



Seyda Subasi Singh

Overrepresentation of Immigrants in Special Education

Die Überrepräsentation von MigrantInnen in der Sonderpädagogik

A Grounded Theory Study on the Case of Austria

Eine Grounded Theory Studie am Beispiel Österreich

Inklusion, Behinderung, Gesellschaft

Bildungs- und sozialwissenschaftliche Beiträge

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Abstract

The overrepresentation of minority students in special education referrals can be tracked in many countries, and the lack of transparency and uniformity in referrals is a hot topic to discuss. Despite the years of research and discussion, we have limited understanding of this complex issue, as the research is challenged by dependency on the availability of numeric data, incautiousness to cultural specificities, or concentration on certain variables. With this study, the aim was to come up with sophisticated research by giving participants an active voice, by drawing data from firsthand experiences, and by accepting the co-construction of the researcher. The study had a holistic perspective and included various stakeholders. Asking and looking for what we can learn about the overrepresentation by relying on the interpretation of experiences required a flexible epistemological stance. As a method, constructivist grounded theory was recruited. Teachers, parents, school inspectors, school directors, school psychologists, and special education teachers were the data sources. Intensive interviews were the main data collection tools supported with researcher diary, memos, group discussion and extant texts such as educational statistics, newspaper articles, reports, and school policy statements. The data from 25 participants were analyzed with the guidelines of constructivist grounded theory in an iterative way. The findings of the study showed that special education referral means different practices and experiences for different groups of participants. In addition, the people included in the referral have a direct influence on the experiences of each other. The referral process is experienced with challenges, suspicion and ambiguity and the process is built on mutual distrust. Distrust is the core of the experiences, relationships, interactions and actions related to special education referrals. Distrust is also the basis of the perceptions on educational equity, parental and teacher competencies, immigrants, the Turkish community, or the school system.

Keywords: overrepresentation, special education, migrants, minorities, equity

Zusammenfassung

Die Studie beleuchtet die Überrepräsentation von SchülerInnen mit türkischem Migrationshintergrund mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf im österreichischen Schulsystem. Ein überproportionaler Anteil von SchülerInnen mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf, die einer Minderheit angehören, kann in vielen Ländern beobachtet werden. Der Mangel an Transparenz und Einheitlichkeit des sonderpädagogischen Bedarfs sind brisante Themen. Trotz langjähriger Forschung und Diskussion ist das Verständnis für dieses komplexe Thema gering und die Forschung steht vor verschiedenen Herausforderungen, wie etwa der Abhängigkeit vom Zugang zu sozialstatistischen Daten oder geringer Sensitivität gegenüber kulturellen Merkmalen. In der vorliegenden Studie wurde eine innovative Perspektive eingenommen, indem dieses vielfältige Thema nicht auf sozio-demografische oder individuelle Merkmale beschränkt wurde. Das Ziel war, den Beteiligten mit einem anspruchsvollen Forschungsdesign eine Stimme zu geben, Erfahrungen aus erster Hand zu erheben und die Ko-Konstruktion der Ergebnisse durch die Forscherin gleichzeitig mit zu berücksichtigen. Die Studie folgt einem ganzheitlichen Zugang und inkludiert verschiedene Stakeholder, die am Prozess der Feststellung des sonderpädagogischen Förderbedarfs von SchülerInnen mit türkischem Migrationshintergrund im österreichischen Schulsystem beteiligt sind. Für das Erforschen der Überrepräsentation auf Basis der Interpretation von Erfahrungen war ein flexibler epistemologischer Zugang nötig. Als Methode wurde die konstruktivistische Grounded Theory eingesetzt und Lehrkräfte, Eltern, SchulinspektorInnen, Schulleitungen, SchulpsychologInnen und SonderschullehrerInnen befragt. Die Narrative, die mittels „intensive interviews“ erhoben wurden, stellten die Hauptdatenquelle dar – unterstützt durch Forschungstagebücher, Memos, Gruppendiskussionen und andere schriftliche Datenquellen, wie Bildungsstatistiken, Zeitungsartikel, Berichte und strategische Dokumente aus Schulen. Die Daten aus den Interviews mit den 25 StudienteilnehmerInnen wurden mithilfe der konstruktivistischen Grounded Theory schrittweise ausgewertet. Die Ergebnisse der Studie zeigen, dass das Feststellen des sonderpädagogischen Förderbedarfs mit unterschiedlichen Praktiken und Erfahrungen für die verschiedenen Gruppen verknüpft ist. Die Praktiken derjenigen, die den Prozess mitgestalten, bedingen sich gegenseitig. Dem Prozess wird mit der Erfahrung von Herausforderung, Argwohn und Ambiguität begegnet, was das gegenseitige Misstrauen der beteiligten Personen in den Prozess widerspiegelt. Dieses Misstrauen steht im Zentrum der Erfahrungen, Beziehungen, Interaktionen und Gedanken – nicht nur gegenüber dem sonderpädagogischen Förderbedarf, sondern auf einer breiteren Basis gegenüber Bildungsgerechtigkeit, Kompetenzen von Eltern und Lehrkräften, Migration, der türkischen Community, und dem österreichischen Schulsystem.

