Nothing has changed on the Mainstreaming Front: Classroom Teachers and Individualized Education Program (IEP)

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ABSTRACT
The aim of the study is to reveal the problems encountered in the process of IEP development and functional implementation in the classroom environment, which are frequently mentioned in the national literature in Türkiye, and the solution suggestions for eliminating these problems from the perspective of classroom teachers. For this purpose, the study was designed with phenomenology, one of the qualitative research methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine classroom teachers working in inclusive classrooms in Eskişehir. The data were analyzed through content analysis. The results of the study revealed that there are unfavorable physical conditions for students with special needs, unfair workload, and insufficient cooperation among stakeholders. Suggestions such as the appointment of special education teachers to schools with inclusive classrooms and special education mentoring were offered.
KEYWORDS
Mainstreaming; individualized education program (IEP); classroom teachers; special education.

INTRODUCTION

Individualized Education Program (IEP) is defined as a special education program that is prepared for targeted goals in line with the developmental characteristics, educational performances and needs of individuals in need of special education and includes support education services to be provided to these individuals (MEB, 2006). To define it in more detail, IEP is a written special education program that is prepared by a team for each student with special needs in the educational environment he/she attends and is systematically monitored, implemented and evaluated to respond to the educational needs of all stakeholders (Council for Exceptional Children, 1999; Gürsel & Vuran, 2015; Turnbull et al., 2002). The concept of IEP was first included in the legal regulations in our country in 1997 (Kargın, 2007). Since then, IEP has been included as a legal responsibility in all Special Education Services Regulations that have been updated or amended. Stakeholders involved in the IEP development phase include the general education teacher, special education teacher, counselor, family, school administrators and, when necessary, the student himself/herself (Heward, 2013). As stated in the definitions, IEPs are needed in all educational environments where students with special needs attend. Therefore, IEPs should also be prepared and implemented for students receiving education in mainstreaming classes. The importance of the qualified preparation and systematic implementation of IEP is emphasized on the basis of successful inclusion practices (Weishaar, 2010). From this point of view, classroom teachers are the IEP team members who spend the most time with students with special needs in inclusive classrooms and observe their educational needs the best (Siegel, 2004).

A review of the literature reveals many national studies on IEPs. The common finding in these studies is the problems in the preparation and implementation of IEPs. Negative attitudes towards IEPs (Kol, 2016; Tike-Bafra & Kargın, 2009), problems in establishing an IEP team and working consistently (Can, 2015; Çuhadar, 2016; Çıkılı et al. 2020; Eratay & Öztürk, 2010; Söğüt & Deniz, 2018; Vuran et al. 2017), lack of knowledge about IEP preparation (Avcıoğlu, 2011; Camadan, 2012; Güzel, 2014; İlik, 2015; Pektaş, 2008; Tike-Bafra & Kargın, 2009), problems related to working in collaboration (Camadan, 2012; Eratay & Öztürk, 2010), problems in realizing instructional adaptations (Avcıoğlu, 2011; Can, 2015; Kuyumcu, 2011), insufficient physical arrangements (Sezgin & Sarıca, 2021; Yılmaz & Batu, 2016). Although problems and solution suggestions regarding IEPs are mentioned in most studies, these findings are descriptive. It is thought that there is a need for deep discussions on the problems in the literature and the solutions to these problems. Therefore, the need for an in-depth examination of the problems and solutions put forward by various studies from the perspective of classroom teachers has been the pioneer of this study. From this point of view, the aim of the study is to reveal the problems experienced in the process of IEP development and functional implementation in the classroom environment, which are frequently expressed in the literature,

and the solution suggestions for eliminating these problems from the perspective of classroom teachers. For this purpose, the following questions were tried to be answered.

Research Questions

- How do classroom teachers define IEP?
- According to the classroom teachers, what are the reasons for the problems in the development and functional implementation of IEP?
- What are the suggestions of classroom teachers for the functional implementation of IEP?

METHOD

In this section, the research design, participants, data collection techniques, data collection process and the analysis process of the data obtained as a result of the research are given.

