Experiences of Primary School Teachers Regarding Individualized Education Programs and Mainstreaming/Integration in Türkiye

Eylem Dayı | 🆔 | eylemd@gazi.edu.tr
Gazi University, Faculty of Education, Special Education, Ankara, Türkiye
Çetin Toraman | 🆔 | cetintoraman@comu.edu.tr
Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Faculty of Medicine, Medical Education, Çanakkale, Türkiye
Pınar Özkan Renk[1] | 🆔 | pinarrenk0@gmail.com.tr
Ministry of National Education, Specialist Teacher, Kahramanmaraş, Türkiye
Belgin Öztürk | 🆔 | belgin.ozturk@gazi.edu.tr
Gazi University, Faculty of Education, Special Education, PhD Student, Ankara, Türkiye

Abstract
This study addressed the experiences of primary school teachers in Türkiye regarding inclusion/integration and Individualized Education Programs (IEP). The study also addressed how mainstreaming/integration and IEPs might impact students without special needs and their parents. This qualitative study adopted a phenomenological research design. The sample consisted of 17 primary teachers recruited using criterion sampling. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide and analyzed using inductive content analysis and phenomenological coding. The results indicated that participants expressed the opinion that mainstreaming was not applicable in general education. They also believed that the IEP was unfunctional. They used ready-made IEPs, albeit not actively. They were of the opinion that class sizes and physical conditions of schools were not suitable for mainstreaming education and that they were left alone in the mainstreaming/integration.

Keywords: Individualized education programs, Mainstreaming/integration, Primary teacher, Special education, Phenomenology

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[1] Corresponding Author

Introduction

Education has evolved significantly alongside sociocultural, political, economic, and technological changes over time. As part of this evolution, educators have focused on both typically developing students and students with special needs. In the realm of educating students with special needs, practices initially known as mainstreaming and later as integration in the pertinent literature (Yücesoy Özkan et al., 2021) were formally conceptualized as inclusive education through the Salamanca Statement adopted during the World Conference on Special Needs Education organized by UNESCO in 1994 (Tonegawa, 2022). Inclusive education is a journey, not a destination (Runswick-Cole, 2011). International conferences, including the Global Education Meeting and the Brussels Declaration in 2018, have declared that the primary mission of inclusive education is to ensure that the right to a safe, quality education throughout life is a universal entitlement for all individuals (Florian, 2019).

Building on these global efforts toward inclusive education, Türkiye has developed its own regulations that shape the educational practices for students with special needs. The principles of educational activities for these students are outlined in the Regulation on Special Education Services (RSES) (Ministry of National Education, 2018) under the category of "Mainstreaming/Integration Educational Activities (MIEAs)." Therefore, Turkish researchers use the term "mainstreaming/integration education" instead of inclusive education (Çağlar, 2012). Mainstreaming/Integration Educational Activities" are defined as forms of education that encompass both full-time schooling with typically developing peers and part-time education within special education classes. These activities are designed to facilitate interaction with individuals of diverse abilities and educational backgrounds while enabling students with special needs to achieve their educational objectives at the highest possible level. According to data from the Ministry of National Education (MoNe) for the academic year 2022-2023, a total of 384,250 students with special needs are currently receiving education through MIEAs across all levels of education in Türkiye. This indicates a commitment to inclusive education practices and providing educational opportunities to students with special needs.

In addition to the emphasis on inclusive practices, it is also a legal obligation in Türkiye, as it is in many countries worldwide, to prepare Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for students with special needs. This requirement extends to those participating in MIEAs and other educational settings. IEPs are a critical component of special education and inclusive education practices, as they outline the specific goals, support services, and accommodations tailored to meet each student's unique needs. These IEPs ensure that students receive an appropriate and inclusive education, further reflecting the commitment to providing equal educational opportunities to all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities (Smith & Brownell, 1995; Yell et al., 2013). In addition to the legal obligation to prepare IEPs, Türkiye has established a process to ensure their effective development and implementation. This process involves the establishment of an IEP development unit (MoNe, 2018), typically led by the school principal or vice principal, and comprising various stakeholders, including parents or guardians, classroom teachers, guidance counselors, other subject teachers, and students. Furthermore, guidance and research centers (GRCs) provide the necessary support for the establishment and functioning of an IEP unit. These GRCs play a crucial role in facilitating the development and implementation of IEPs for students with special needs, offering expertise, resources, and guidance to schools and educators in creating effective IEPs that address the unique requirements of each student. This support helps ensure that students with special needs receive the necessary accommodations and services to succeed in their educational journeys within the inclusive education framework in Türkiye (MoNe, 2018).

Building on this foundation, the most significant responsibility of an IEP development unit established at a school, especially when a student with special needs is placed through a GRC, is to not only prepare the student's IEP but also to oversee the implementation process. The IEP development unit prepares an IEP for students with special needs by assessing their performance level, establishing long and short-term goals, selecting teaching methods and materials, defining start and end dates for each short-term goal, and facilitating a personalized educational plan to meet their unique needs and objectives. Additionally, the IEP development unit finalizes the IEP by specifying the support services (such as support rooms, physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, psychological counseling, etc.) that students with special needs will receive, ensuring a comprehensive plan for their educational and developmental needs (Kargın, 2007). It is essential for all stakeholders to collaborate to ensure that an IEP is both educationally appropriate and legally sound. Because one of the most important factors in the success of mainstreaming, which includes the preparation and implementation of IEP, is cooperation (Salend, 1998). This collaborative effort helps create a comprehensive and legally compliant IEP that meets the unique educational needs of students with special needs (Christle & Yell, 2010; Pilhaja & Holst, 2013; Stroggilos & Xanthacou, 2006; Yell et al., 2013).

Numerous researchers have investigated teachers' views of IEPs and MIEAs. Studies indicate that teachers often feel they do not collaborate effectively with their colleagues or parents during the IEP process (MacLeod et. al., 2017; Stroggilos & Xanthacou, 2006). Additionally, teachers report gaps in their knowledge of preparing IEPs (Kartika et al., 2018; Mereoiu et. al., 2018). Research also shows that teachers need to develop professional skills to implement IEP processes (Bhroin & King, 2019; Lee-Tarver, 2006; Timothy & Agbenyega, 2018).

In the Turkish context, similar challenges have been identified, reinforcing global concerns about IEP processes. Turkish researchers have documented that classroom teachers have negative views of MIEAs (Burunsuz & İnce, 2020; Sadioğlu et. al., 2013). A key factor contributing to these negative perceptions is that many teachers use ready-made IEP plans (Burunsuz & İnce, 2020), due to the difficulty they face in preparing their own plans (Söğüt & Deniz, 2018). Moreover, many schools do not have formal IEP units (Özan & Dolunay Sarıca, 2021), and the lack of time and resources available for IEP implementation (Batu et. al., 2018; Deniz & Çoban, 2019; Ersoy et. al., 2021) create significant barriers. Compounding these issues, many teachers do not know how to prepare IEPs (Çıkılı et. al., 2020; Değirmenci Kurt & Tomul, 2019; Evyapan, 2020; Gündüz & Zorluoğlu, 2023; Ünal, 2010), and cooperation among IEP unit stakeholders remains insufficient (Baran, 2021; Batu et al., 2018; Yener & Dayı, 2021).

