Examining the Practices of Preschool Teachers for Children with Special Needs

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Abstract

In this study, researchers aimed to examine the practices of preschool teachers in their classes for children with special needs. The research, in which interviews and documents were used, was designed using a case study, one of the qualitative research methods. Snowball sampling, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used to determine the research study group. Structured interview questions, checklists for adaptation, and individualized training programs were used as data collection tools. Data were analyzed through content and document analysis. As a result of the research, it was determined that preschool teachers made different instructional applications in their classrooms for children with special needs, and they thought that these applications were beneficial for children with special needs. When the activity and individualized education programs were examined, it was determined that teachers generally made adaptations in their free time and used adult and peer support more frequently. The findings are discussed considering the relevant literature.

Keywords: Individualized education program, preschool, special needs child, adaptation

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Introduction

Children with Special Needs and Inclusive Education

A child with special needs is a term used to express children with developmental disabilities or giftedness. Children with special needs differ from their peers regarding their mental, emotional, and behavioral development, communication skills, and physical characteristics. The types of special needs are examined in two main categories: common inadequacies and rare deficiencies. Common deficiencies are children with mental and developmental disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, emotional and behavioral disorders, children with communication, language and speech difficulties, and gifted and talented children. Rare disabilities are children with hearing impairment, children with visual impairments, and children with physical disabilities, health problems, and multiple disabilities (Kirk et al., 2017). These children are educated in special education schools, special education classes, or integrative education classes according to their level of disability.

Inclusion/integration in the Special Education Services Regulation (2021); It is defined as the education that takes place full-time or part-time in special education classes together with the peers of people with special needs in order to enable people with special needs to interact with other people at all educational levels and to achieve the highest level of educational goals. As a result of the researches, researchers have found that integrative education can be beneficial for both children with special needs and typically developing children. (Reichow et al., 2016; Yazıcı, 2019). In addition, research has revealed that certain key factors are important for integrating education. One of them is research-based instructional strategies (Reichow et al., 2016).

In order for the integration practices of preschool education, which is the first step of formal education, to be successful, it is necessary to make changes in the physical environment, use effective methods and strategies, adapt teaching activities, and provide learning opportunities that are equal for all children (Kale et al., 2016). Based on providing equal opportunities, the differences in the developmental level of the child with special needs are decisive. The systematic and regular implementation of education suitable for differences is possible with individualized education programs.

An IEP is a written annual education plan for a child eligible for special needs classification. It was included in the Education of All Children with Special Needs Act of 1975 and required the development of individual plans to meet the needs of each child. BEP was included in the law for the first time in Turkey in 1997. This document education plan outlines the placement, services, accommodation, and modifications necessary to meet the child's individualized needs in the least restrictive environment

(Rapp & Arndt, 2012). An IEP prepared for a child with special needs should include the following information (Kirk et al., 2017):

- Children's current performance
- A statement that includes academic, functional, and measurable annual goals
- A description of how to assess the child's progress toward meeting annual goals
- Program adaptations and supports for the child
- Statements indicating the start date of services and adaptations, special education and related services, additional assistance and services, and how often, where, and for how long adaptations and supports will be provided.

Adaptation in Preschool Education Program

The most important factors affecting the social and accepted and successful success of children with special needs are the adaptations made by teachers for children with special needs and the individualized education programs prepared. The preschool teachers program should have the necessary skills and knowledge to adapt to the physical environment of the classroom and teaching methods according to children with special needs and to use different methods (Tufan & Yıldırım, 2013).

With the preschool education program renewed in 2013, the adaptation section has started to take place in the activity plans. With the adaptation part of the activity plans, it is aimed at integrating children with special needs into the whole education process. The adaptation department is of great importance in terms of providing equal opportunities to every child in the classroom by making versatile arrangements and adaptations by taking into account the developmental areas of the children with special needs in the classroom, the learning process, methods, and materials (Kılınç et al., 2021).

