

When examining the findings derived from my reflective journals, it is evident that I incorporated environmental arrangements and practices for differentiating content, process, and products while supporting children's engagement. In the process of supporting engagement, I concluded that I facilitated children's engagement by addressing the organization of the physical and social environments, differentiating materials, providing special material support, and managing routines and transitions. An appropriate learning environment for children should be organized to encourage their engagement (Blair, 2002; Blair & Diamond, 2008). Considering the interests and needs of all children in creating an environmental arrangement facilitates their engagement in the learning process. When these environmental characteristics are comprehensively addressed, children's engagement can be supported to create an inclusive preschool classroom (British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2019).

The findings of this research underscore the importance of creating a learning environment that is responsive to children's individual needs. Ensuring that children feel comfortable and harmonious in their physical and social environments can significantly impact their engagement. Similarly, Gandini (2011) emphasizes that teachers need to create an engaging environment for children to engage in the learning process. The researcher notes that engaging elements should be carefully selected and arranged to foster communication and interaction. In this process, educators can support engagement by providing suitable tools, materials, and strategies to create a dialogic environment where everyone engages.



In the process of supporting engagement, I concluded that by organizing the process according to children's interests and preferences, simplifying and differentiating activities, and adapting questions, I was able to differentiate the learning content, which in turn increased children's engagement. Differentiating the learning content according to children's ages, developmental levels, and individual interests can provide a foundation for their more willing participation in the learning process. Tomlinson (2001) suggests that differentiating content to children's individual characteristics will enhance their learning motivation and enable them to engage more actively in the process. The findings from my research support this assertion. I differentiated the learning process by providing adult and peer support when children needed it. I observed that differentiating the learning process supports children's engagement. When children received adult or peer support on certain tasks, they performed these tasks more easily and engaged more effectively in their learning processes. Stukat (1995) emphasizes that the teacher-child relationship increases children's motivation, thereby enhancing their engagement.

The literature discusses how the overall quality of teacher-child interactions in learning processes benefits children's engagement with their classmates' experiences (Curby, Downer, & Booren, 2014). This research supports (Hockett, 2018) assertion that incorporating small group activities that promote peer-child interactions can enhance children's engagement. In this context, the findings of the study demonstrate that adult and peer support planned by the teacher in the learning process encourages active engagement. For practitioners in early childhood education, making differentiations based on children's individual needs in the learning process may be an effective approach to enhancing engagement and learning motivation.

In the activities we conducted, I provided opportunities for different types of responses in the questions I asked children, as well as in the expected reactions during the process, to enhance their engagement. Additionally, I encouraged children to respond at different levels to promote their engagement. All these processes supported children's engagement by differentiating the learning products. I observed that offering children various response options and allowing flexibility in expected reactions enabled them to actively engage in the process. The findings of the research reveal that allowing flexibility in children's responses contributes to their engagement. Hockett (2018) emphasizes that using various assessment elements or strategies to determine how assessment systems or questions for children are framed can be a way to increase children's engagement. The researcher notes that children can respond to questions by talking, drawing, completing a task, making choices from a series of options, and using cards, clicks, or other signals. In this regard, it can be said that creating a flexible environment where children can reflect their unique characteristics in learning products is important for engagement.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of differentiation strategies, such as making environmental arrangements in preschool education, and providing flexibility in the learning process, content, and products to enhance children's engagement. In this context, statements indicate that differentiating learning environments and processes to meet children's individual needs not only increases their engagement but also contributes to their overall development. These results support the findings of Pietarinen et al. (2014) which show that children's cognitive engagement is largely dependent on the dynamic interaction between children and the school environment, as well as on the daily pedagogical practices adopted in schools. This research demonstrates similarities between the practices in my reflective journals and the implementations made by teachers regarding differentiation in the study by



Demirci-Ünal and Öztürk (2024). This research additionally illustrates the impact of differentiation practices on children's engagement in the learning process.

### ***Challenges and proposed solutions to the challenges***

One of the most significant challenges that emerged in the research is the problems related to stakeholders. Factors such as issues related to administrators, families, limited guidance services and the shortage of support personnel have been among the key elements affecting children's engagement. This situation leads to teachers feeling isolated in the educational process and struggling due to a lack of support. It is well known that the developmental challenges faced by children in school, as well as their learning and differentiation processes, are directly related to the decisions made by administrators (Stringer, 2009).

As a researcher-teacher, I proposed conducting training and consultations related to stakeholders as solutions to the problems related to stakeholders. Some of the practices I implemented for these proposals include informing the school administration, conducting family training sessions, receiving guidance services, and providing family support. School administrators need to possess the knowledge and skills to be aware of their important role in managing relationships with all stakeholders in the inclusive education process. Additionally, they must engage in efforts aimed at increasing their knowledge about the inclusive education process (LeMay, 2017). In this context, practices such as informational meetings and family training sessions can support children's active engagement in the educational process and contribute to families and other stakeholders taking on a more conscious and supportive role in the inclusive education process. Furthermore, collaborating with school administration and local institutions in situations where guidance services are limited can provide teachers with the opportunity to establish a more effective support network.

One of the other problems I encountered while supporting children's engagement is the problem related to an inclusive perspective. These problems generally involve exclusionary and discriminatory attitudes among children and families. Allodi (2010) emphasizes the importance of considering factors such as interpersonal relationships, adult-child interactions, peer relationships, the attitudes and behaviors of adults, and the communication styles of teachers to ensure that all children engage in the social environment during the learning process. Similarly, Vaughn et al. (2016) notes that acceptance by peers is related to social engagement. In this regard, the findings of this research also support studies indicating that exclusionary attitudes from peers and families can affect children's engagement.

As a proposed solution to problems related to an inclusive perspective, I suggested creating experiential opportunities related to the inclusive process. Some of the implementations I carried out for this purpose included the use of children's books, modeling the value of diversity, and incorporating materials that support diversity in the classroom. The perception of diversity as a value by the teacher in inclusive classrooms is one of the factors that influence children (Hockett, 2018). Therefore, it is thought that the teacher's appreciation of diversity will support all children's perspectives on diversity. In this context, it can be said that creating a welcoming environment regarding diversity in the classroom may impact children's engagement. Akın (2019) states that the social characteristics of the classroom environment center around the term's social acceptance and respect for differences. Beliefs and attitudes towards acceptance among peers are critical for establishing inclusive early childhood education classrooms. An important factor here is the implementations in which

children engage that foster the positive development of these attitudes (Winter, 1999). Additionally, the use of picture books helps increase children's levels of social acceptance regarding their peers (Prater, Dyches, & Johnstun, 2006). Based on the findings of this research, it is emphasized that by using materials such as picture books and toys that support diversity, children's perspectives on diversity in the classroom can be developed, thereby supporting their engagement.

The results of the research indicate that I faced problems related to school resources while supporting engagement in the learning process. These problems include issues related to classroom facilities and the limited movement spaces within the school. As a proposed solution to problems related to school resources, I suggested collaborating with institutions. Examples of these collaborations include conducting out-of-school learning activities and providing projects and materials. For inclusive education to be successful, it must be supported by all stakeholders. All individuals and institutions in society should be responsible for ensuring that all children receive education in inclusive educational environments ("Eğitimde Birlikteyiz," 2021)

This research addresses the challenges encountered in the process of supporting engagement in early childhood education and proposes solutions. The findings suggest that environmental arrangements, support from teachers and stakeholders, and an understanding of inclusive education can be decisive in increasing children's engagement. Collaboration with stakeholders and regulations that support inclusive education can positively affect children's social adaptation and engagement, while out-of-school activities can mitigate the negative effects of environmental limitations.

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