These challenges underscore the vital role that general education teachers play in the inclusive education of students with special needs, particularly in the context of MIEAs. They have a significant responsibility to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment and to help those students achieve their educational objectives. There are two critical steps in ensuring positive outcomes for students with special needs. The first step involves the correct and effective management of the IEP preparation process, while the second step is the active use of the IEP during the implementation phase. Properly prepared IEPs are fundamental to the success of students with special needs. Involving educators, specialists, parents, and students in the IEP development process ensures that the plan is comprehensive and tailored to the unique needs and strengths of the student (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010).

Given these challenges and the important role teachers play, this study had two objectives: (1) providing insights into the real-world practices, challenges, and perspectives of classroom teachers involved in the preparation and implementation of IEPs and (2) addressing the perspectives and views of typically developing students and their parents regarding the implementation of IEPs tailored to students with special needs in their classrooms.

Method

This qualitative study adopted a phenomenological research design to seek answers to the questions of how classroom teachers are involved in the preparation and implementation of IEPs tailored to the needs of their students with special needs and what typically developing students and their parents think about the implementation of IEPs. Phenomenology focuses on uncovering the reality found in individuals' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Rather than accepting concepts at face value, phenomenology encourages questioning what we know. It suggests we approach familiar ideas with fresh curiosity, as if we were outsiders examining them for the first time. In this process, phenomenological sociologists explore how people interpret their social reality when cultural concepts are set aside or "bracketed," as in Husserl's concept of epoché (Creswell, 2013). A key question in these studies is: "How do we organize our experiences to create a shared understanding of the world?" (Wallace & Wolf, 1995).

Phenomenological research aims to reveal the common meaning behind people's experiences of a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This approach assumes that people's experiences can be analyzed, that these are conscious experiences (van Manen, 2016), and that the focus should be on understanding the shared essence of these experiences (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Moustakas, 1994).

Participants

The sample consisted of 17 primary teachers recruited using criterion sampling, which is used to specifically select participants or cases based on predetermined criteria or characteristics that are relevant to the research question or study objectives (Miles et. al., 2014). The inclusion criteria were (1) being a primary school classroom teacher, (2) having inclusive students, (3) volunteering, and (4) giving consent for audio recording.

Participants were recruited until data saturation was reached, following a process where researchers conducted an interview, transcribed it verbatim, coded the data, confirmed the coding process, and then interviewed the second participant. They followed the same procedure for each participant. They terminated recruitment once data

saturation was achieved (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In other words, they noticed that new interviews were no longer providing substantially new insights or information. At this point, they had a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and therefore deemed further interviews unnecessary.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide with flexible questions developed by the researchers through a literature review and examination of legal texts related to "The Ministry of National Education Special Education Services." The initial guide featured eight main questions and probe questions, which were refined based on feedback from three experts in qualitative research and special education. The researchers further revised the interview guide after a pilot study involving two primary teachers. Based on the pilot study results, the final interview guide comprised ten main questions and probe questions (Merriam, 2018).

Data Collection

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Gazi University (E-77082166-604.01.02-548721). All teachers were briefed about the research purpose and procedure. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The interviews were held one by one. An interview was transcribed and analyzed before the next one was conducted. Participants were recruited until data saturation was achieved. Each interview lasted 15 to 37 minutes, with an average of 23 minutes.

Researchers' Role

This research was conducted by a team of four researchers, including one who serves as a special education academic at a state university in Türkiye, another who holds an academic position at a state university in Türkiye, and two researchers currently pursuing their Ph.D. degrees in special education with master's qualifications. Providing information about the characteristics and qualifications of the researchers in a qualitative research report is a valuable practice. It helps readers understand the backgrounds, expertise, and perspectives of the researchers conducting the study. This transparency can enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings and provide context for readers to interpret the study's outcomes and conclusions. It is important to establish the researchers' qualifications and potential biases, if any, as it contributes to the overall transparency and rigor of the research (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

The specialized training of the researchers in the field of special education is an asset as it provides them with the expertise and knowledge to think prescriptively about educational practices, the development of IEPs, and their preparation and implementation in alignment with students' unique characteristics. The researchers' perspective that teaching is a professional occupation primarily rooted in knowledge and skills with less emphasis on emotion is an important aspect to consider when evaluating the research. This perspective can influence their approach to the study, their interpretation of findings, and the recommendations they propose. Readers should take into account the researchers' perspective and how it might shape the research process and outcomes.

Data Analysis

In this research, an inductive content analysis method was employed. Inductive content analysis involves directly deriving themes and categories from the dataset, allowing patterns and insights to emerge from the data itself. The steps of phenomenological data analysis developed by Moustakas were followed (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). First, the researchers developed their unique definition of the concept of "experience" to adopt a phenomenological approach to explore phenomena (mainstreaming, IEPs, and support rooms). This process involved capturing and interpreting the lived experiences of individuals involved in these educational contexts to construct a nuanced understanding of what it means to navigate and participate in such systems. This approach allows the researchers to offer a rich and context-specific definition of "experience" as it relates to the phenomena under investigation. The researchers recorded and transcribed all statements in the interviews and then analyzed them based on the assumption that each statement was of equal value. The researchers removed other repetitive, irrelevant, and unrelated statements from the data list. Following their data analysis process, they directed their

attention to a list of statements that were closely linked to the phenomenon they were investigating. They associated and clustered these statements into meaning units or themes. Themes in qualitative research are often exemplified through what can be described as the "textures of the experience" or textural descriptions. These are narratives or descriptions provided by participants that convey their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to a particular phenomenon. The researchers combined individual textural descriptions and arrived at composite textural descriptions. They combined the textural descriptions of the meanings of experience with structural descriptions. At this stage, the researchers prepared narratives with textural descriptions of the "what" and structural descriptions of the "how." They arrived at a composite description of the phenomenon from the combined textural and structural descriptions. Finally, they arrived at the essence of these experiences.

To assess the reliability of the expert opinions received during the external evaluation of the analyzed data, the researchers conducted an internal consistency calculation using the Krippendorff Alpha coefficient. The resulting coefficient was .739, indicating a high level of consistency among the expert opinions. This suggests that the expert assessments were generally in agreement, enhancing the trustworthiness of the external evaluation process in terms of consistency (Krippendorff, 2004).