Research Objectives

When the literature was examined, it was seen that researchers generally focused on the opinions of teachers and teacher candidates regarding inclusive education (Bruns & Mogharreban, 2007; Danniels & Pyle, 2021; Korkmaz & Ünsal, 2022; Küçük Doğanoğlu & Bapoğlu Dümenci, 2015; Koçyiğit, 2015; Kraska & Boyle). 2014; Özaydın & Çolak, 2011; Sukbunpant et al., 2013). However, it has been determined that the number of studies on instructional adaptations is limited (Akgül et al., 2022; Hau et al., 2022; Kılınç et al., 2021). No study has been found in the literature in which the researchers have investigated the teaching strategies, the adaptations and the IEP. In order to see the functional progress of instructional adaptations, it is important to examine these components together. Therefore, in this study, the researchers aimed to examine the teaching strategies, adaptations and IEPs used by preschool teachers for children with

special needs. The fact that there is no previous study in the literature examining instructional strategies, adaptations, and IEPs makes this research different. For this purpose, answers to the following questions were sought.

1. What are the methods/techniques that preschool teachers use to ensure the participation of children with special needs?
2. What are the reasons for choosing these methods and techniques?
3. What are the similarities and differences between teachers' practices, adaptations in activity plans, and the child's IEP?

Methodology

Research Design

A case study, one of the qualitative research methods, was used in this study to examine the practices planned for preschool children. Case study is defined as "a qualitative approach in which the researcher collects detailed and in-depth information about real life, a current limited system or multiple constrained systems in a certain period of time, and presents a situation description or themes of the situation" (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). In this study, it was aimed to examine the instructional strategies of preschool teachers for children with special needs, and for this purpose, interviews, IEP analysis, and activity analysis were used. Figure 1 shows the data triangulation used to provide the case study.
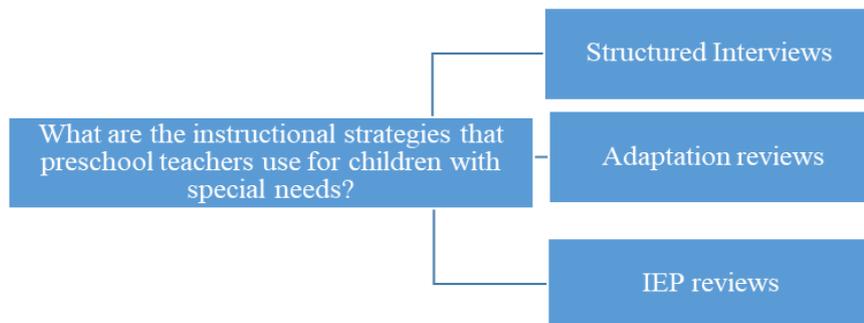

Figure 1. Data Triangulation

Working group

Snowball sampling, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used to determine the study group. In the snowball sampling method, each participant is asked to recommend another prospective participant who bears certain characteristics and is willing to participate in the study, to make the study group bigger (Jonhnson and Christensen, 2010; Patton, 1987). A total of 13 teachers were reached during the data collection process. However, children with special needs in the classroom of six teachers were not included in the study because they did not have individualized education programs. For this reason, the study group of the research consisted of seven preschool teachers. Demographic information about the study group is given in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Informations about Teachers

Gender	f
Female	6
Male	1
Age	f
21-25	1
26-30	1
36-40	2
41-45	2
46 +	1
Educational Status	f
Pre-school education-Bachelor's	7
Professional Seniority (year)	f
1-5	2
11-15	3
16-20	1
20+	1
School Type	f
Preschool	3
Kindergarten	4
Status of Taking Special Education Lessons	f
Yes	4
No	3
Status of Taking Inclusive Education Lessons	f
Yes	1
No	6
Children's Special Needs Type	f
Autism Spectrum Disorder	6
Down Syndrome	1

When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that six of the teachers participating in the research are female, and one is male. All of the teachers are graduates of pre-school education, and most of them have 1-15 years of professional experience. While three of the teachers work in independent kindergartens, four of them work in kindergartens. Three teachers stated that they took special education lessons, and one of them took inclusive lessons. When the special needs type of the children in their class is examined, six of them have autism spectrum disorders, and one has Down Syndrome.