Research Design

This study, which aims to examine the problems experienced during the development and implementation of the IEP in the classroom environment and the solution suggestions for eliminating these problems from the perspective of classroom teachers, was designed as a phenomenology research from qualitative research methods. Phenomenology researches describe the experiences of individuals about the phenomenon they experience, rather than what the phenomenon actually is (Creswell, 2013; Ersoy, 2016). The reason why the phenomenology design was preferred is the possibilities of holistically examining the experiences, perceptions and how the participants make sense of the phenomenon offered by the design in accordance with the purpose of the research through the eyes of the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013).

Participants

The participants were classroom teachers working in Eskişehir who were responsible for the process of preparing and functionally implementing IEPs as emphasized in the literature. Criterion sampling, one of the purposeful sampling types, was used in the selection of participants. In this context, classroom teachers who were actively involved in the preparation and implementation of the IEP, that is, who experienced the phenomenon that was the subject of the research and who had inclusion students in their classrooms were included in the study. Teachers were informed about the subject and process of the study and participants who volunteered to participate in the study were included. Demographic information about the participants of the study is given in Table 1.

Table 1.

Participants

Code Name	Age	Gender	Undergrate Degree (University)	Graduation Section	Graduation Year	Taking a Course on IEP in Undergraduate Education	Receiving In-Service Training on IEP	Professional Experience
K1	49	Male	Ankara	Teaching Education Programs	1994	Yes	Yes	29 year
K2	49	Female	Uludağ	Classroom Teaching	1996	No	No	26 year
K3	50	Female	Trakya	Classroom Teaching	1995	No	Yes	27 year
K4	39	Female	Gazi	Classroom Teaching	2004	No	Yes	17 year
K5	43	Female	Gazi	Classroom Teaching	2003	Yes	No	20 year
K6	45	Female	Anadolu	Classroom Teaching	2001	Yes	No	22 year
K7	50	Male	Akdeniz	Classroom Teaching	1993	No	No	29 year
K8	49	Female	Ondokuz Mayıs	German Language Teaching	1995	No	No	27 year
K9	39	Female	Dokuz Eylül	Classroom Teaching	2003	Yes	No	19 year

Data Collection

In phenomenological research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, as it is aimed to address these experiences of the people who experience the phenomenon in depth and holistically and to see these experiences from the perspective of the participants. In addition to the interviews, data were obtained through the field notes of the researchers.

In the preparation of the interview questions, the information obtained from the research findings in the literature on the process of preparing and functionally implementing the IEP and the experiences of the researchers were utilized. Comprehensive interview questions were prepared to answer the research questions. The interviews were conducted between November 22-30, 2022 and lasted between 18 and 24 minutes.

Data Analysis and Credibility

Content analysis technique was used to analyze the data obtained with a holistic approach. The data were recorded regularly during the research process and the codes obtained after the

analysis of these data were combined under themes by the researchers. The themes and sub-themes obtained after the analysis of the data were sent to three field experts and the themes and sub-themes were finalized in line with the opinions of the experts.

FINDINGS

As a result of the analysis, five main themes and 23 sub-themes were reached. Information on the themes is given in Table 2.

Table 2.

Themes

Theme no	Theme name
1	IEP According to Teachers' Views
2	Factors Affecting IEP Preparation Process
3	Problems in the Process
4	Recommendations
5	Alternative Practice Examples

Note: IEP: Individualized education program

As seen in Table 2, the main themes are teachers' definition of IEP, factors affecting the IEP preparation process, problems experienced in the process, suggestions, and examples of alternative practices.

IEP According to Teachers' Views

The teachers in the study defined IEP as an individual-specific education program prepared in line with the needs of the individual with special needs in accordance with the definition in the book. All participants agreed that IEP is a program prepared in line with the needs of the individual. Participant 8's statement summarizing the common views of all participants on this issue is as follows: "IEP is an individualized education plan that is made specific to the individual, it is made specific to the student." However, participant 5 said, "IEP is an individualized education program. First of all, teacher, IEP is flexible. These studies can be carried out flexibly by the IEP development unit. At the same time, the family should also have support in this regard. It is a program made to maximize the development of students with special needs, a kind of support education program" and drew attention to other stakeholders that should be involved in the IEP process. Participant 9 said, "We think that the individualized education program is a program, a plan prepared only for children who learn late or have a mental problem. But actually it shouldn't be like that, right? Normally, it should be a plan that should be prepared and implemented for children at higher levels as well.", expressing the need to prepare IEP for all students with special needs.