Schlagwörter: Überrepräsentation, Sonderpädagogik, MigrantInnen, Minderheiten, Gerechtigkeit

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To Define!

Foreword

In this book, I tackled the overrepresentation of students from a migrant background in special education referrals in the Austrian context. This study was conducted in Vienna, the capital of Austria. It recruited migrants from a Turkish background and others such as teachers, school directors, school inspectors, and school psychologists who have experiences with special education referrals of students from a Turkish background. As the first qualitative study with this specific group of immigrants, the study aimed to offer insight into the discussion of immigrant-overrepresentation in special education and the discussion of the overrepresentation of students from a Turkish background. It gave voice to people who have experience in the referral process. My aim was to analyze this topic from a holistic perspective by including several stakeholders and relying on their first-hand experiences. The overrepresentation of immigrant children in special education schools or in other low-achieving schools is a complex topic that should not be diminished to the lack of language competence of these groups. Similarly, the literature has pointed to the need for more sophisticated research to understand this phenomenon. Trying to explain such complexity through statistical data of parental background, socio-economic status or language competence has been proven inadequate as well. Therefore, this study strived going beyond the description of the situation or identifying the most relevant cause regarding family background. It can be said that this study tackled a topic that is known, discussed but not researched. Findings showed that there was a need for such a study. What the study reached suggested that the emphasis on the lack of language competence or on the family background would be only an underestimation of the problem. The referral process indeed bears a more manifold nature which requires collaboration among stakeholders to avoid any misdeed for students. However, this study demonstrated distrust and a weak collaboration among them which confirmed the necessity of research on the topic. Including Turkish immigrants, non-German speakers, asking about the overrepresentation of students with a Turkish background in special education in a culturally sensitive way, reaching several stakeholders included in the process such as teachers, school directors, school inspectors, or school psychologists as a foreigner researcher, and doing research about such a sensitive topic an immigrant was not a smooth and easy process. However, every single step of this research brought the hope that the findings will reach a wide range of readers and it will have an influence on practices. Hopefully, this goal will be achieved through this book.

This book presents the study in eleven chapters. The first chapter introduces the study in terms of its background, relevance, purpose, and significance. The literature that formed the frame of the discussion for this study is discussed in the second chapter. The next chapter gives detailed information about the research context by presenting the Austrian education system, teacher education system, special education context, as well as the immigrant context. The fourth chapter discusses the methodological approach and the epistemological stance of the research. The fifth and sixth chapters present the data collection and data analysis processes respectively. The presentation of findings starts with the seventh chapter that explains the categories reached at the end of data analysis. This chapter provides quotations from the participants as well. Following, the eighth chapter shows how the core category emerged while the ninth chapter presents the theory generation. The tenth chapter, on the other hand, discusses the generated theory in terms of its relevance to literature by making use of visuals. The last chapter summarizes the previous chapters and discusses the implications of the study by reflecting on critical issues.

We live in a time of selectivity and rivalry, where people are more individualistic and ask for the best only for themselves. However, asking the best for all can defeat the disadvantages of all. Hence, I would like to finish this foreword with a quotation from John Dewey.

“What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.”
(Dewey, 1907)

Seyda Subasi Singh, Ph.D.

1 Introduction

This chapter gives information about the background, relevance, purpose, and significance of this study. After introducing the background that urged and motivated the study, the relevance of the study to special education, inclusion, Austria, and methodology is discussed. The chapter goes on with the purpose, significance, and potential of the study. At the end of the chapter, the definitions of the terms that are adopted in this study can be found.