Data Collection Tools

In the research, structured interview questions, individualized education program (IEP) checklist and adaptation activities checklist prepared by the researchers were used as data collection tools. While preparing the data collection tools, the relevant literature was first reviewed. While preparing the Individualized Education Program (IEP) checklist, the module named "Individualized Education Program (Road Map)" prepared by the Ministry of National Education was used. Prepared checklists and structured interview questions were submitted to five expert opinions. Necessary adjustments and changes were made in line with expert opinion. First of all, interviews were held with teachers. Then, individualized education plans received from teachers were examined. Finally, activity plans were obtained from the teachers. Written adaptation activities were examined.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Checklist: A 13-item checklist has been prepared considering the features that should be included in the individualized education program. There are two options for each item, yes/no.

Adaptation Activities Checklist: A 12-item checklist has been prepared in order to understand how teachers support the child with the adaptation activities they have prepared for children with special needs. While five of the items were about leisure time, transition, meal time, activities and adaptations in the daily flow, seven items were created using curriculum change types. There are two options for each item, yes/no.

Data Analysis

Content analysis method and document review method were preferred in the analysis of the data.

Validity and Reliability of the Study

External Validity of the Research

While it is thought that the results obtained in quantitative studies conducted with large groups can be generalized to the universe, even if there is a certain margin of error; It is believed that the results of studies conducted in a small and specific environment with the

participation of a smaller number of people with specific characteristics cannot be applied to other situations or communities. Therefore, the purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize the results obtained to other environments and situations; instead, it is to transfer the results obtained to similar settings (Shenton, 2004; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011). In this study, detailed description and purposeful sampling were preferred in order to ensure external validity.

Internal Validity of the Study

In qualitative research, unlike quantitative research, the researcher has to prove how convincing it is in the observations and data obtained during the research by using multiple data collection techniques. The better the researcher does this, the higher the internal validity of the research (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011). In this study, expert review and participant confirmation were used to ensure internal validity.

Reliability of the Study

In qualitative research, reliability comes up with the concept of acceptability and requires the researcher to confirm the results obtained with the data collected (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011). The external reliability method used in this study is a short confirmation.

Results

Findings Obtained from the Interviews

The information obtained as a result of the interviews about the methods that preschool teachers use for the active participation of children with special needs and the reasons for preferring these methods is presented below.

Methods Used by Teachers: The methods used by the teachers participating in the research for the active participation of children with special needs (CSN) in their classrooms are presented in Figure-2.

Special teaching methods	Teaching techniques	Classroom management	Others
• Storytelling • Puppet • Show off • Role playing • Teaching through play	• Working together • Peer teaching • Adapting the event • Family engagement events	• Using a reinforcer • Teaching the rules • Motivation	• Close contact • Informing other children about the special needs child

Figure 2. Methods Preschool Teachers Use

When Figure 2 is examined, it is seen that the practices of preschool teachers to ensure the active participation of CSN are divided into four categories: Special teaching methods, teaching techniques, classroom management, and others. When the special teaching methods used by the teachers are examined, it is seen that the methods of teaching through storytelling, puppetry, demonstration, role-playing, and play are used. When the teaching techniques used by the teachers were examined, it was determined that they used the activities of working together, peer teaching, adapting the activity, and family participation. It was determined that preschool teachers, who stated that they use reinforcement, teaching rules, and motivation in classroom management, also establish close contact and inform other children about CSN. Below are examples of the answers of the teachers who participated in the research.

"He does his activities with me one-on-one. If I am taking care of other children, he gets help from staff. I keep it by my side. I try to keep it away from children because it harms other children and is aggressive" (T1).

"He loves puppets and stories and enjoys them a lot. I will definitely place it among the activities to be done. I try to approach him with the toys he likes. If he insists, I do not force him because when he is forced, he becomes completely stubborn and closes himself. Absolutely not interacting. I told his friends about his differences before, and I explain in case of disagreement. I'm talking about your feelings. I organize events where he can be with his family. It makes me incredibly happy to see its effects on the family and the child." (T2)

"Since it is mild, I tried to be explanatory, demonstrative, and tolerant about sharing toys, rules, and communicating during free activities. I made him observe first and then take an active role in the activities." (T3)

"I use motivation and attention a lot because it is very important for me to experience the feeling of success."(T5)

Reasons for Preschool Teachers Choosing the Methods They Use: Figure 3 shows the reasons for choosing the methods used by the preschool teachers participating in the research.

