



Perceptions and Experiences of Special Education Students towards Mersin Tourism

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Cite this study: Kinikli, M., A. (2024). Perceptions and Experiences of Special Education Students towards Mersin Tourism. WATERRA, 1(1), 19-28.

<https://www.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17244173>

Keywords

Tourism
Mersin
Special education students
Destination perception
Qualitative research

Article

Received: 10 September 2024
Revised: 22 November 2024
Accepted: 29 November 2024
Published: 31 December 2024

Abstract

This study phenomenologically examines the tourism perceptions and experiences of special education students in Mersin. The fundamental problem is the inadequacy of Mersin's tourism infrastructure in meeting the needs of these students, and the research aims to analyze their tourism perceptions, expectations, and experiences specific to Mersin to propose solutions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews; findings have shown that students perceive tourism positively but face significant barriers in Mersin regarding fundamental elements such as transportation, accommodation, and the accessibility of tourist attractions. While sea, nature, cultural, and entertainment tourism are preferred, accessible information and social acceptance were also identified as important factors. Consequently, comprehensive improvements in transportation, accommodation, site accessibility, and information services are required for Mersin to become an accessible and inclusive tourism destination for special education students, which will enhance their social participation.

1. Introduction

Tourism is a significant social activity that meets various needs of individuals, such as rest, entertainment, learning, and socialization (UNWTO, 2019). Especially for individuals with disabilities, tourism is seen as an important tool for social participation and personal development (Darcy & Dickson, 2009). In recent years, increased awareness and studies on tourism for disabled people have contributed to significant developments in this field. However, the tourism experiences and expectations of special education students hold distinct importance due to their unique characteristics. Special education encompasses specially designed educational programs and services for individuals with different learning needs (Kirk, et al., 2015). Therefore, the participation of special education students in tourism activities necessitates arrangements suitable for their individual needs.

Disability is defined as difficulties in adapting to social life and meeting daily requirements resulting from the loss of physical, mental, spiritual, sensory, and social abilities to various degrees, either congenitally or acquired later (Güloğlu, 2022). The full and equal participation of disabled individuals in social life is a requirement of human rights and social justice principles (UNCRPD, 2006). In this context, participation in tourism activities is a fundamental right that disabled individuals should enjoy on equal terms with others. However, the tourism experiences of disabled individuals differ due to the various barriers they encounter. These barriers can stem from

various factors such as the inaccessibility of the physical environment, deficiencies in information and communication, staff attitudes, and social exclusion (Darcy & Buhalis, 2011; WHO, 2011).

1.1. Problem and Aim of the Research

Mersin stands out as one of Turkey's significant tourism destinations, with its rich historical and cultural heritage, natural beauty, and climatic advantages. However, the question of to what extent Mersin's tourism offerings meet the needs of special education students is an important research topic. The main problem of this study is that Mersin's current tourism infrastructure and services are inadequate in meeting the needs of special education students. This situation restricts the participation of special education students in tourism activities and hinders their full integration into social life.

The aim of this study is to thoroughly examine the tourism perceptions, expectations, and experiences of special education students concerning Mersin, and to identify the problems encountered in this area and propose solutions. In line with this general aim, answers to the following questions will be sought:

- What are the basic perceptions and connotations of special education students regarding the concept of tourism?
- What are the touristic activities that special education students enjoy participating in or dream of, and what are their reasons for these?
- What are the elements that special education students consider important for themselves during a touristic trip or holiday (e.g., transportation, accommodation, food, social interaction, etc.)?
- What are the thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of special education students related to tourism specifically in Mersin?

Based on the answers to these questions, recommendations will be presented for Mersin to become a more accessible and inclusive tourism destination for special education students.

1.2. Significance of the Research

This research is considered to make significant contributions towards enhancing Mersin's potential as a disability-friendly tourism destination. The findings to be obtained will guide relevant stakeholders, such as local governments, tourism businesses, special education institutions, and families, in developing tourism products and services suitable for the needs of special education students. Furthermore, this study can be regarded as an important step towards improving the quality of life for special education students by supporting their more active participation in social life. In this context, the results of the research will contribute to the adoption of a more inclusive and accessible approach in Mersin's tourism sector.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section, the theoretical framework of the study will be established by examining the basic concepts of the research and the relevant literature.

