

## Challenges Faced by Teachers in Preschool Special Education

Mehmet Ali Yarım<sup>1a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Ministry of Education, Bursa, Turkey

<sup>b</sup> Ministry of Education

### Abstract

The aim of this research is to examine the difficulties faced by teachers working in preschool special education practices using a qualitative approach. The study was conducted using a phenomenological research design. The study group consisted of 18 preschool teachers (14 female, 4 male) working in state preschools who had at least one student with special needs in their class. The teachers' ages ranged between 24 and 46 years. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using content analysis. The findings revealed that teachers face multifaceted difficulties in special education practices. These difficulties were identified as individualization in teaching processes, classroom management and behavioral problems, preparing and implementing individualized education programs (IEPs), collaboration with families, inadequacy of institutional support services, and needs related to teachers' professional competencies. The research results indicate that in order to improve the quality of preschool special education practices, it is necessary to strengthen practice-based professional support for teachers, increase expert support, and develop structures that support family participation. This study aims to contribute to practice and policy development processes in the field of preschool special education by focusing on teachers' experiences.

### Article history

Received: 21.1.2026.

Accepted: 21.2.2026.

### Keywords:

Preschool education;  
Special education;  
Inclusive education;  
Teachers' opinions;  
Qualitative research

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author's email: [mehmetali.yarim@gazi.edu.tr](mailto:mehmetali.yarim@gazi.edu.tr)

## Introduction

Early childhood is a critical developmental stage where an individual's cognitive, social, emotional, and language development occurs most rapidly and significantly impacts their later life. Educational support provided during this period is of great importance, especially for children with special needs, in terms of reducing developmental risks and maximizing their potential (MEB, 2024). Preschool special education practices aim to respond to children's developmental needs through early diagnosis, early intervention, and inclusion.

In recent years, inclusion practices, where children with special needs receive education alongside their peers, have become widespread in preschool education institutions. However, this widespread adoption has led to various pedagogical, professional, and emotional challenges for teachers. Preschool teachers assume significant responsibilities in areas such as planning teaching processes that consider the individual differences of children with special needs, maintaining classroom management, collaborating with families, and accessing expert support (Gönen, Kılıç & Koçak, 2024). The literature predominantly features quantitative studies on the special education competencies, attitudes, and professional needs of preschool teachers; However, qualitative studies that delve deeply into the difficulties experienced by teachers appear to be limited. Yet, qualitative research that reveals teachers' experiences, perceptions, and problems from their own perspectives fills an important gap in terms of developing practical solutions (Ministry of National Education, Strategy Development Department, 2024).

### ***Special Education and Inclusion in the Preschool Period***

Preschool special education encompasses planned and systematic educational support provided to children with developmental delays, disabilities, or those at risk. Many studies emphasize that early intervention programs implemented during this period have long-term positive effects on children's academic and social development. Inclusion practices aim to support social adaptation and acceptance by enabling children with special needs to be in the same educational environment with their peers. Preschool special education encompasses planned and systematic support provided to children with developmental delays or those at risk. Many studies emphasize that early intervention programs have long-term positive effects on children's academic and social development (Division for Early Childhood, 2014). Inclusion practices aim to support social adaptation and acceptance by enabling children with special needs to be in the same educational environment with their peers (Salend, 2016). Although the legal framework for preschool special education in Turkey is clearly defined; Large class sizes, time and resource constraints that make classroom differentiation difficult, and limited and intermittent support services make it difficult for teachers to effectively manage the process. Qualitative findings show that teachers struggle, especially in individualized instruction, behavior management, and IEP implementation, due to a lack of institutional support (Gönen, Kılıç & Koçak, 2024). Although the legal framework for preschool inclusion practices has been established in Turkey, it is reported that various problems are encountered in practice. In particular, large class sizes, inadequate physical conditions, and limited support services make it difficult for teachers to effectively manage the inclusion process.

### ***The Role of Preschool Teachers in Special Education***

Preschool teachers play a key role in the education process of children with special needs. Teachers are expected to recognize the individual characteristics of children, develop appropriate teaching strategies, and differentiate the learning environment. In addition,

teachers are responsible for establishing cooperation with families, coordinating with guidance services, and working with multidisciplinary teams. Teachers play a key role in the education process of children with special needs. Teachers are expected to recognize the individual characteristics of children and differentiate the learning environment (Loreman, Deppeler & Harvey, 2015). Research shows that the level of knowledge and experience of teachers in special education directly affects the success of inclusion. However, it is stated that many teachers do not gain sufficient practical experience during their undergraduate education (Sucuoğlu & Kargin, 2014). In addition, the responsibility of coordinating with multidisciplinary teams and guidance services is an important part of the teachers' professional roles (Friend & Cook, 2017).