Child-related reasons	Class-related reasons
•Ensuring the active participation of the child •Adapting the child to the classroom •Appropriate for the child's special needs •Preventing the child's aggressive behavior •child having fun •Supporting the child's social relationships	•Ensuring active participation of the whole class •Crowded classroom

Figure 3. Reasons for Preschool Teachers to Prefer the Methods They Use

When Figure 3 is examined, it is seen that the methods chosen by preschool teachers are divided into two categories: child-related reasons and classroom-related reasons. When the reasons related to the child are examined, it is seen that the answers given are providing the child's active participation, ensuring the child's adaptation to the classroom, being suitable for the child's special needs, preventing the child's aggressive behavior, having fun with the child and supporting the child's social relations. When the reasons related to the class are examined, it is seen that the answers to the active participation of the class and the crowded class are given. Below are examples of the answers of the teachers who participated in the research.

"Since my classroom is crowded, I run lessons with the auxiliary staff so that it does not distract and affect the children while I teach with other children. He takes the same course in a separate place and individually." (T1)

"They are all my children, and I love them all. My student named….. is very introverted and does not interact. I want him to have fun, laugh and communicate with us. We are a class, and I want my children to laugh, have fun and learn together." (T2)

"Since the family approaches the child a little more emotionally, they cannot support his development. I also plan collaborative activities to ensure that the child adapts to the classroom and I prefer methods for this." (T4)

Opinions of Preschool Teachers on the Benefits of the Methods They Use: All of the preschool teachers participating in the research think that their methods are useful. Preschool teachers' opinions on the reasons why the methods they use are useful are given in Figure 4.
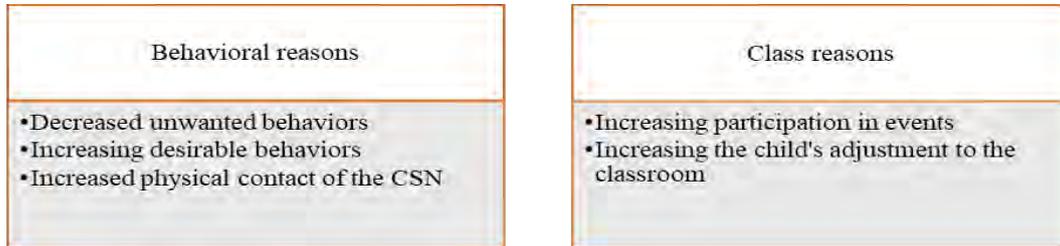
Behavioral reasons
• Decreased unwanted behaviors • Increasing desirable behaviors • Increased physical contact of the CSN

Class reasons
• Increasing participation in events • Increasing the child's adjustment to the classroom

Figure 4. Reasons for Preschool Teachers to Think that the Methods They Use Are Useful

When Figure 4 is examined, it is seen that the reasons why the preschool teachers who participated in the research think that the methods they use are useful are divided into two categories: behavioral reasons and classroom reasons. While there are answers to decrease in unwanted behaviors, increase of desired behaviors and increase in physical contact of the CSN in behavioral reasons, it is seen that the answers include increased participation in activities and increase in the child's adaptation to the class for reasons related to the classroom. Below are examples of the answers of the teachers who participated in the research.

"I think it's useful because I see it. He now sits at the table, eats, communicates with toys. I can move on to the next achievement." (T.1)

"I think it is beneficial for the child. The reason why I think about this is the feedback of the parents and our guidance teacher who supported us. I can see that he feels more harmonious in the class, now he belongs to the class. She can express her feelings comfortably." (T.7)

Findings Obtained from Document Reviews

Table 2 shows the adaptation activities of the teachers, and Table 3 shows the findings about the children's IEPs.