1.1 This Study

This study attempted to develop an understanding of the overrepresentation of students with a Turkish migration background in special education referrals in Austria based on the experiences of the people included in the education referral process. The study was conducted in Vienna with participants who had first-hand experiences. The aim was to identify the meaning that participants made of their experiences.

The topic of minority and immigrant overrepresentation in special education is a complex one. However, it is a topic that can reveal significant information about the context, society, and research field. This study could show how the special education referral process is understood, experienced, and interpreted by individuals included in the referral process. In a broader sense, the study could indicate how students with special needs and being educated in a special education school are understood especially focused on immigrants and minorities. The attitude of teachers towards special education and special education needs among Turkish immigrants are some additional aspects that such a study could reveal.

1.2 Background of the Study

In many countries, students with a migration background have a likelihood to attend certain types of schools in a disproportioned way (Song, 2011). Disproportional placement of immigrant students may refer to underrepresentation or overrepresentation for this group. Underrepresentation mainly means fewer students with a migration background in promising schools such as academic schools, grammar schools, or pre-university schools. On the other hand, overrepresentation refers to the high number of immigrant students in low-promising schools such as vocational schools, apprenticeships, or special education schools.

The overrepresentation of students with a migration background in special education referrals can be tracked in many countries around the world (Berhanu & Dyson, 2012; Luciak, 2004; Reichenberg & Berhanu, 2017). Harry (2014) discussed that the low achievement of immigrant students can be considered as a disability in some contexts, which may lead to a referral to special education. Werning, Loser, and Urban (2008) reported the overrepresentation of immigrant students in special education schools in Germany, while Berhanu and Dyson (2017) reported a similar placement for Nordic countries, Strand and Lindsay (2009) for England, or Petricusic (2004) for Slovenia. As a country that is populated with a large number of immigrants, and where immigrant children are overrepresented in special education, Austria was chosen as the research site for this study (Herzog-Punzenberger & Unterwurzacher, 2009; Luciak & Biewer, 2011; Yildiz, 2012). The context of Austria will be discussed in Chapter 3 in detail.

The disproportionate distribution of students with a migration background in special education schools is a topic that has been tackled with different perspectives for decades (Dyson & Gallanough, 2008; Harry, 2014; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Valenzuela, Copeland, Huaqing Qi & Park, 2006). As Skiba et al. (2008, p. 264) put, the disproportionate placement of immigrants and minorities is one of the “most long-standing and intransigent” problems of the special education research. However, despite the years of research and discussion, we have limited understanding of the complex issue of the overrepresentation of immigrant groups in- special education referrals (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011; Sweller, Graham & van Bergen, 2012). Forming a coherent explanation of this issue is challenged by several factors such as; dependency on the available data-sets, divergent or contradictory research findings, linear explanations, too much attribution to some certain variables (Sullivan & Bal, 2013), culture-specificity, nation-specificity (Gabel, Curcic, Powell, Khader & Albee, 2009), or various definitions across educational systems (Berhanu & Dyson, 2012).

Similarly, the research in the Austrian context tries to explain the overrepresentation or the underrepresentation of students with a migration background in some specific schools through statistics. National statistics give a detailed picture of the number of students with a migration background in different types of schools. However, the research tackles the topic based on certain factors such as economic status or education level of parents. For the Austrian context, several scholars (Bacher, 2006; Herzog-Punzenberger & Unterwurzacher, 2007; Luciak & Biewer, 2011; Unterwurzacher, 2007) indicated that the education level of parents or socioeconomic status could not account for the low academic achievement and need for special education of students with a migration background. Hence, there has been a call for the research that can come up with an integrated understanding without limiting the discussion to specific indicators.

1.3 Relevance of the Study

There were two phases of the literature review in this study. In line with the constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), the research did not start with a framework or a gap in the literature to fill. The initial literature review was undertaken comprehensively before the research started. The aim was to find a starting point, to identify what new insight the study can achieve, and to locate the relevance of the study to certain aspects in the educational field.

The following part discusses the relevance of the study in several aspects. The research topic comprises multiple concepts such as special education or inclusion. These aspects are interrelated and relevant to the research in different ways. On the other hand, the relevance to the research conducted so far, and the appropriateness of the methodology are also included in this section.