Research shows that the level of knowledge and experience of teachers in special education directly affects the success of inclusion practices. However, it is noted that many teachers receive only a limited number of courses related to special education during their undergraduate studies and do not gain sufficient practical experience.

### ***Challenges Faced by Teachers***

In the literature, the challenges faced by preschool teachers in special education practices are discussed under various headings. Among these challenges, preparing and implementing individualized education programs (IEPs), classroom management, coping with behavioral problems, time constraints, and lack of materials stand out. In addition, the limitations teachers experience in accessing expert support and their inability to establish sufficient cooperation with guidance services are frequently emphasized problems. In the literature, the challenges faced by teachers are highlighted as preparing individualized education programs (IEPs), classroom management, coping with behavioral problems, and lack of materials (Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2018). The limitations teachers experience in accessing expert support and their inability to establish sufficient cooperation with guidance services are frequently emphasized (Gürgür & Uzuner, 2011). However, the difficulty families have in accepting their children's special needs or their low participation in the education process constitutes a separate area of difficulty that creates professional stress for teachers (Özaydın & Çolak, 2011). However, the level of family involvement and expectations regarding the education of children with special needs can pose a separate challenge for teachers. Lack of sufficient information from families or their unwillingness to cooperate makes it difficult for teachers to effectively conduct the educational process.

### ***The Importance of Qualitative Studies***

Although a significant portion of studies in the field of preschool special education are based on quantitative methods, there is a growing need for qualitative research that deeply reveals the experiences and lives of teachers. Qualitative studies allow for an understanding of the contextual and multidimensional nature of the difficulties teachers face; they offer more realistic and applicable suggestions for policymakers and practitioners. This study aims to contribute to this gap in the literature by addressing the difficulties faced by preschool teachers in special education practices from a qualitative perspective.

### ***Research Questions***

The main purpose of this study is to examine the difficulties faced by teachers working in preschool special education practices. In line with this general purpose, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What difficulties do preschool teachers encounter in the education process of children with special needs?
2. What are the difficulties teachers experience regarding classroom instruction and classroom management?

3. What kinds of problems do preschool teachers experience in the process of collaborating with families?
  4. What are the teachers' perceptions of support services (guidance, expert support, materials, etc.) in special education practices?
  5. What are the teachers' suggestions for overcoming the difficulties they encounter?
- These questions ensure the clear formation of the theme and sub-themes in the findings section.

## **Method**

### *Procedure*

This research was conducted using a phenomenological design, a qualitative research method. The phenomenological design aims to deeply examine individuals' experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they attribute to a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus of this study is the difficulties experienced by preschool teachers in the process of special education practice. The research aimed to identify common themes by describing the teachers' subjective experiences in this process (Patton, 2015).

### *Participants*

The study group consists of 18 preschool teachers working in state preschool education institutions during the 2025–2026 academic year who have at least one child with special needs in their class. Criterion sampling, a purposeful sampling method that allows for the selection of units directly related to the research question, was used to determine the participants (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). The determined criteria are:

- (1) working as a preschool teacher in institutions affiliated with the Ministry of National Education,
- (2) having an inclusive education student in their class,
- (3) actively managing the teaching processes in this process.

### *Instrument*

A semi-structured interview form was used as a data collection tool in the research, allowing participants to express their experiences in their own words. The interview questions were prepared by reviewing the relevant literature and submitted to two experts in the fields of special education and qualitative research methods to ensure content validity (Patton, 2015). Necessary corrections were made to the questions in line with expert suggestions, and the form was finalized.

### *Data Collection Process*

Data was collected through one-on-one interviews with teachers on a voluntary basis. The interviews were conducted in environments where teachers could express themselves comfortably and lasted an average of 30-40 minutes. Audio recordings were made with the participants' permission to prevent data loss and increase the depth of the analysis. During the interview process, non-directive, open-ended questions and probes were used to avoid limiting the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### *Data Analysis*

The obtained data was analyzed using content analysis, a method that allows complex data to be organized within the framework of basic concepts and themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). The analysis process included transcribing the audio recordings, reading the data until familiarity was achieved, creating initial codes, grouping similar codes under themes, and

interpreting the findings. In presenting the findings, direct quotations from participant statements were used to reflect the raw data and support credibility.