Trustworthiness, Credibility, and Transferability

In this study, the researchers took several steps to uphold data reliability. They scheduled individual appointments with each participant, provided a comprehensive briefing on the research purpose and procedure, and obtained informed consent. Additionally, they sought renewed consent for audio recording when initiating recordings. Each researcher thoroughly analyzed each interview before moving on to the next one. Furthermore, the researchers engaged in collaborative discussions and consensus-building regarding their findings (Creswell, 2012). These practices contribute to the study's trustworthiness and the reliability of its data.

The researchers performed participant verification for credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). They completed the analysis and produced findings. Before writing up the findings, they reached out again to two of the participants and sought their views on whether the data and the meanings reflected their experiences. They also consulted three experts who are academics working in the field of educational sciences and have previously conducted qualitative research. The researchers asked the experts to check the data and the findings to ensure peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lastly, the researchers used direct quotes from all participants to provide an accurate and coherent picture of their views (Christensen et. al., 2014).

Results

The data were grouped under four cores: (1) We do stuff that does not really make sense, (2) we are professionals, (3) we are conscientious, and (4) we have been left to our own devices. This section presents the findings.

We Do Stuff That Does Not Really Make Sense
The first core was, "We do stuff that does not really make sense." Figure 1 summarizes the core with an image.
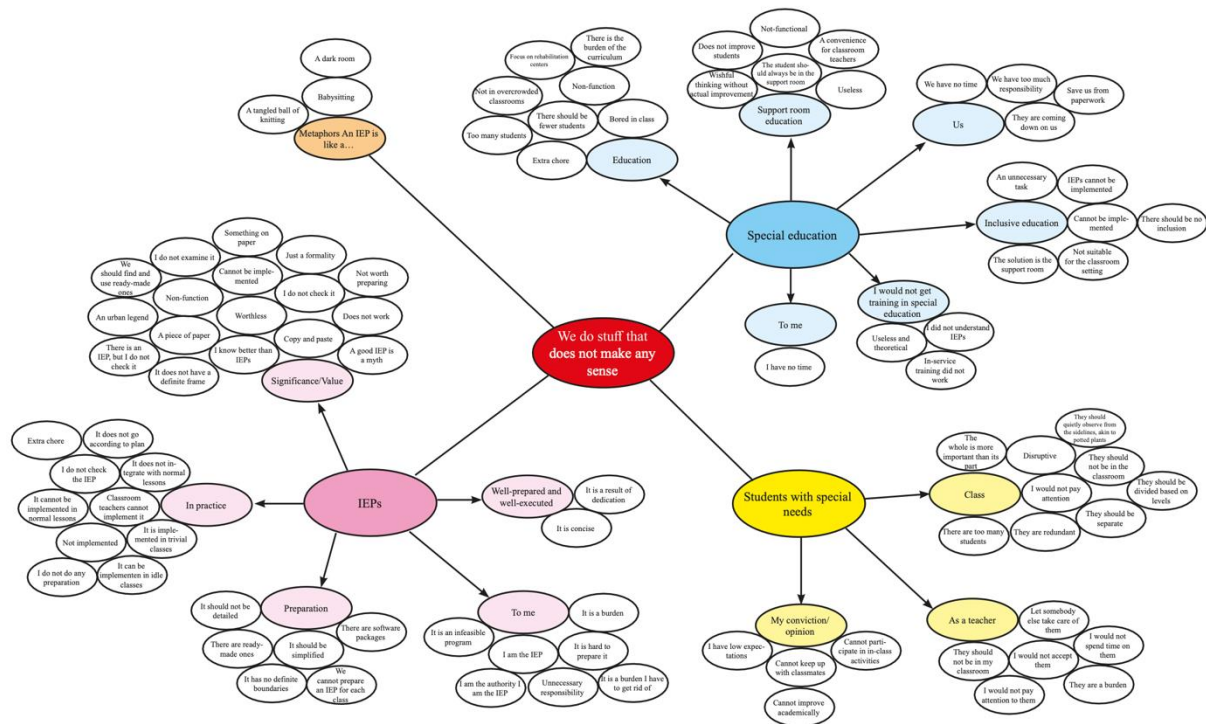
Figure 1. We do stuff that does not really make sense.

In the realm of special education, teachers often find themselves entangled in numerous tasks and obligations associated with various facets of education, including support room education, mainstreaming, and specialized training. While some teachers receive training in special education, these training experiences may vary, with some occurring during their university education and others provided as in-service training throughout their professional careers. However, there is a perception that certain training programs tend to be overly theoretical and lack practical relevance, leading to the perception that they are a waste of time as they fail to address the practical needs of teachers in the field of special education.

One of the participant teachers expressed their perspective on inclusion activities in special education, asserting that they consider such activities not only a waste of time but also impractical. They argue that the typical classroom environment is not conducive to inclusive education, and as a result, these practices should not be implemented. Additionally, the participant highlighted the issue of IEP implementation, suggesting that this is another challenge faced in the field of special education. In their view, the solution lies in providing education exclusively within the support room setting:
"I don't think having an inclusion class makes sense. Instead, we should have dedicated classes where we can really put the program into action. I'm talking about separate classes, like those support rooms, where you can properly carry out the IEP."

Trying to implement special education in overcrowded classrooms is just not feasible. Some see it as a futile effort that only adds more stress to teachers who are already grappling with the regular curriculum. Moreover, inclusive students in these crowded classrooms may end up feeling unengaged. Instead, authorities should prioritize special education and rehabilitation centers over public schools and classroom teachers. Here is how the participant voiced her perspective:
"Those special needs students, they're basically just hanging out in regular classrooms. They're copying what the teacher puts on the board or trying to keep up with their buddy's notes. It's like they're there as duplicates, not really learning anything."

Support room education in special education can be boiled down to "wishful thinking without actual improvement." It does not really help students make progress and seems to be flawed and ineffective. However, it does offer some relief to classroom teachers. Some argue that inclusive students should always receive their education in these rooms.

Participants have their unique viewpoints on the circumstances of students with special needs in the classroom and their own roles as teachers. They tend to keep their expectations low for students with special needs due to their struggles in keeping pace with classmates, participating in class activities, and achieving academic progress. Some participants expressed a desire for these students to be placed in a different class with specialized care. They feel that these students can be challenging for teachers to manage and may not be readily accepted in the regular classroom setting.

Some participants feel that students with special needs create overcrowding and disruptions in the classroom, suggesting that they shouldn't be in the regular classroom. They believe that there are just too many students in one class and propose that students should be grouped by their skill levels. Furthermore, they argue that students with special needs should be separated from the regular class, emphasizing the importance of the whole class over the needs of one student. If transferring them to other classes is impossible, they envision a scenario where these students quietly observe from the sidelines, akin to potted plants. This perspective is described by one of the participants as follows:
"You know, I think students with special needs should be in a different classroom."