1.3.1 Relevance to Special Education

Special education can be considered a tailored intervention to respond to the difficulties that some learners experience (Berhanu & Dyson, 2012). Although special education should ideally offer specialized and mainly costly services for the ones who need them, special education is regarded as dubious by immigrant families. Firstly, special education is considered ineffective in achieving desired learning outcomes especially, for providing language services (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). Learning the language of the receiving country and communicating by using it at an advanced level has great importance for immigrant families. However, as a special education

need is diagnosed through tests in receiving country language (Sullivan, 2011), the referral to special education may be based on being incompetent in the language of the receiving country. Another issue is the overrepresentation of ethnic minorities and immigrants in special education referrals based on high incidence disabilities (Berhanu & Dyson, 2012; Sweller et al., 2012). The identification of special education needs for immigrants is often based on subjective high incidence disability categories such as specific learning disabilities, speech and language disorders, cognitive impairments, and emotional disabilities, which are mostly convertible (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Such impairments may not be enough for putting a hold on the access to education for many immigrant families, because accessing mainstream education and academic achievement are viewed as indicators of integration by immigrants (Arzubiaga, Nogueron & Sullivan, 2009; Goldberg, 2002). Hence, being diagnosed with special education needs and being educated in segregated school settings concern immigrant families. As such this study strived to understand the immigrants' perspectives about special education by recruiting them as data sources.

1.3.2 Relevance to Inclusion

With the introduction of the term 'inclusion' to school context at the end of the 1980s, this sociological term became an important term for educational sciences (Biewer, Proyer & Kremsner, 2019). With the declaration of Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 (UNESCO, 2015), inclusion became a central point of education in the international context. As Biewer and Schütz (2016) explained, inclusion has two categories of focus: narrow and broad concepts. The narrow concept can be understood as the inclusion of children with disabilities until the end of the 1990s. However, starting in 2000, inclusion took on the broader context to include all students who are disadvantaged (Biewer et al., 2019). This development presented inclusion as a concept that encompasses all who are vulnerable to exclusion and marginalization. Several aspects, such as migration, sexual orientation, gender, poverty, or disability are discussed as vulnerability factors in the inclusion context. Hence, catering to all people with basic rights and equal opportunities regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, ability, or religion is rudimentary of inclusion (Siska & Habib, 2013).

The inclusive practices are supported by UNESCO (2017) as they "can be effective in supporting the involvement of all learners who are facing vulnerable situations; examples include those who are new to a class, learners from different cultural and language backgrounds, and those with disabilities" (p. 33).

Being an immigrant increases the likelihood of being diagnosed with special education needs and being denied from mainstream education (Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Luciak & Biewer, 2011; Skiba et al., 2008). Inclusion was introduced as a way to eliminate this disadvantage. However, the goal of elimination of the disadvantages of vulnerable groups through inclusion should be tackled carefully. The discussion of the overrepresentation in special education referrals for immigrants should not be clouded by the inclusive education discussion. Inclusion is encouraged as a response to the inequities in special education, and inclusive educational practices are served as remedies. However, like other policies, educational policies are vulnerable to the people who implement them (Chase, 2014). Putting policies into practice is an interpretation of policy; and the success of inclusion is up to the ethos of the school, support systems, settings, and shared responsibility of staff (Coburn, 2005). Hence, the marginalization and stigmatization of certain groups of people cannot be eliminated only through the introduction of inclusion as an educational policy.

Moreover, inclusion cannot be the opposite of exclusion as long as normality is the focus of the educational processes. The comparison to the implicit norms and usage of difference markers may

create new discriminatory conditions embedded within inclusive education (Graham & Slee, 2008). Therefore, discussing the overrepresentation of immigrant groups in special education referrals should be of great interest even when inclusive education is implemented across nations. Equity and inclusion go hand in hand in terms of eliminating disadvantages and ensuring access and opportunities for all. As Obiakor (2011) suggested, any education program should encourage access, equity, and inclusion; however, he explained that the placement principles for inclusion still value race, background, and language, which contradicts the idea of equity. That fact that students with a migration background are represented in segregated settings, more than their peers are, would contradict the inclusion efforts in a country. As a country that adopted several steps in the direction of inclusion, the consistent overrepresentation of Turkish immigrant students in special education is an important point to examine in Austria.