Table 2
Findings Related to Adaptation Activities

	f
Adaptations are included in free times.	4
Adaptations are included in transition activities	-
Adaptations are included at mealtime	1
Adaptations are included in the activities	-
Adaptations are included at the time of collecting the day	1
Environmental regulation adaptations have been made	1
Materials have been adapted	-
Adaptations have been made to facilitate the activities	1

Adaptations were made with peer support	2
Adaptations were made with adult support	3
Adaptation has been made with the use of special materials	3
Adaptation has been made to increase learning opportunities (hidden support)	3

When the adaptation activities are examined, it is among the findings that teachers mostly include adaptations in their free time, adaptations with peer support, adaptation with adult support, increasing learning opportunities (hidden support). It is seen that teachers do not prefer special material usage adaptation studies in transition activities, environment adaptation studies. When the adaptation activities of the teachers were examined, two teachers stated that they did not plan adaptation activities, while two teachers stated that they applied the adaptation activities orally in their free time.

Table 3
Findings Obtained from Individualized Education Plans

	f
It contains the child's personal information.	6
The educational performance level of the child is included	2
Long-term goals aimed to be achieved at the end of an academic year are included	5
Short-term goals consisting of measurable intermediate steps between the child's determined performance level and long-term goals are included	5
The teaching methods chosen to achieve the determined goals are included	3
The start and end dates of the time required to achieve the short-term goals are specified	2
Evaluation methods and criteria that will be used to determine whether the determined targets have been achieved or not are specified	1
It is specified where additional special services will be provided to the child	2
It is specified when additional special services will be provided to the child	3
It is stated who will provide additional special services to the child	2
It is specified how long the additional special services to be provided to the child will be provided	2
There are regulations regarding the educational environment	2

When the Individualized Education Plans are examined, it is stated that the personal information of the child, long-term goals, short-term goals, teaching methods, when and by whom additional special services to be given to the child will be provided. When it is examined in general, it is among the findings of the research that it does not include the evaluation and criteria that will be used to determine whether the targets set in the plans have been achieved.

Discussion

As a result of this research, which aims to determine the instructional strategies that preschool teachers use for children with special needs and the frequency of adaptation of these strategies in IEPs, perhaps the most important finding emerged as a result of the creation of the research group. Six of the 13 teachers who agreed to be interviewed reported that IEP was not prepared. In the study conducted by Justice et al. (2014), it was determined that approximately half of the children with special needs who participated in the study had IEPs. Although this finding is similar to the literature, it is essential to prepare an IEP for children with special needs according to the Special Education Services Regulation. The twentieth article of the fourth part of this regulation states, "It is essential to prepare an IEP for individuals with special educational needs based on the training program they will follow." It states that the BEP is a mandatory condition. Although it is a legal obligation and it is possible for children with special needs to receive education in accordance with their differences, it is remarkable that the program was not prepared for six children. It is thought that the individualized education program can be neglected because it is prepared by a commission (teacher-parent-school principal, etc.). The research conducted by Bryant (2018) supports this situation. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with preschool teachers, and it was determined that the teachers thought that individuals who were out of school did not understand the importance of the curriculum. However, it is thought that this situation may also be caused by a lack of information. When the demographic information given in Table 1 is examined, it is seen that three of the seven teachers did not receive any special education, and six of them did not receive any education for inclusion. When the relevant literature is examined, it is seen that preschool teachers have deficiencies in practice with children with special needs (Bryant, 2018; Dikici Sığırtmaç et al., 2011) and there are opinions that this situation affects their attitude towards integrating (Bryant, 2018). Similarly, there are also researchers (Artman-Meeker & Hemmeter, 2013; Guo et al., 2013; Hestenes et al., 2008) emphasizing that the components of teacher education integration are important for success.

When the methods preferred by preschool teachers to ensure active participation in HOW were examined, it was determined that the answers they obtained were divided into categories such as special teaching methods, teaching techniques, classroom management, and others. Among the special teaching methods, there are storytelling, puppetry, demonstration, role-playing and teaching through games, one-to-one study, peer teaching, adapting the activity and family participation activities are included in the teaching techniques. When the answers given about classroom management are examined, it is seen that the use of reinforcement, teaching rules, and motivation are included, while the other category includes close contact and informing other children