Participants find it challenging to prepare and carry out IEPs and view this task as a heavy burden on their shoulders. Participants see themselves as the authority of knowledge. They find it a waste of time preparing IEPs because, to them, the teacher is the IEP. A well-prepared or implemented IEP is a short and concise program that requires dedication. A participant described this situation as follows:
"How about we just jot down those IEPs on paper and lighten the load on ourselves."

Participants should not be required to provide elaborate IEPs. In fact, there is software accessible to assist teachers in crafting IEPs. Moreover, ready-made IEPs can be located in various sources. The parameters of an IEP are not distinctly defined. Furthermore, it is not obligatory to create an IEP for every subject.

Implementing IEPs within the regular teaching routine presents significant challenges. Integrating them into lessons is a demanding task that increases teachers' workloads. Participants, in general, are not inclined to use IEPs as the basis for their teaching due to the associated difficulties. They believe that IEPs are more suitable for implementation in support room education or within special education and rehabilitation centers. If there's a need for their application, it is suggested that they may be more feasible for less critical subjects or during free periods. This sentiment was articulated by the participant teacher as follows:
"Well, we don't have to use IEPs in every single class, but we can definitely use them in subjects like art, music, or gym."

What is the significance or value of IEPs for the participants? A well-crafted IEP is often seen as a mythical concept. Some participants questioned the worth of preparing IEPs, considering them nothing more than a cut-and-paste exercise and mere procedural documents. IEPs that exist solely on paper hold little value for the participants. They often disregard IEPs, viewing them as dysfunctional and impractical. In summary, to some, an IEP appears to be nothing more than a piece of paper and a myth. For them, it may be more practical to locate pre-made IEPs and put them to use. This perspective was expressed by one of the participants as follows:
"Honestly, I barely have time to put those plans into action. And you know what? Even if the IEP looks good on paper, with all those numbers and charts, we just check the boxes."

Participants were prompted to share their metaphors for IEPs. They likened them to the act of babysitting students. They also compared IEPs to a dark room filled with uncertainties or a tangled ball of knitting.

We Are Professionals

The second core was, "We are professionals." Figure 2 summarizes the core with a tree of meanings.
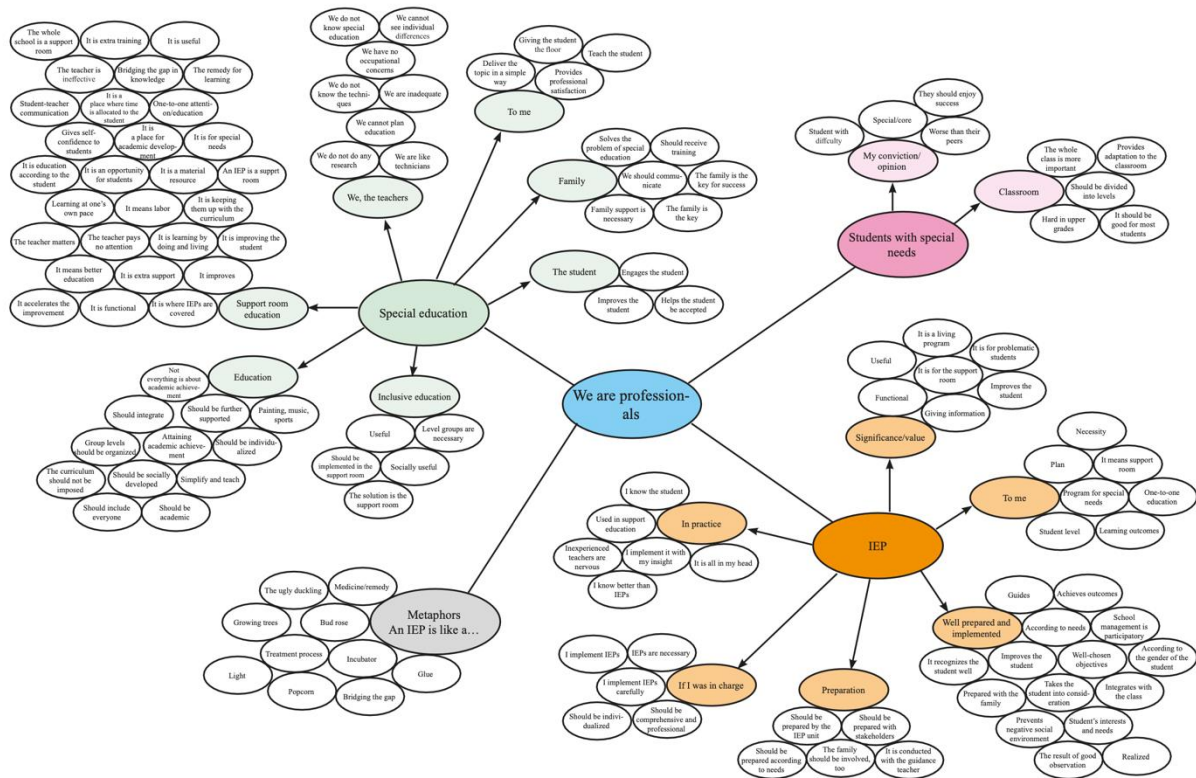
Figure 2. We are professionals.

Participants showcased their professional expertise in the realm of IEP preparation and implementation and provided insights into how well-constructed IEPs make sense to them. They also articulated how they would handle the implementation of IEPs if they were in positions of authority. Their interpretations of IEP application within their professional roles can be summarized as follows: IEPs utilized in support education are perceived as less significant because the teachers themselves have intimate knowledge of their students. Furthermore, everything that could be documented in IEPs is already ingrained in teachers' minds. Only inexperienced educators might feel anxious about executing IEPs. Experienced teachers rely on their own expertise to guide their teaching, believing they understand their students better than what IEPs can capture. If these teachers were in positions of authority, they would ensure that IEPs were meticulously crafted and executed programs tailored as closely as possible to each student's unique needs. This perspective was articulated by two participants in the following manner:
"I know my students better than IEPs. I don't think it's right to rely solely on those documents."
"I don't constantly refer to IEPs. I already have a good grasp of what my students need."

IEPs should be developed by specialized IEP units involving stakeholders like parents and guidance counselors to ensure customization based on specific needs. Well-prepared IEPs, which are effective when put into practice, should be needs-oriented, offering guidance and facilitating students in reaching their learning objectives. A quality IEP, capable of enhancing a student's progress, should be clearly defined, feature carefully selected learning goals, consider the student's individuality, be gender-sensitive, and be prepared collaboratively with the family. Successful implementation of well-crafted IEPs results from diligent observation, promotes a positive social environment, and facilitates the student's integration into the classroom.

For professionals like the participants, IEPs hold practical value as dynamic programs. They serve as essential blueprints, offering insights into students' proficiency levels. These plans are intended for support room education, specifically designed for students with special needs. IEPs represent educational achievements and signify individualized learning opportunities, particularly in the context of support room instruction.