1.3.3 Relevance to Austria

With a culturally diverse population, Austria experiences the overrepresentation of students with a migration background in special education referrals (Herzog-Punzenberger & Unterwurzacher, 2009; Luciak & Biewer, 2011; Yildiz, 2012). According to Luciak and Biewer (2011) and Bacher (2006), immigrant students and ethnic minorities such as Roma students are overrepresented in low promising schools and underrepresented in academic schools. In addition, the diagnosis of special education needs and the special education referral process are suspected of being based on false decisions. Similarly, Altrichter and Feyerer (2011) as well as Krammer, Gebhardt, Rossman, Paleczek, and Gasteiger-Klicpera (2014) pointed to the lack of unity and conformity to diagnose special education needs and to refer to special education in Austria.

When compared to other immigrant students, students with Turkish background have a higher risk of being referred to special education in Austria. Luciak and Biewer (2011), as well as Herzog-Punzenberger and Unterwurzacher (2009) and Bacher (2006), reported the high risk in Austria for Turkish along with former Yugoslavian immigrant students. Herzog-Punzenberger and Unterwurzacher (2009) concluded that students from a Turkish background have a 2.3 times higher risk of being diagnosed with special education needs than their native peers in Austria. However, the overrepresentation in such diagnoses is not so high for all students with a migration background. The same study showed that students with Polish, Czech, Hungarian and Slovakian background do not have a dramatically higher risk than their native Austrian peers of being diagnosed with special education needs; while students with Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian background have a high risk, but still lower than the students with a Turkish background. Similarly, Franz (2007), Sohn and Özcan (2007), and Avci (2006) highlighted Turkish children's high probability of ending up in a special education school in Germany. Diefenbach (2004), Merz-Atalik (2014), as well as Geiling and Theunissen (2009) described such placement as ambiguous. Weiss (2007) suggested that social and structural factors are more effective on educational achievement than ethnicity in the German-speaking context. However, the research of Unterwurzacher (2007) showed that even when the socioeconomic factors are controlled, students with Turkish or former Yugoslavian backgrounds perform less than their peers do in Austria.

As a country that has developed policy regulations and strategies for the implementation of inclusion, Austria offers a context where we witness efforts for inclusion and educational equity as well as the overrepresentation of immigrants in special education schools at the same time. As Krammer et al. (2014) suggested, we need more analytic research on the overrepresentation issue by including people who have experiences in special education referrals. We need to construct a "theoretical understanding" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 4).

1.3.4 Relevance to Research

The president of the Council for Exceptional Children, Lloyd Dunn, brought the issue of overrepresentation of immigrants in special education to attention in the United States in 1968 (Dunn, 1968). The research in the last five decades has shown that several notable themes have emerged regarding this issue.

In some context, as Harry (2014) indicated, the low achievement of students with a migration background can also be considered as a disability and may lead to the placement in special education schools for students with a migration background in an overrepresented way. While Hibel, Farkas, and Morgan (2010) suggested that such overrepresentation may result from non-academic factors rather than learning problems.

Among the studies and research so far, we can find several explanations for this overrepresentation. Misidentifying disability (Blanchett, 2006), poor parenting (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), social and educational inequality (Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008), wish for homogeneity in schools (Thomas & Loxley, 2001), identifying challenging students as deviant (Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008), the failure of culturally responsive teaching or lack of fit between students' culture and school culture (Gay, 2002), teacher efficacy (Podell & Soodak, 1993), institutional discrimination (Gomolla & Radtke, 2009), or employing special education as a tool of assimilation (Gabel et al., 2009) are some of the discussion points that we can see in the literature.

However, as Hosp and Reschly (2004) suggested "a significant weakness in the research is the exclusion of variables that are more directly related to special education eligibility decision-making" (p. 185). This study takes this suggestion one step further and tries to develop an understanding of the perspectives of the people who are included in the decision-making for special education referrals. Hence, several data sources were recruited, the excessive focus on numeric data and single factors was avoided.

1.3.5 Relevance to Challenges

Forming a comprehensive understanding of the overrepresentation of immigrants in special education is challenged by several reasons. Hence, there are numerous points of view on the phenomenon, although the research body has struggled to form a comprehensible understanding (Sullivan & Artilles, 2011; Sweller et al., 2012).