2.1. Tourism and Disability

Tourism is defined by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) as the travel of individuals outside their usual environment and the activities they undertake during these travels (UNWTO, 2019). This definition emphasizes

that tourism is not only an economic activity but also a phenomenon with social, cultural, and personal dimensions. Tourism increases individuals' social interactions, enables cultural exchange, and contributes to their personal development (Richards & Hall, 2000). Disability, on the other hand, is defined as difficulties in adapting to social life and meeting daily requirements resulting from the loss of physical, mental, spiritual, sensory, and social abilities to various degrees, either congenitally or acquired later (WHO, 2001). This situation refers not only to an individual's medical problem but also to a condition that affects their social participation (Barnes, et al., 1999; Oliver, 1990). Therefore, disability is a social phenomenon that affects an individual's role and status in society (UNCRPD, 2006).

The full and equal participation of disabled individuals in social life is a requirement of human rights and social justice principles. In this context, participation in tourism activities is a fundamental right that disabled individuals should enjoy on equal terms with others. However, the tourism experiences of disabled individuals differ due to the various barriers they encounter. These barriers can stem from various factors such as the inaccessibility of the physical environment, deficiencies in information and communication, staff attitudes, and social exclusion (Poria, et al., 2011). This situation restricts the participation of disabled individuals in tourism activities and reduces the benefits they would derive from tourism. Therefore, it is necessary for the tourism sector to be organized to meet the needs of disabled individuals and for policies to be developed that support their participation in tourism.

2.2. Studies on Accessible Tourism and Individuals with Special Needs

Accessible tourism is a concept that enables disabled individuals and other people with special needs (such as the elderly, pregnant women, etc.) to participate in tourism activities without encountering any obstacles (Darcy & Dickson, 2009). Accessible tourism encompasses not only the arrangement of the physical environment but also ensuring that information, communication, transportation, accommodation, and services are accessible. In recent years, the growing interest in accessible tourism has also increased the number of studies conducted in this field. These studies contribute to making the tourism sector more inclusive by revealing the tourism needs, expectations, and problems faced by disabled individuals.

Research on factors affecting the tourism participation of individuals with special needs provides important information for understanding their travel decisions, destination preferences, and tourism experiences. For example, some studies show that the most important factors in the travel decisions of disabled individuals are accessibility, safety, and cost (Yau, et al., 2004). Other research indicates that the tourism experiences of disabled individuals are affected by factors such as staff attitudes, information and communication facilities, and social support (Poria, et al., 2011). These studies emphasize that the tourism sector needs to be organized to meet the diverse needs of individuals with special needs.

This study aims to add a new dimension to the work done in this field by examining the perceptions and experiences of special education students regarding tourism in Mersin. Special education students have unique tourism needs due to their cognitive and social developmental characteristics. Therefore, understanding their tourism experiences and expectations will help the tourism sector develop more effective policies and practices in this area.

3. Material and Method

This study adopts a phenomenological approach, a qualitative research method, to understand the perceptions and experiences of special education students regarding tourism in Mersin. Phenomenology is a research method that aims to deeply examine how individuals experience a particular phenomenon and how they attribute meaning to these experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach provides a suitable framework for understanding the tourism experiences of special education students from their own perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection tool. These interviews allow the researcher to ask predetermined core questions while also enabling them to ask additional questions and explore topics in-depth based on participant responses (Patton, 2014).

The research participants consisted of special education students living in Mersin province and studying in special education schools or special education classrooms. A purposive sampling method was used for participant selection. In this method, individuals with specific characteristics suitable for the research purpose are selected (Miles, et al., 2014). This study ensured the participation of special education students with different ages, disability types, and socio-economic levels to increase data diversity and richness. The principle of data saturation guided the determination of the number of participants. Data saturation is defined as the point at which data obtained from new interviews show similarity with previous data and do not provide new information. During the data collection process, efforts were made to ensure participants felt comfortable and safe, to encourage them to share sincere and in-depth information (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Interviews were conducted face-to-face by the researcher in an environment preferred by the participants. In the interviews, audio recordings were made with participants' consent and later transcribed. A descriptive phenomenological analysis method was used for data analysis. In this method, data are carefully examined, and meaningful themes are created to reveal the essence of participants' experiences (Giorgi, 2009). Various strategies were employed during the analysis process to ensure data validity and reliability. For example, the researcher kept reflection notes to minimize the influence of their own biases during the analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, analysis results will be supported by direct quotations from participants' statements to provide the reader with a closer perspective on the data.