Students with special needs, while facing challenges, each possess unique qualities and deserve the opportunity to thrive. However, when considering the entire class, the collective needs of the class take precedence. Therefore, it suffices for students with special needs to integrate into the class. In fact, it might be reasonable to group them by

proficiency levels. As grade levels advance, the challenges for students with special needs in the classroom tend to intensify. One of the participants articulated this perspective as follows:

I don't teach based on IEPs; it's not really feasible for me. I mean, I've got 30 students to handle. There's a curriculum I need to cover, and it's the same for all of them. Plus, those three students in inclusive education have their own unique needs and abilities. I don't really have the opportunity to provide individual tutoring in the classroom, and it's just not practical. Once you start down that road, there's no end to it."

According to the participants, special education plays a vital role in fostering the acceptance, inclusion, and overall development of students within the classroom. Parents of students in special education hold a crucial position. Maintaining open communication with them is essential. Their support is invaluable because collaboration with them is imperative for success. Therefore, it is essential to educate and inform parents about special education. From a professional standpoint, some teachers offering special education may not adequately recognize individual differences, lack research initiatives, possess limited knowledge of special education and its techniques, and may experience certain shortcomings. Teachers who do not actively engage in professional growth may approach their roles more mechanically, akin to technicians, and may struggle with educational planning.

For the participants, support rooms are a pervasive resource throughout the school and serve as valuable assets. They function as a remedy for addressing learning gaps and offer opportunities for additional education to bridge knowledge deficits. Support rooms foster meaningful teacher-student interactions and enable educators to dedicate personalized, one-on-one instruction to their students. These rooms play a pivotal role in boosting the self-confidence and academic performance of students with special needs. They serve as functional supplemental classrooms, creating a hands-on learning environment that accommodates individual learning paces and facilitates curriculum catch-up. Support rooms are the designated spaces for processing IEPs. However, it is crucial to note that teachers responsible for support room education are not very effective. Some view it solely as a means of financial gain.

In the realm of special education, it is crucial to avoid exclusively prioritizing academic success and imposing rigid curricula. Instead, special education should aim to simplify and facilitate learning. Nevertheless, it is evident that some teachers tend to place excessive emphasis on academic achievements. Special education should provide additional support, foster inclusivity, and place a strong emphasis on students' social development. Additionally, grouping students according to their proficiency levels can be beneficial. While inclusion education holds value, it may be more effectively implemented within the support room setting.

Participants were asked to express their metaphors for IEPs. They viewed IEPs as medications, remedies, light, and treatment. The metaphorical power of IEPs in the eyes of participants is striking. IEPs are seen as transformative tools, turning students from "ugly ducklings into swans." Students are likened to budding roses or popcorn kernels, symbolizing their potential for growth and development. IEPs are compared to glue, highlighting their role in binding students to their classmates and the classroom community. They are viewed as gap-closers, bridging the divide between students with special needs and their peers, and even as "incubators" that breathe new life into their educational journeys.

We Are Conscientious

The third core was, "We are conscientious." Figure 3 summarizes the third core with an image.
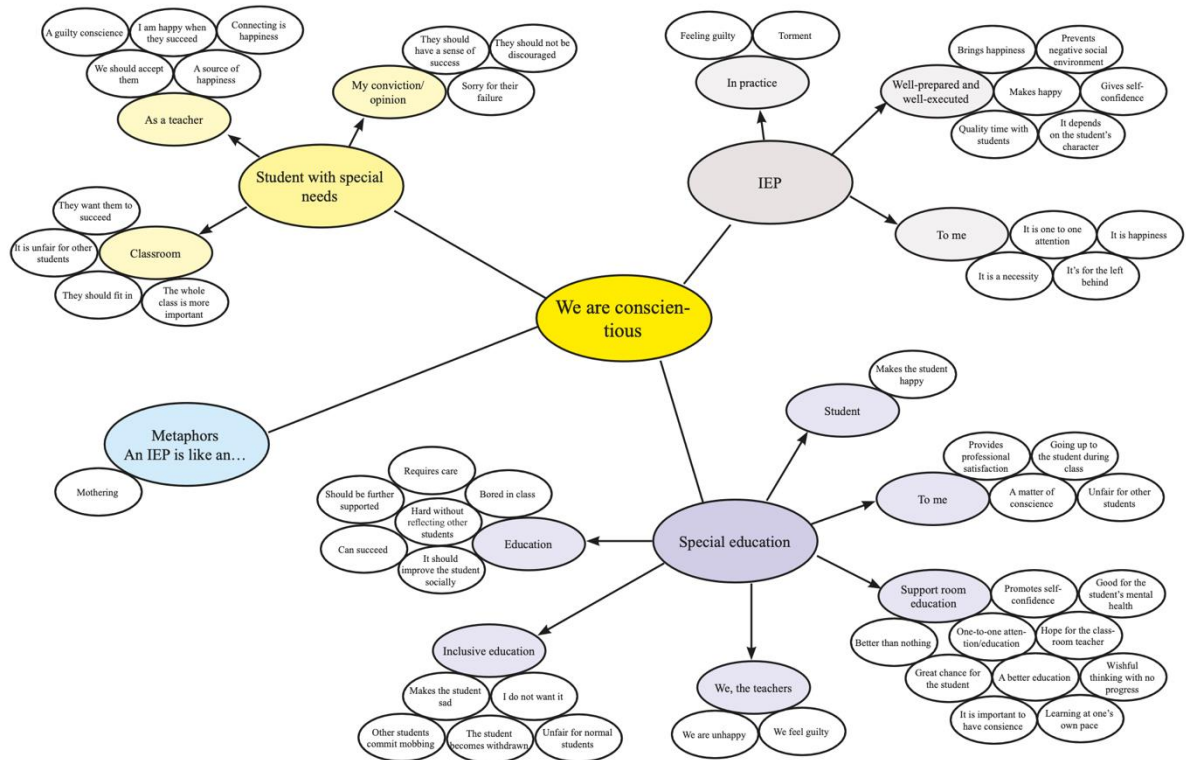
Figure 3. We are conscientious.

Conscientious teachers may experience guilt when they are unable to implement IEPs. For these educators, IEPs are regarded as essential and synonymous with providing personalized attention. Executing IEPs for students who are struggling academically brings them joy. A well-prepared and effectively executed IEP not only translates to valuable one-on-one time with the student but also fosters the student's self-confidence, bringing intrinsic happiness. A successful IEP should be tailored to the student's individual characteristics and work to mitigate negative social influences.