about HOW. When the answers given are examined, it is observed that teachers generally lack knowledge on this subject. When the teaching methods and techniques they used were examined, it was seen that they generally gave answers that they could use for children with typical development. However, it is seen that they do not refer to different methods and techniques such as applied behavior analysis, early intensive behavioral education, discrete trial teaching, opportunity teaching, activity-based teaching, video modeling, social stories, which are frequently used for CSNs, but only focus on peer teaching and direct teaching. This situation makes us think that teachers have a lack of knowledge about different methods and techniques used for CSNs. When the literature is examined, the research conducted by Yıkmış et al. (2018) emphasizes the lack of knowledge by showing the answers given by the teachers in parallel with the answers in our research. Similarly, in the studies conducted by Doğanoğlu and Dümenci (2015), Zabeli and Gjelaj (2020), and Sucuoğlu et al. (2014), it is seen that preschool teachers lack knowledge about teaching integration. It is noteworthy that the teachers participating in the research also have information needs in the answers given in the classroom management and other categories. The use of reinforcement, teaching rules, and motivation that teachers mentioned in the classroom management category are the things that should be done in the classroom with or without CSN.

When the teachers' reasons for preferring the techniques they use were examined, it was seen that the answers given were divided into two categories: reasons related to the child and reasons related to the classroom. When the reasons related to the child are examined, it is seen that the answers given are providing the child's active participation, ensuring the child's adaptation to the class, being suitable for the child's special needs, preventing the child's aggression, ensuring the repetition of the behaviors, ensuring the child's fun and supporting the child's social relations. When the answers given are examined in parallel with the answers above, it is again seen that teachers have information needs. For example, some of the teachers mentioned that they use these techniques to prevent the child's aggression. However, functional evaluation and functional analysis are very suitable approaches for identifying and treating problem behaviors. Apart from this, strategies such as differential reinforcement, redirection, extinction, and cost of response are used to reduce problem behaviors. However, teachers focused on using reinforcers and teaching rules in the classroom management category. However, these are methods used not to reduce problem behaviors, but to gain new behaviors and prevent problem behaviors (Kargın, 2013).

When the findings obtained as a result of the document review were examined, it was seen that the teachers generally included the adaptations in their free time. Apart from this, it has been observed that adaptations are rarely included in transition activities, meal time, activities and collection time. These findings were found surprising by the

researchers. Because, teachers have directed to problem behaviors in their previous answers. However, it is surprising that if the process does not proceed in a planned way, it is surprising that they give so little room for adaptation in transitional processes (Coleman et al., 2013), where the probability of the emergence of problem behaviors is very high. In addition, transition-based teaching is one of the methods used to teach in pre-school classes with children with special needs. However, it was determined that teachers did not use transition-based teaching or other natural teaching methods. When the curriculum changes used by the teachers were examined, it was seen that peer support, adult support and confidential support were used more and they did not include the use of landscaping and special materials.

As a result of the examination of the IEPs that were prepared, it was concluded that some of the areas that should be found are only included in the education programs of some children. The area in all children's IEPs is the area where the educational information of the child is written. It has been determined that the methods and techniques to be used to evaluate whether the children reach the determined goals are included in the individualized education program of only one child. In a similar study, it was determined that some areas were missing in the individualized education programs examined (Akarsu & Atbaşı 2021). In this case, it is thought that individualized education programs are neglected and perhaps even the prepared programs are not implemented.

Conclusion

As a result, it was determined that the preschool teachers participating in the research used different methods for children with special needs in their classrooms, the reasons for preferring these methods were related to the child and the classroom, and they thought that the methods they used were beneficial for the children. As a result of the document analysis, it was determined that the teachers did not include adaptations at all times of the day, and that there were some deficiencies in the IEP items.

Recommendations

1. While determining the study group of the research, it was seen that the IEP was not prepared for the HOW in the class of six teachers. As it is known, IEP is prepared by a commission under the chairmanship of the school principal or the deputy principal appointed by the principal. Therefore, all responsibility for not preparing IEPs does not belong to the teacher. Provincial Directorates of National Education can give schools a certain period of time after CSN starts school and the preparation of IEP can be supported.

2. Again, when the results of the research were examined, it was determined that the teachers needed information about the methods and techniques they could use for CSN. Teachers can be given in-service training on this issue.

3. When the Preschool Education Programs of the Council of Higher Education are examined, it is seen that the courses related to special education are insufficient. The number of lessons on this subject can be increased and applications can be added.

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