3.1. Content Analysis

In this section, the content analysis results of the data obtained from interviews conducted to reveal the perceptions and experiences of special education students regarding tourism in Mersin are presented. The themes obtained from the analysis cover the perceptions of special education students regarding the concept of tourism, their preferred touristic activities, the elements they consider important in a touristic trip, and their experiences specific to Mersin.

The Table 1 summarizes participant demographics (n=12), including gender, age group, disability type, education level, school type, socioeconomic status, residence, tourism experience (last 12 months), preferred tourism types (multiple responses).

Table 1. Demographic Data collected from participants

| Variable | Category | n | % |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|---|------|
| Gender | Female | 6 | 50.0 |
| | Male | 5 | 41.7 |
| | Other / Prefer not to say | 1 | 8.3 |
| Disability Type | Intellectual | 6 | 25.0 |
| | Hearing | 2 | 16.7 |
| | Visual | 2 | 16.7 |
| | Physical | 2 | 8.3 |
| Education Level | Middle school | 4 | 33.3 |
| | High school | 6 | 50.0 |
| | Associate / Bachelor's | 2 | 16.7 |
| School Type | Special education school | 7 | 58.3 |
| | Mainstream / Inclusion class | 5 | 41.7 |
| Socioeconomic Status (self-assessed) | Low | 3 | 25.0 |
| | Middle | 7 | 58.3 |
| | High | 2 | 16.7 |
| Residence | City center | 8 | 66.7 |
| | District / Rural | 4 | 33.3 |
| Tourism Experience (last 12 months) | None | 3 | 25.0 |
| | Once | 4 | 33.3 |
| | ≥2 times | 5 | 41.7 |
| Preferred Type of Tourism (multiple) | Beach / Sea | 8 | 66.7 |
| | Nature | 7 | 58.3 |
| | Culture – Museum | 6 | 50.0 |
| | Amusement park | 5 | 41.7 |

3.2. Basic Perceptions and Connotations Regarding the Concept of Tourism

When the perceptions of special education students regarding the concept of tourism are examined, it is seen that this concept is generally associated with positive feelings and experiences. Participants define tourism with concepts such as "fun," "rest," "discovering new places," and "socialization". These perceptions show that tourism is not just a holiday for special education students, but also an opportunity for personal development and social interaction. For example, one participant (SS4) defined tourism as "getting together with friends, playing games, and seeing different places," while another (SS8) expressed it as "making beautiful memories with family and getting away from stress". These statements reveal that tourism helps special education students strengthen their social bonds and meet their emotional needs.

However, some participants also associate the concept of tourism with "difficulties" and "obstacles". Factors such as "transportation," "accommodation," and "accessibility" were particularly mentioned as elements that negatively affect the tourism experience. For example, one participant (SS2) said, "Getting on the bus and getting lost in crowded places worries me a lot," while another (SS6) expressed their concerns by stating, "Not being able to move comfortably in the hotel room and not finding a suitable toilet can turn my holiday into a nightmare". These findings indicate that tourism can be both a desire and an area of struggle for special education students. Therefore, it is of great importance that the tourism sector is organized to meet the needs of special education students.

3.3. Touristic Activities Liked or Dreamed of and Their Reasons

While the touristic activities that special education students enjoy participating in or dream of show diversity, some common themes emerge.

- **Sea and Beach Tourism:** This is among the most preferred activities by participants. Participants find swimming in the sea, playing in the sand, and sunbathing both enjoyable and relaxing. The physical relaxing effect of water and the freedom of movement it provides are significant reasons for this preference. For example, one participant (SS5) stated, "Swimming in the sea makes me very happy; it's as if all my troubles go away".
- **Nature Tourism:** This is another area that attracts the interest of special education students. Participants want to hike in the forest, have picnics, and explore natural beauties. The reason for this preference is the calming effect of nature, fresh air, and the opportunity to spend time outdoors. For example, one participant (SS9) said, "Listening to the bird songs in the forest and smelling the flowers relaxes me a lot".
- **Cultural Tourism:** This is preferred by some participants. Visiting museums, seeing historical places, and attending cultural events are particularly related to the desire to learn and acquire new information. For example, one participant (SS12) expressed, "Seeing historical places and listening to their stories excites me a lot".
- **Entertainment Tourism:** This is among the activities preferred by special education students. Visiting amusement parks, playing games, and participating in fun activities are particularly associated with the pursuit of excitement and enjoyment. For example, one participant (SS1) said, "Riding the Ferris wheel at the amusement park and eating cotton candy is very fun".