For conscientious teachers, special education brings happiness to students and is an act of conscience that provides professional satisfaction. However, it can be perceived as unfair to other students. Support room education, characterized by individualized attention, has a positive impact on students' self-confidence and psychological well-being. It offers one-on-one education and support, ultimately resulting in better educational outcomes for the student. This approach presents a significant opportunity for the student's growth. A conscientious teacher should prioritize the student's needs and ensure they learn at their own pace. The support room becomes a beacon of hope for both the teacher and the student. In a traditional classroom setting, it can be challenging to implement Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and see significant improvements in the student's progress. One of the participants expressed this situation in the following words:
"I treat them as if they were my own children. I really want to see them progress. There's a difference in how someone with a child and someone without a child interacts with children, you know."

Conscientious teachers may experience feelings of guilt and dissatisfaction regarding special education practices. In reality, inclusive education can sometimes be viewed as compromising the rights of typically developing children in the classroom, leading to discomfort among students with special needs who may experience bullying. This is one of the reasons I am not in favor of mainstreaming. Special education should ideally provide additional support, be delivered with care, and aim to foster social development in students with special needs. While this goal is attainable, it is undeniably challenging. Implementing special education effectively while considering the needs of both typically developing students and those with special needs can be demanding. As a result, students with special needs might feel disengaged in a mainstream classroom setting. One of the participants articulated this situation with the following words:

"I used to provide a different exam paper for my student with special needs, but then the other students started asking why he got a different paper. So, I switched to giving him the same paper but with accommodations. Then, my student with special needs started questioning, 'Why am I being tested differently? Why is my paper different?' It made me wonder if he fully understands his differences. I mean, some students are aware of their differences, while others may not be. It varies from student to student…"

For conscientious teachers, it is essential that students with special needs are not discouraged and are given opportunities for a sense of accomplishment. However, they may also be saddened by the challenges they face in addressing the diverse needs of their students in the classroom. Personally, I have a strong sense of responsibility and feel a sense of guilt at times when I have students with special needs in my class. Nonetheless, I find joy in connecting with them and witnessing their achievements. We must wholeheartedly accept and support them. It's worth noting that their classmates also want to see students with special needs succeed. However, we must also consider the overall dynamics of the class. Some might argue that having students with special needs in the class can be perceived as unfair to other students. Consequently, there is a belief that students with special needs should adapt and integrate into the classroom environment.

Participants were asked to provide metaphors for IEPs. They likened the implementation of IEPs to the act of mothering.

We Have Been Left to Our Own Devices

The fourth core was, "We have been left to our own devices." Figure 4 summarizes the fourth core with an image.
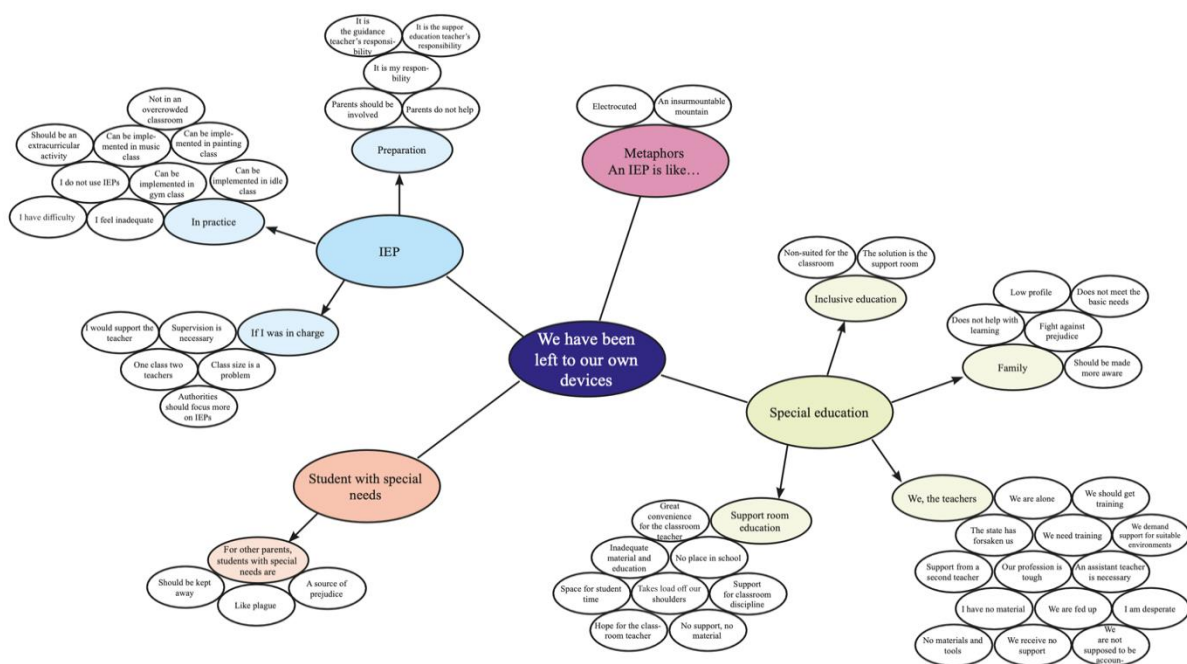

Figure 4. We have been left to our own devices.

According to teachers who feel isolated in their efforts, mainstreaming practices in special education are often deemed unsuitable for the classroom environment. They believe that the solution to the challenges posed by special education lies in support room education. In the realm of special education, there is a perception that parents are not sufficiently involved in assisting their children and may not even meet their basic needs. Typically, parents of students with special needs maintain a low profile, harbor prejudices regarding the special education their children receive, and may require increased awareness and understanding.

In the context of special education, teachers are left unattended by the state. They need a suitable environment, materials, tools, and equipment, and the support of a second teacher. Teachers working in an already difficult profession need training in special education. As with everything else, teachers alone should not be held

accountable for special education. Support room education in special education is a relief and hope for the classroom teacher, taking the burden off the classroom teacher. The school does not allocate space for support room education, and even if space is allocated, there are inadequate materials and training. To summarize, support room education can be explained as "no support, no materials." One of the participants described the situation in the following words:
"Our classrooms are inadequate and overcrowded. We need extra teachers to support us."

For participants who often are left to their own devices, students with special needs can become a source of conflict with parents of typically developing students. Parents of typically developing students may hold biases against students with special needs, view them negatively, and express a desire to keep them separate from their own children. One of the participants described this situation as follows:
"I often witness this attitude from parents; it's as if they see these children as a problem, and I've encountered this sentiment consistently. They question why a child with special needs is in our class, fearing that they might negatively impact our children."