Participants expressed both positive and negative opinions about the IEP. Participant 4 said, "I mean, IEP is still better than no diagnosis at all, better than doing nothing on behalf of

that child." Participant 9 said, "Nothing works without a plan or a program. There has to be a program. It doesn't work when a different program is not written, it doesn't work when you say let me do this according to my head. "When we look at the negative opinions; Participant 5 said, "IEP is actually really useful theoretically, but unfortunately it is not very functional." Participant 8 said, "I mean, is that individualized education plan useful when it is implemented in the classroom? I think not at all." Participant 8 also supported this view.

Factors Affecting IEP Preparation Process

When we look at the factors affecting the IEP preparation process, it is seen that the participants emphasized the importance of making a careful evaluation and the existence of ready-made IEP creation formats that they can access from the internet. Participant 8 said, "I think that this plan is based on getting to know the student very well first. If we can get to know the student very well, a certain period of time is required for this. For example, we are asked for an IEP plan immediately when the school opens. I think we should have the opportunity to observe a new student for at least a month because they do not have an IEP plan." Participant 6 said, "I take goals that I can achieve, I limit them because I try to get to know the child first. After getting to know the child, I set goals that I can definitely achieve."

Another important factor affecting the IEP preparation process is the existence of ready-made IEP formats. Participant 2 said, "Obviously, there are things that are ready, ready on the internet sites. There are individual education programs. We play on these programs. For example, Sakarya CRC has a website, it is ready there, it can be prepared online. What I mean by ready-made is that there is actually something ready-made, but there is an individual education plan that can be prepared online. I always use that. It is on the website of Sakarya GRC." Participant 7 said, "We prepare it from Tokat Erbaa GRC. From there, since we know our own students, we know what we can give them that is appropriate. Here's what to take. We prepare it that way by getting to know our student." He stated that they benefit from the ready-made formats on the websites of GRCs.

Problems Experienced

When we look at the problems related to IEP, it is seen that the participants drew attention to three sub-themes: problems arising from insufficient cooperation, problems in the IEP preparation and implementation process.

The teachers stated that they did not take enough courses on special education and IEP preparation at the undergraduate level, that they lacked information and information resources, that the in-service trainings given were not efficient, and that they were expected to make an IEP immediately without giving enough time to get to know the student.

When we look at the implementation process, the participants stated that there were difficulties in achieving the individual goals planned to be gained in the context of IEP due to reasons such as intensive general education curriculum, crowded class size, lack of materials, lack of knowledge and experience. In addition, the participants emphasized that there were problems arising from the diagnosis and that the placement was not appropriate. Participant 7

said, "Some students need to be diagnosed well at the beginning and sent well. If you write everything and send it to us as a template, it is not an inclusion student." Participant 9 also said, "I think there is a problem, there is a problem with the things... For example, it says that it is suitable for mainstreaming education. For example, I think that some children should not be included among other children who are in regular education." He supported this situation with his words. In addition to these, Participant 8 said, "For example, when you give the child a separate sheet of paper in the classroom and tell him/her to do this, why can he/she say that mine is different? I mean, the child sees that." With these sentences, she emphasized that while mainstreaming, it unintentionally causes segregation.

When we look at the problems arising from the lack of cooperation, teachers emphasized that teachers were left alone in the IEP preparation and implementation process for reasons such as insufficient family participation in the IEP preparation process, lack of clear roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the process, and reluctance to cooperate. Participant 3 explained this situation by saying, "Of course, I feel that I am alone while doing this. I already prepare the plan myself. After I prepare the plan here, of course I ask for help from families. I think that families are not enough in this regard." Participant 1 stated, "I think that all the burden in the IEP is on the shoulders of the classroom teacher. It is not something that can only be done with his/her efforts, the parents should also be conscious." It is understood that Participant 1 has a similar opinion.