The research about the overrepresentation of students with a migration background in special education is limited to the availability of data. As Sullivan and Bal (2013) stated, many child-level or school-level variables are not documented by the officials or made public to researchers. The collection of data covering several important variables about national special education indicators would allow the researchers to conduct sophisticated research about the overrepresentation (Valenzuela et al., 2006). However, using different ways of data collection (Donovan & Cross, 2002) can make it difficult to do comparative studies across countries. Similarly, several other scholars around the world from the UK (Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008), New Zealand, Germany, and Canada (Gabel et al., 2009), or Australia (Sweller et al., 2012), stated the impossibility of comprehensive analysis due to lack of available data sets in their countries. Another challenge is the divergence and contradiction of research findings and linear explanations for special education referrals. When a single factor is tackled, inconsistent findings across studies reveal the reasons in economic variables such as housing value, income, school poverty or community poverty (Sullivan & Bal, 2013) or across studies that explore only the effect of teacher efficacy on special education referrals (Chu, 2011). An example can be the study of Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, and Maczuga (2012) who analyzed the data of 7,900 children in early

childhood education age. After controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, they found that minority children are disproportionately underrepresented in early childhood interventions and early childhood special education. However, their findings were challenged by contradictory findings of similar research with the same variables. On the other hand, gender, birth weight, and racial-ethnic status could have created bias due to “reverse causality” (p. 348). Therefore, they pointed to the need for calibrating the focus on how several underlying variables come together to generate that overrepresentation.

The next challenge is the disproportioned focus on certain factors. Until the early 2000s, the investigation about the phenomenon concentrated on two themes, namely demographics and economic variables of the children and the school districts (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). Based on this concentration, prior research adopted the statistical significance of predictors to explain the overrepresentation of children with a migration background in special education. Many studies have relied on the available data sets on socio-economic status and tried to explain the overrepresentation based on poverty indicators. However, exposure to poverty or poverty-related variables does not necessarily yield low achievement or special education needs (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz & Chung, 2005). An important point to bear in mind is the interaction of the variables. The intersectionality between variables such as demographics, economics, or academics must be taken into account.

Based on the data from one school district, Valenzuela et al. (2006) examined the relationship between language proficiency and ethnicity in terms of their effect on disability labels. Their findings showed minority students and English language learners were disproportionately enrolled in special education and segregated settings. However, they regard their analyses of the data from 17,870 students as limited because of the incompetence of correlational studies to identify the causal relationships among the variables. At the end of their large-scale quantitative study, they argued the impossibility of collecting data about all potential intersecting variables through quantitative methods.

A final challenge to sophisticated research is the incautiousness to cultural and social variedness. Although ethnic overrepresentation in special education is a global phenomenon, the causes, eligibility criteria, and rates of ethnic overrepresentation may vary within the country or within the cultures in the same country (Gabel et al., 2009). Sweller et al. (2012) showed how the enrollment of ethnic minorities in special education increases drastically faster than the enrollment of this group in mainstream schools. Their findings, however, indicated a discrepancy among different minority groups in terms of representation in special education settings in Australia.

Different linguistic competences, knowledge of the school system, knowledge of parental rights, educational experiences in the country of origin, and immigration reasons are factors that can be peculiar to individuals as well as to ethnic groups. Similarly, Dyson and Gallannaugh (2008) argued that too much of a focus on one individual level can curb insights into the group norms. They suggested that some individual problems that lead to unfitting school performance can be related to the educational or social outcomes of the whole social group. Hence, we should bring the social group dimension and the individualistic approach together to understand how local cultural and social practices intersect with students’ cultural and social practices to create such overrepresentation (Artiles & Bal, 2008).

With this study, such a manifold issue was not attributed to a single socio-demographic or individual factor. On the other hand, as Gabel et al. (2008) suggested, reasons for overrepresentation can be nation/culture-specific and terminologies, classifications, and definitions may vary within educational systems, making it difficult to come up with internationally valid explana-

tions. However, there was an effort to maximize the range of collected information through theoretical/purposive sampling by providing a thick description of the context of this study. So, the findings can be discussed in other contexts, and thereby, form research that appeals to international interests.