In the realm of special education, the responsibility for preparing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) typically falls upon teachers, counselors, and support room educators. While parents should ideally be involved and supportive in the IEP preparation process, this is often not the case. Implementing IEPs within overcrowded classrooms can be challenging, but opportunities exist outside of regular class hours, such as during extracurricular activities, art, music, physical education, and sports classes. Free periods also offer a chance to work on IEPs. However, teachers face significant difficulties in implementing IEPs. They are often stretched thin and unable to handle every aspect of the process. If teachers were given more authority in special education and IEP implementation, they could ensure the proper preparation and execution of IEPs. Additionally, reducing class sizes to manageable levels, providing support to teachers, and ensuring the presence of two teachers in a classroom simultaneously would be beneficial. Effective supervision is crucial, and teachers should not be left to handle everything on their own. Two participants articulated this situation with the following words:
"To make IEPs truly effective and beneficial, I believe teachers need more support, better training, and greater encouragement to prepare and implement them."
"The classroom teacher often feels isolated and overwhelmed."

Participants were asked to develop metaphors for IEPs. Participants who felt left alone likened IEPs to insurmountable mountains. They also stated that having students with special needs in their classrooms was like an electric shock.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study focused on three aspects of IEPs. First, it addressed what primary teachers thought about students with special needs included in MIEA. Second, it analyzed IEP preparation and execution processes. Third, it examined what typically developing students and their parents thought about students with special needs and IEPs. Our results pointed to four common cores regarding our participants' views and perspectives: (1) We do stuff that does not really make sense, (2) we are professionals, (3) we are conscientious, and (4) we have been left to our own devices.

As for the first core, "We do stuff that does not really make sense," our participants received in-service training in special education either during their undergraduate education or in their professional careers. However, they viewed these courses as unimportant and unnecessary since they did not seem to enhance their theoretical and professional growth, which is consistent with the literature (Berkant & Atılgan, 2017; Burunsuz & İnce, 2020). Çıkılı et al. (2020) discovered that the challenges faced by teachers in IEP preparation do not vary based on whether they have undergone in-service training or not. This implies that both the special education courses these teachers attend during their undergraduate education and the in-service training they receive in their professional careers may not be effectively serving their intended purposes. This causes teachers to see in-service training programs as a waste of time. General education teachers receive information about special education and IEP through the "special education and inclusion" course during their undergraduate education, which is their pre-service period. Aydın and Yılmaz (2024) state that the courses taken in their study have limitations in affecting the knowledge levels of pre-service teachers on IEP and special education. In the literature, in order for this course given in undergraduate programs to be effective, it is recommended that general education teacher candidates be provided with the opportunity to practice in schools where MIEAs are conducted (Aydın & Yılmaz, 2024; Çekiç et al.,

2024; Karabulut, 2023). In terms of teachers' service period, in-service trainings are utilized to ensure the professional development of teachers related to special education and inclusion. In Türkiye, in-service trainings are organized by MoNE in the form of face-to-face or online seminars or courses (Korukluoğlu & Gürol, 2023). However, it is stated that these methods are not effective because they do not include practice and feedback (Bümen et al., 2012). In the literature, practices that include monitoring and feedback are recommended instead of traditional in-service trainings.One of these is providing mentoring support from experienced teachers (Aktan, 2023).Another professional development support is coaching and counseling practices (Tekin İftar et al., 2018).In line with the recommendations, it is thought that teachers can gain knowledge and skills on MIEAs by increasing the effectiveness of practices in both pre-service and in-service periods.

Our participants hold the belief that MIEAs are generally not suitable for implementation in regular education classrooms. From their perspective, IEPs are more suitable for implementation in support rooms rather than general education classrooms. General education teachers often perceive support rooms as spaces where students with special needs are relocated from the regular classroom environment. This perception may stem from viewing students with special needs as academically challenging and potentially burdensome, leading to the belief that they are not on par with their peers in terms of academic abilities. On the other hand, general education teachers find it challenging to implement IEPs in their classrooms due to concerns about overcrowding and inadequate resources. As a result, they perceive that students with special needs are simply biding their time in general education classrooms without receiving the individualized support they require. Teachers engage in the paperwork required to prepare IEPs even when they believe these plans are ineffective, leading them to feel that they are doing stuff that does not really make sense. Research also shows that teachers believe that general education classrooms are ill-suited for students with special needs because they are inadequate and overcrowded (Akcan, 2013; Baran, 2021; Berkant & Atılgan, 2017; Burunsuz & İnce, 2020; Deniz & Çoban, 2019; Güzel, 2014; Söğüt & Deniz, 2018; Yılmaz & Batu, 2016).

The objective of MIEAs is not solely to bring students with special needs to the same academic level as their peers but rather to empower these students to attain their educational objectives at the highest possible level (MoNe, 2018). According to this statement, teachers should not necessarily anticipate that students with special needs will reach the same academic level as their peers. Instead, the focus is on helping these students achieve their educational goals to the best of their abilities. Teachers are likely to have negative connotations for students with special needs because they do not know this. On the other hand, teachers often state that MIEAs are not feasible because their classrooms are overcrowded (more than 30 students). According to Article 23, paragraph "ğ" in RSES (MoNe, 2006), schools should arrange class sizes in MIEA classrooms to ensure that they do not exceed 25 students when there are two students with special needs and 35 students when there is one student with special needs. However, the current RSES (MoNe, 2018) does not specify any recommendations regarding the number of students in MIEA classrooms. In Italy, the first country in Europe to adopt MIEAs, mainstreaming classes are organized for no more than 20 students (Anastasiou et. al., 2015). Performing MIEAs in overcrowded classrooms can be challenging for teachers. Therefore, it becomes important to establish class size guidelines for MIEAs through legal regulations to ensure optimal learning conditions for both teachers and students.

As for the second core, "We are professionals," teachers often recognize that IEPs are essential for addressing the needs of students with special needs. However, they do not stick to IEPs during their lectures because they believe that they already know their students with special needs very well. Research also shows that while teachers think IEPs are necessary, they rarely stick to them during their lectures (Alan & Aksoy, 2023; Anilan & Kayacan, 2015; Güzel, 2014; Kozikoğlu & Albayrak, 2022). Teachers think that support room teachers are responsible for implementing IEPs. They noted that support education rooms in schools can be any available space, such as the vice principal's office or the library, which is repurposed for this use. Participants noted that the rooms used as support education spaces were not arranged in accordance with the guidelines outlined in RSES (MoNe, 2018). Participants pointed out that support education room teachers are not chosen based on whether they have undergone in-service training on MIEAs, as outlined in MoNe (2017). Instead, volunteer teachers are typically assigned to these roles. Participants also expressed that support education room teachers may lack the necessary expertise in special education due to financial constraints and resource limitations. Researchers have also reported similar findings. First, some schools have no support education rooms (Yazarkan, 2020). Second, some schools have support education rooms, but they lack the necessary equipment and sources (Filik, 2019; Kaptan, 2019; Yazıcıoğlu, 2020). Third, support room teachers are volunteers, not teachers who have received professional in-service training in MIEAs (Yazçayır, 2020).