#### *Validity and Reliability*

Various measures were taken to improve the quality and transferability of the research. To test the accuracy of the data, participant statements were directly quoted (descriptive validity) and the analysis process was reported in detail (Patton, 2015). To ensure coding security, the data was also reviewed by an independent researcher, and inter-expert consistency was checked using the formula "Agreement / (Agreement + Disagreement) x 100". *Ethical Principles*

Ethical standards were adhered to throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study and signed an informed consent form. To ensure confidentiality, codes such as K1, K2, and K3 were used instead of real names. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Atatürk University.

## **Results**

In this section, the data obtained from interviews with preschool teachers were analyzed using content analysis method, and the findings were presented under six main themes. The findings were supported by direct quotations from the teachers' statements.

**Table 1.**

*Challenges Faced by Teachers in Preschool Special Education*

<b>Theme No</b>	<b>Main Theme</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>	<b>Sample Participant Statements</b>
<b>1</b>	Difficulties in Teaching Processes	Individualizing activities, time management, curriculum incompatibility	"It is very difficult to do activities suitable for both the whole class and the student with special needs at the same time." (P4)
<b>2</b>	Classroom Management and Behavioral Problems	Behavioral problems, attention deficit, communication difficulties	"When there is a behavioral problem, the whole class is affected." (P7)
<b>3</b>	Difficulties Related to IEP Process	IEP preparation, implementation, lack of guidance	"We prepare IEPs but it is not really possible to implement them." (P6)
<b>4</b>	Collaboration with Families	Acceptance problems, expectation pressure, low participation	"Some parents do not accept that their child has a special condition." (P3)
<b>5</b>	Institutional and Support Services	Insufficient expert support, crowded classrooms, lack of materials	"The guidance service cannot allocate enough time for preschool." (P5)
<b>6</b>	Teacher Competencies and Professional Needs	Lack of in-service training, learning through experience	"The training we receive remains very superficial." (P1)

### ***Theme 1: Difficulties Experienced in Teaching Processes***

A large majority of teachers stated that they had difficulty planning and implementing the teaching process for children with special needs. Individualization of activities, time

management, and addressing the entire class simultaneously were particularly highlighted. Participants indicated that making separate adaptations for students with special needs made classroom operations difficult:

“It is really difficult to conduct activities suitable for both typically developing children and students with special needs at the same time in the classroom.” (K4)

Some teachers emphasized that the curriculum does not adequately meet the needs of children with special needs:

“The program is generally designed for the average child. It is often insufficient for children with special needs.” (K1)

### ***Theme 2: Classroom Management and Behavioral Problems***

Another area of difficulty frequently mentioned by teachers was classroom management and behavioral problems. In particular, attention deficit, communication difficulties, and aggressive behaviors were stated to negatively affect classroom order. “When there are behavioral problems, it’s not just that child who is affected, but the whole class.” (K7)

Some teachers stated that they felt inadequate in dealing with such situations:

“Sometimes I don’t know how to intervene, I’m afraid of doing something wrong.” (K2)

### ***Theme 3: Difficulties Experienced in the IEP Preparation and Implementation Process***

Most participants stated that they found the process of preparing an Individualized Education Program (IEP) complex and challenging. It was emphasized that IEPs are often prepared as a formality and are not sufficiently reflected in practice. “We prepare IEPs, but it’s not really possible to implement them in the busy classroom.” (K6)

Teachers also stated that they did not receive sufficient guidance on IEPs:

“We often learn how to prepare an IEP through our own efforts.” (K9)

### ***Theme 5: Support Services and Institutional Deficiencies***

Participants stated that the support received from guidance services and special education specialists is often insufficient. Access to specialist support, particularly in preschool institutions, was noted as limited. “There is a guidance service, but they cannot dedicate enough time to preschool education.” (K5)

Overcrowded classrooms and a lack of materials also emerged as significant problems:

“The class is very crowded; one-on-one attention is almost impossible.” (K10)

### ***Theme 6: Teacher Competencies and Need for Professional Support***

Teachers clearly stated that they need to improve their professional competencies in special education. They emphasized that in-service training is insufficient and that more practical training is needed. “The training we receive on special education is very superficial.” (K1)

Some teachers, however, stated that they feel more competent with experience:

“We learn over time, but this process is very challenging.” (K6)

## **Discussion**

This study qualitatively examined the challenges faced by preschool teachers in special education practices and revealed that these challenges have a multidimensional structure encompassing instructional, institutional, and systemic factors. The findings indicate that teachers experience significant difficulties in individualizing instruction, managing classroom behaviors, preparing and implementing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), collaborating with families, and accessing adequate professional support.