1.3.6 Relevance to Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis. There were several reasons for choosing a qualitative approach. In this study, the aim was to collect data from different perspectives about the overrepresentation of students with a Turkish migration background in special education referrals. Interpreting the experiences and the perspectives of the participants and getting to learn their interpretation of their experiences were the goals. When the focus of the research is an interpretation, the qualitative design is likely to be adopted (Ingstad & Grut, 2005).

On the other hand, as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggested, qualitative methods would allow the researcher to investigate the experiences of the participants. In her study using qualitative methods, Poon-McBrayer (2016) indicated how a qualitative design could be used to map the complexities embedded in special education in multicultural settings. Her work showed how narrative inquiry could illustrate more complicated situations that cannot be explained through quantitative methods.

Grounded theory was chosen from other qualitative research methods for this study. As Birks and Mills (2015) described, grounded theory does not only describe and explore a phenomenon but explains and elaborates on the phenomenon being studied. Grounded theory explains the phenomenon in the context of the people who experience it. This study tried to come up with an understanding rather than only a description; hence, grounded theory served to this aim. Specifically, constructivist grounded theory was the best match. As constructivist grounded theory is ideal for getting to the underlying processes (Charmaz, 2014), it allows us to collect data to understand what is happening in the research site.

The purpose of developing an understanding of overrepresentation in special education required going through the underlying meanings. Hence, qualitative design and constructivist grounded theory method were the most fitting choices.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

With this study, I tried to defeat the challenges for reaching a comprehensive understanding by embracing an innovative stance, by drawing the data from first-hand experiences, and by not denying the co-construction of researchers. The target was to ask and identify what we can learn about the overrepresentation by relying on the experiences of the parents, teachers, school directors, school psychologists, and inspectors. These participants are the ones who are included in the decision-making process for special education needs, although to different extents. In addition, the study avoided oversimplifications and did not consider certain background variables as the only factors for the overrepresentation of students with Turkish background in special education. Hence, the study required a methodology that gives way to flexibility, the inclusion of various data sources, and interpretation.

By asking what we can learn about this phenomenon, the aim was to understand what the experiences of parents, teachers, school directors, inspectors, or school psychologists can tell us about the referral of students with a Turkish background to special education schools. The

study started with some initial questions to progress the research and later, the questions were modified after discovering relevant or irrelevant concepts in the course of the research (Charmaz, 2014). The initial questions were to identify the research phenomenon but not to make assumptions about it. In the beginning, the aim was to stay at a descriptive level and to channel the attention to the actions and process. The initial questions were:

- How is a referral to special education done for students with Turkish background?
- How do participants explain the referral to special education for students with Turkish background?
- How do participants make the meaning of their experiences that they had during the referral process to special education for students with Turkish background?

These research questions were reviewed and adapted through the research. The ongoing process of the inquiry, interviews, or analysis influenced the inquiry. The adapted research questions are discussed in Chapter 6.

1.5 Significance of the Study

Such a study has a touch on important and needed discussions. First, this study created a holistic perspective by including several stakeholders (Turkish parents living in Austria, school directors, inspectors, and school psychologists) affected by or affecting the same process, namely, the referral to special education.

Another advantage of this study lies in its qualitative nature. Such a qualitative study is needed in Austria as educational research on educational equity and school placement is discussed based on quantitative data about school enrollment, dropouts, or achievement scores provided by educational statistics.

With the qualitative nature of this study, the research explains the participant meanings, and it sheds light on the differences that are practiced during the referral of students with Turkish background to special education. Along with immigrants from the former Yugoslavian background, the Turkish community forms the second most populated immigrant community in Austria. The overrepresentation of Turkish immigrants in special education which is considered as a non-university track is an important topic to discuss.

So far, research has included teachers in studies. However, this time, parents are also included, and they form the main source of information along with the teachers. The experiences of parents can demonstrate how parents explain their knowledge about schooling processes, the rights of their children, and their rights as parents, as well as their experiences of participants of special education referrals. Additionally, the experiences of teachers may provide knowledge about where teachers interact in such a referral. School psychologists are the ones who are responsible for psychological evaluation and testing upon the initiation of teachers, hence, they have relevant experiences as well. Additionally, school inspectors or school directors are members of the educational settings at different levels, although not directly in the learning of students. However, their experiences are also included to understand the phenomenon from a comprehensive perspective.