According to the data obtained from the research, some of the class teachers used ready-made IEPs without any care, while others prepared the IEPs either on their own or with guidance teachers. IEPs are crucial components of MIEAs. Crafting an IEP from scratch is not merely a matter of meeting legal requirements but also about

formulating effective special education plans tailored to the needs of students with special needs (Christle & Yell, 2010). IEPs should not be "cookie cutters" with pre-defined objectives solely based on students' age and disability categories. Instead, they should be individualized to meet the unique needs of each student. Participants expressed that they did not have the time to prepare IEPs because they had too much responsibility. This situation can be explained by the fact that the necessary committee for preparing IEPs in schools (MoNe, 2018) was not convened, classroom teachers were left alone to prepare IEPs, they were in an environment devoid of collaboration and teamwork (MoNe, 2018), and therefore the workload was left entirely to them. In other words, they receive no assistance or support from their colleagues, which is consistent with the literature (Batu et al., 2018; Çıkılı et al., 2020; Değirmenci Kurt & Tomul, 2019; Şahin & Gürler, 2018; Yener & Dayı, 2021).

Regarding the third core principle, "We are conscientious," participants conveyed feelings of guilt for various reasons. Firstly, they acknowledged that they do not consistently incorporate IEPs into their teaching. Secondly, they observed that typically developing students and their parents sometimes develop negative attitudes towards students with special needs. Thirdly, they recognized that students with special needs may experience feelings of inadequacy due to difficulties in keeping up with their classmates. Participants express a strong desire to witness progress in students with special needs, but they also feel a sense of sadness and frustration because they believe they are unable to provide the necessary assistance and support to facilitate that progress. Similarly, in the study conducted by Sadioğlu et al. (2013), participants reported that they believed that it would be more beneficial for students with special needs to receive education in separate classes with their peers who have similar academic levels and needs. Our results show that teachers cannot always take into account individual differences among students in their lessons because they are not familiar with special teaching techniques used in special education. In order to eliminate the lack of knowledge of classroom teachers, in-service training can be provided, and necessary support services such as consultancy, which are also included in legal regulations, can be provided so that teachers can consistently include IEPs in their teaching. When this is achieved, it is thought that the anxiety that participants stated that students with special needs may experience feelings of inadequacy due to difficulty in keeping up with their classmates will be eliminated, and it will be possible for normally developing students and their parents to develop positive attitudes towards students with special needs.

Our participants expressed the belief that parents of both typically developing students and students with special needs have limited awareness, which can make it challenging for them to effectively implement MIEAs. This finding is consistent with those reported by earlier studies (Baran, 2021; Burunsuz & İnce, 2020; Değirmenci Kurt & Tomul, 2019). Teachers have a responsibility to proactively engage with parents of both typically developing students and students with special needs to provide them with information regarding MIEAs (Yılmaz et al., 2021).

However, unfortunately, it is seen in the findings of this research that both teachers and teachers have limited knowledge about MIEAs. Therefore, in this process, counselors who are legally responsible according to the Guidance and Psychological Counseling Service Regulation (MoNe, 2020) will be able to pave the way for teachers to effectively implement MIEAs by conducting informative interviews with parents, students, and teachers and working in collaboration.

Regarding the fourth code, "We have been left to our own devices," participants stated that their classrooms were overcrowded and lacked the necessary equipment and materials. They acknowledged their responsibility to cover all aspects of the curriculum for typically developing students while also adjusting their teaching methods to accommodate the specific needs and requirements of students with special needs. They also noted that parents of students with special needs displayed indifference and a lack of support. Additionally, they noted that students with special needs were not evenly distributed, with some classrooms having more than two students with special needs. Teachers prepare IEPs alone or together with guidance counselors. IEP unit stakeholders do not attend the meetings, which are not held anyway. Furthermore, participants expressed feelings of inadequacy due to perceived gaps in their knowledge of IEP processes. They mentioned that they often handle IEP preparation, implementation, evaluation, and monitoring independently, without access to guidance or support. This lack of resources and assistance left them with unanswered questions regarding MIEAs. There is also a lack of cooperation with special education institutions that provide support services. Participants believe that one solution is to reduce class sizes and, if needed, to have an assistant teacher to support students with special needs. IEPs should be prepared by a team, not by one person (Karaca, 2022). During this process, all participants should adopt long- and short-term goals (Kargın, 2007). However, our results show that that is not the case. Research also shows that teachers believe that they have gaps in their knowledge of IEP processes (Akalın, 2014; Anilan & Kayacan, 2015; Baran, 2021; Batu et al., 2018; Berkant & Atılgan, 2017; Değirmenci Kurt & Tomul, 2019; Demirezen & Akhan, 2016; Deniz & Çoban, 2019; Karaca, 2022; Sadioğlu et al., 2013; Şahin, 2017; Ünal, 2010).

According to RSES (MoNe, 2018), each classroom should have an equal number of students with special needs, not exceeding two. The statements of our participants show that school administrations do not act in accordance with the regulations. Research shows that teachers demand effective in-service training in IEPs and MIEAs.

Çıkılı et al., 2020; Evyapan, 2020). Actually, our findings suggest that not only teachers but also all individuals involved in the IEP process have knowledge gaps when it comes to preparing and implementing IEPs. As a result, it appears that comprehensive in-service training is required for all stakeholders involved in the IEP process to ensure a better understanding and effective execution of IEPs.

Our results indicate that teachers choose not to use IEPs, although they believe they are necessary. They think that IEPs and MIEAs cannot be executed in general education classrooms for various reasons. First, they often find themselves burdened with too many responsibilities because the stakeholders of MIEAs do not have a clear understanding of their professional duties and responsibilities. Second, there is no culture of cooperation. Third, teachers are provided with only "education room" and SERC support services. Third, schools have inadequate physical conditions. Fourth, there are no effective and enforceable policies. Fifth, teachers are left to their own devices in the MIEA processes.

Recommendations

Classroom teachers and stakeholders often have inadequate knowledge about MIEAs and IEPs. They may lack a clear understanding of their respective responsibilities in these processes. Therefore, the classroom instruction education departments of universities should enrich the content of existing courses related to special education and provide teacher candidates with the opportunity to practice the courses in classes where MIEA is conducted. In addition, it is recommended that in-service training practices that include monitoring and feedback, such as mentoring, coaching, and consultancy, be carried out for teachers, parents, and school administration so that all stakeholders in schools know their roles and can effectively conduct MIEAs. Governments should introduce legal regulations for counseling, instructional coaching, cooperative teaching, itinerant teaching, and shadow teaching practices within the support education activities. This phenomenological study was conducted with primary teachers. Researchers should conduct similar studies with teachers in different branches and school types. They should also use different research methods to recruit more teachers.

Ethical Approval
Ethical permission (date: 30/12/2022, number: E-77082166-604.01.02-548721) was obtained from Gazi University Ethics Committee for this research.

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