The prominence of instructional challenges aligns with previous research demonstrating that differentiated instruction is one of the most demanding aspects of inclusive preschool education (Loreman et al., 2015; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Teachers’

difficulties in adapting activities to meet diverse needs reflect the limitations of standardized curricula, which often fail to provide sufficient flexibility for children with special needs. Similar concerns have been reported in European contexts, where inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to balance whole-class instruction with individualized support under time and resource constraints (Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Eurydice, 2019). These findings suggest that the challenges identified in this study are not unique to Turkey but are part of a broader international issue in early childhood inclusion.

Classroom management and behavioral problems emerged as a major source of professional stress for teachers. Consistent with previous studies, teachers reported feeling inadequately prepared to manage challenging behaviors, which often disrupt the learning environment for the entire class (Salend, 2016; Sharma et al., 2012). Research emphasizes that teachers' self-efficacy plays a critical role in the successful implementation of inclusive practices (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). When teachers lack sufficient training and ongoing support, their attitudes toward inclusion may become less positive, negatively affecting instructional quality (UNESCO, 2020).

The findings related to the IEP process indicate that teachers often perceive IEPs as bureaucratic obligations rather than functional instructional tools. This perception has been widely reported in the literature, particularly in contexts where interdisciplinary collaboration is weak (Friend & Cook, 2017; Odom et al., 2013). Studies conducted in Turkey and other countries highlight that teachers need practical, implementation-oriented support rather than formal training focused solely on documentation (Sucuoğlu & Kargin, 2014; Peck et al., 2009). The lack of systematic mentoring and professional guidance limits the effective use of IEPs in daily classroom practices.

Family collaboration was identified as another critical challenge. Teachers reported difficulties related to families' acceptance of their children's special needs and limited participation in the educational process. Similar findings have been reported in studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and other European countries, where insufficient family awareness and unrealistic expectations increase teachers' emotional burden (Hadžimusić & Krnjić, 2019; Karaj & Rapti, 2015). Research emphasizes that effective inclusion in early childhood education requires strong family-teacher partnerships based on trust, communication, and shared responsibility (Guralnick, 2017; Barton & Smith, 2015). Institutional and systemic deficiencies, such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of materials, and limited access to special education specialists, further exacerbate the challenges faced by teachers. International studies underline that inclusion cannot be sustained solely through individual teacher effort; instead, it requires supportive school structures and policy-level commitment (Bouillet, 2018; UNESCO, 2020). The Global Education Monitoring Report highlights that inclusive education systems must provide continuous professional development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and adequate resources to ensure quality outcomes for all children.

Finally, findings related to teachers' professional competencies indicate that both pre-service education and in-service training are insufficient to meet the complex demands of preschool special education. Teachers' reliance on trial-and-error learning underscores the need for systematic professional development models grounded in practice (Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2018; Odom et al., 2013). Research from various European contexts confirms that sustainable inclusion depends on long-term mentoring, reflective practice, and institutional learning rather than short-term training initiatives (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Eurydice, 2019).

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that improving the quality of preschool special education requires a comprehensive approach that addresses instructional practices,

professional development, family collaboration, and institutional support simultaneously. Creating an inclusive ecosystem in which teachers are supported by specialists, families, and policymakers is essential for ensuring equitable and effective early childhood education for children with special needs.

### **Conclusion And Recommendations**

The findings of this study revealed that the difficulties teachers face in preschool special education practices have individual, institutional, and systemic dimensions. Supporting teachers directly affects the quality of inclusion practices and the success of children with special needs in education.

In this regard, the recommendations developed are presented below at three levels:

#### 1. Individual Level

- ✓ Practice-based in-service training for preschool teachers should be increased; these trainings should include classroom examples, case analyses, and problem-solving workshops.
- ✓ Mentoring mechanisms should be established where teachers can receive guidance in the preparation and implementation processes of IEPs.

#### 2. Institutional Level

- ✓ Special education specialists should be encouraged to take a more active role at the preschool level in schools; the culture of cooperation between teachers, guidance services, and families should be strengthened.
- ✓ Information and guidance activities for families should be made regular and sustainable; the active participation of families in the process should be encouraged.
- ✓ Class sizes should be reduced so that teachers can dedicate more time to individualized teaching practices.

#### 3. Systemic Level

- ✓ The IEP process should be simplified to suit the preschool level and freed from bureaucratic burdens.
- ✓ Teaching materials should be diversified and rich content should be developed that addresses the different learning styles of children with special needs.
- ✓ Long-term strategic plans should be made in education policies for preschool special education practices; an ecosystem should be created where teachers are not left alone and are empowered with expert and family support.

### **Conflict of interest**

None.

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