On the other hand, including parents who cannot communicate in German is another advantage of this study. Families, especially non-competent German-speaking mothers, can rarely be integrated into research conducted by non-Turkish speaking researchers. In this study, the data collected in Turkish were used by losing no meaning to an external translator or interpreter.

1.6 Definitions of Terms

Students: in this study, students refer to school-age children (pupils). As the relevant literature mainly adopts the terms 'students with a migration background' or 'students from a migrant background', this study used the word 'students' rather than 'pupils'.

Students with a migration/from a migrant background: this term is used to define the students who do not belong to the dominant cultural group in the country. These students can be first, second, or third-generation immigrant students with or without Austrian citizenship. Students with a migration background are mainly the ones who have a different household language other than German.

Parents with/from Turkish background: in this study, parents with a Turkish background are the parents who were born either in Turkey or in Austria. These parents are sources for the parents-data. The terms 'Turkish parents', 'parents from Turkey', 'parents from a Turkish migrant background', or 'parents with Turkish background' are used interchangeably.

Students with/from Turkish background: these students are the students whose parents are of Turkey origin. Their parents can be first or second-generation immigrants born in Austria or Turkey and can have either Turkish or Austrian citizenship. The criterion for having a Turkish background is the language spoken at home. The language in the household of these students is predominantly Turkish. The national statistics and research also adopt this criterion.

Special education teachers: these teachers are the ones who completed teacher training for special education and who are employed in special education schools or mainstream schools. Special education teachers can be employed in special education schools, in integrative classrooms of mainstream schools, in special education centers, or inclusive settings.

Special education referral: the referral to special education is the diagnosis process of special education needs and mainly means a change in the curriculum that the student should follow. Based on the extent of the special education needs, the referral can lead to a change in the classroom or school. However, students can stay in their classrooms after being diagnosed with special education needs in case their needs can be catered with the available sources.

Special education referral process: the term special education referral process refers to the process that includes the diagnosis and decision-making for special education needs. The referral starts with the first step that teachers take by reporting a possible special education need that a student has. The referral mainly starts in the school and includes teachers and school directors at the beginning. The referral process later includes parents, the observation of students, testing, the evaluation of special education centers, decision commission, diagnosis, and placement in a new classroom or school.

Disproportionality: disproportionality refers to either a lower or higher percentage of students from a specific ethnic or minority group in a specific type of school than it can be found in the whole school system.

Overrepresentation: overrepresentation in schools occurs when the number of pupil groups with a certain background in specific schools is more than the number that these groups appear in the whole school system. Overrepresentation in the literature and the judgment of disproportionality are calculated with the 10% rule of Chinn and Hughes (1987). This rule indicates an acceptable bandwidth for the total enrollment of a specific group.

Receiving country/host country: these terms are used to explain the country of residence of immigrants. The term 'host country' encourages the understanding that immigrants are guests or hosted as temporary residents. However, the relevant literature uses this term to refer to the country where immigrants live. This study uses 'receiving country' and 'host country' interchangeably.

This book discusses the overrepresented referral of students from a migrant background to special education by concentrating on the case of students from a Turkish background in Austria. It attempts to open space for bringing first-hand experiences together to address the complexity of the referral process and to develop an understanding that goes beyond oversimplification and linear explanations for the overrepresentation of students from a migrant background in low-promising schools.

Dieses Buch diskutiert die Überrepräsentation von SchülerInnen mit Migrationshintergrund mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf, wobei in der Studie SchülerInnen mit türkischem Hintergrund in Österreich im Mittelpunkt stehen. Es wird versucht, Raum für die Zusammenführung von Erfahrungen aus erster Hand zu schaffen, um die Komplexität des Überweisungsprozesses anzugehen und ein Verständnis zu entwickeln, das über die Vereinfachung und lineare Erklärungen für die Überrepräsentation von SchülerInnen mit Migrationshintergrund in nicht-vielversprechenden Schulen hinausgeht.



Die Autorin

Dr. Seyda Subasi Singh is a postdoc researcher at the Department of Education at University of Vienna. She teaches and conducts research on educational equity, intersectionality and inclusive education.

Dr. Seyda Subasi Singh ist postdoc wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin am Institut für Bildungswissenschaft der Universität Wien. Ihre Arbeits- und Forschungsschwerpunkte liegen im Bereich der Bildungsgleichheit, Intersektionalität und Inklusiven Pädagogik.

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