These findings show that special education students have different expectations from tourism and enjoy various activities. Therefore, it is important for the tourism sector to offer a variety of options suitable for the interests and needs of special education students.

3.4. Important Elements in a Touristic Trip or Holiday (Specifically in Mersin)

The elements that special education students consider important during a touristic trip or holiday are closely related to their needs for independence, comfort, and safety. When these elements are evaluated specifically for Mersin, some significant problems and expectations emerge.

- **Transportation:** Transportation is one of the most important elements in the participation of special education students in tourism activities. Participants expect to be able to easily board vehicles they will travel in (bus, minibus, taxi, etc.), move comfortably within the vehicle, and travel safely. It was stated that

there are some problems regarding the accessibility of public transportation vehicles in Mersin. For example, one participant (SS2) expressed problems related to public transport as follows: "Getting on the bus and getting lost in crowded places worries me a lot.". Therefore, making the public transportation system in Mersin disability-friendly will be an important step to increase the participation of special education students in tourism activities.

- **Accommodation:** Accommodation is another important element that directly affects the tourism experience of special education students. Participants expect to have suitable rooms in accommodation places (wide doors, appropriate bathrooms and toilets, etc.), to be able to move comfortably within the hotel (ramps, elevators, etc.), and for hotel staff to be helpful. It was stated that hotels in Mersin vary in this regard. Although some hotels have rooms for disabled guests, complaints were voiced that these rooms are not practically usable or that staff are inadequately trained. For example, one participant (SS6) expressed their concerns on this matter as follows: "Not being able to move comfortably in the hotel room and not finding a suitable toilet can turn my holiday into a nightmare.". Therefore, it is necessary for accommodation businesses in Mersin to be made compliant with disability-friendly standards and for their staff to be trained in this regard.
- **Accessibility:** Accessibility is an important factor in the participation of special education students in tourist attractions and activities in Mersin. Participants expect museums, historical sites, parks, and other tourist attractions to be accessible to them (ramps, elevators, suitable toilets, etc.). Deficiencies were noted regarding the accessibility of some tourist attractions in Mersin. In particular, the inadequate accessibility of historical sites and natural areas makes it difficult for special education students to visit these places. For example, one participant (SS11) expressed their thoughts on this issue as follows: "I want to go to the historical and natural areas in Mersin, but the inaccessibility of the roads and places makes me very sad.". Therefore, increasing the accessibility of tourist attractions in Mersin will enrich the tourism experience of special education students.
- **Information and Communication:** Accurate and understandable information is important to facilitate the participation of special education students in tourism activities. Participants expect to be provided with information about tourist attractions, transportation options, accommodation places, and activities in a format suitable for them (e.g., Braille alphabet, audio description, simple language). It was stated that tourism websites and brochures in Mersin are not sufficiently accessible for disabled individuals. Furthermore, necessary training should be provided to tourism personnel to enable them to communicate effectively with special education students. For example, one participant (SS3) expressed their need in this regard as follows: "I want to get information about the place I will go to beforehand because surprises make me very anxious."
- **Social Acceptance:** Social acceptance is another important element that positively affects the tourism experience of special education students. Participants expect to be accepted, respected, and supported by other people during tourism activities. While it was stated that the public in Mersin is generally helpful, it was also expressed that negative attitudes are encountered in some cases. For example, one participant (SS10) expressed their expectation on this matter as follows: "In tourism, I want to be accepted and respected like other people.". Therefore, raising the awareness of those working in the tourism sector in

Mersin and the local public towards disabled individuals will positively affect the tourism experience of special education students.

The thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of special education students regarding tourism in Mersin provide important information about the city's tourism potential and the challenges encountered. Participants positively evaluate Mersin's natural beauties (sea, beaches, plateaus) and historical sites (Kızkalesi, Cennet and Cehennem Caves). However, problems experienced in accessing these places negatively affect the tourism experience. Participants state that they most enjoy "sea and beach tourism" in Mersin. Especially swimming in the sea and spending time on the beach during the summer months is an important source of relaxation and entertainment for them. However, the fact that beaches and seaside facilities are not sufficiently accessible for disabled individuals negatively affects this experience. For example, one participant (SS5) described their experience on this matter as follows: "My biggest dream is to be able to move around comfortably on the beach with my wheelchair and get into the sea easily.". Mersin's historical and cultural sites also attract the interest of special education students. Museums, ancient cities, and castles, in particular, offer them an important opportunity for learning and discovery. However, the inaccessibility or inadequacy of many of these sites makes it difficult for special education students to visit them. For example, one participant (SS12) expressed their wish in this regard as follows: "I want to visit the historical places of Mersin and learn their stories, but the lack of ramps in museums makes me very sad.". Nature tourism also offers significant potential for special education students in Mersin. Plateaus and natural parks, in particular, provide an important opportunity for rest and relaxation for participants by offering fresh air, a calm environment, and natural beauty. However, the inaccessibility of many of these areas or their lack of adequate infrastructure makes it difficult for special education students to visit these places. For example, one participant (SS9) expressed their dream on this matter as follows: "I want to have a picnic with my family on the plateau and breathe in the fresh air, but the unevenness of the roads worries me.".

In general, the tourism experiences of special education students regarding Mersin reveal the contradiction between the city's tourism potential and its accessibility problems. Although participants want to benefit from Mersin's natural and cultural richness, they have difficulty realizing these wishes due to the accessibility problems they encounter. Therefore, significant improvements in accessibility are needed for Mersin to become a disability-friendly tourism destination.

4. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the perceptions, expectations, and experiences of special education students regarding tourism in Mersin, revealing both the city's strengths and its significant shortcomings in accessible tourism. The results demonstrate that while students hold inherently positive attitudes toward tourism—as an avenue for recreation, socialization, and learning—their actual participation remains constrained by systemic accessibility barriers. These barriers are not merely physical but also institutional and attitudinal, reflecting a broader need for inclusive urban and tourism planning.

The findings highlight that sea, nature, cultural, and entertainment tourism are the most desired activities among participants. Such preferences indicate that special education students seek multidimensional tourism experiences encompassing both relaxation and personal enrichment. However, the difficulties encountered in transportation, accommodation, and access to tourist sites prevent these students from experiencing tourism

equitably. This imbalance underscores a critical social issue: tourism in Mersin, despite its potential, still functions as a privilege rather than a universal right.

Addressing this disparity requires an integrated approach involving both local governance and the private sector. Infrastructural arrangements—such as accessible public transportation vehicles, barrier-free hotel designs, and inclusive recreational areas—must be supported by policy interventions and continuous stakeholder training. Additionally, the development of digital accessibility (e.g., websites, mobile apps, and information brochures compatible with screen readers and Braille systems) is essential to ensure equitable access to information and services. Beyond infrastructure, social awareness campaigns should be conducted to promote empathy and acceptance among tourism staff and the general public, thereby reducing social stigma and enhancing the sense of belonging for individuals with disabilities.

From a theoretical perspective, the study confirms that accessible tourism should not be understood solely as a matter of infrastructure but as a form of social inclusion and empowerment. It aligns with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), emphasizing the right to full participation in cultural and recreational life. In this sense, tourism becomes not only a leisure activity but also a vehicle for equality, dignity, and citizenship.

For future research, comparative studies involving different cities or disability groups could further clarify regional disparities and inform national policy frameworks. Longitudinal studies could also examine how improvements in accessibility over time affect the participation and life satisfaction of special education students. Moreover, participatory action research—where students themselves contribute to the design and evaluation of tourism services—would provide valuable insights for creating truly inclusive tourism systems.

In conclusion, Mersin possesses considerable potential to become a model city for inclusive and disability-friendly tourism. Realizing this vision requires a sustained commitment to universal design principles, cross-sectoral collaboration, and a paradigm shift from accessibility as a “special requirement” to accessibility as a fundamental right and shared social value. Strengthening accessibility in tourism will not only improve the quality of life for special education students but also foster a more equitable, empathetic, and sustainable society.

Acknowledgement

The author declares no acknowledgement.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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