Suggestions

When we look at the suggestions given for increasing the functionality of the IEP process, it is seen that issues such as increasing family participation, increasing trainings on IEP preparation and implementation in the pre-service process, eliminating material deficiencies, expanding the support education room application, improving the financial conditions of the teachers working here, and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders involved in the process are emphasized.

Participant 6, regarding raising awareness of families and increasing their participation, said, "Families with IEPs should be trained. Both psychologically and socially because some people think like this; when the child is in the IEP, the child is stigmatized, this child doesn't understand, some people even say that he is crazy, that's why he stayed. I mean, by the society... they are stigmatized... Neighbors are very important to them. Their world is limited because of who says what. So they keep their children away from education, the neighbor says they are crazy, my child should not go there, or we try to guide the family, we consciously tell them, look, you will make a lot of progress about this, that, that child, you will have these opportunities... They say no, they say they don't want to... I mean, families definitely need to be made aware of this." He said that families should be made aware and take a more active role in the process.

Participant 1, who stated that the knowledge and experience of the teacher should be increased, said, "I think it is necessary to start with the courses taught at the university. I mean, for example, when I graduated 27 years ago, there were no studies like this, from a long time

ago... IEP plans are very old studies... But we were not taught in the courses. I think this is a deficiency." Participant 3 supported this situation by saying, "First of all, I need to be well educated".

Regarding the clarification of the roles of the stakeholders in the process, Participant 5 said, "I think both teachers, the administration and the parents should be given a training on the duties and functions of the units that make up the IEP. After this training, it is really possible for us to add functionality to the event."

Alternative Practice Examples

In terms of what can be done as an alternative to the current IEP process, the participants expressed examples such as segregated education, increasing the number of class hours for one-to-one education, assigning a special education teacher to each school, assigning an assistant teacher to the classroom and providing on-the-job coaching training.

For segregated education, Participant 5 said, "Actually, I am not a teacher who is very much in favor of mainstreaming. I try to think multilaterally, I try to look at it from different sides. On the one hand, I also want to look at this situation from the family of the student with special needs. It is a difficult process, of course they also want and wish that they are not separated from their peers or that they receive education together. Maybe it will be difficult to separate them in that sense, but unfortunately, the remaining students can also be ignored a little bit... Maybe by providing the necessary equipment in special education classes, by providing physical conditions, and by seriously training people who are really experts in this field, and professionally... They can give a good education together with these children." Similarly, Participant 4 expressed his opinion by saying, "I am more in favor of the idea that children with IEPs should be together with students like themselves."

Participant 6 said, "I think our class hours should be reduced and we should be given something separate to pay special attention to these children. I mean, how primary school used to be 5 hours. I think 5 hours is enough for equipping children. After these 5 hours, they can be given social activities. Just like in private schools, after 4-5 hours of main lessons, at least 3-4 hours are given to the social opportunities of the child. This can also be done in public schools. We have a physical education teacher. We have music teachers. We also have art teachers. It will be given to them so that we can deal with students with IEPs individually for 1 hour or 2 hours differently."

Participant 6 stated that a special education teacher should be assigned to each school: "Children like my student, who are constantly resetting, who I cannot make progress with, should be trained with really expert teachers at certain times. I would like to prepare a special program and spend more time with them, but I would also like them to be in our own classrooms so that they can adapt to normal life. In other words, the two should go together, so I think there should be a special education teacher in every school."

Another alternative to the current IEP process is on-the-job coaching training. Regarding this situation, Participant 5 said, "There should be a unit to help me while I am in that event. I

am stuck at that moment. I need information at that moment. I don't have a source, I don't have a material or someone to support me in some way. So what am I going to do? In the same way, this will not go beyond theory. I think it should be taught to me practically, by doing and experiencing it personally, as we actually apply it to students. It should be based on a sample."

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

As a result of the research, most of the teachers defined IEP as a personalized and individually designed education plan. The definition of IEP in the literature includes steps such as preparation by a team, systematic monitoring, implementation and evaluation as well as being individualized (Council for Exceptional Children, 1999; Gürsel & Vuran, 2015; Turnbull et al., 2002). Therefore, it is seen that teachers' definitions do not include all the steps in the literature.

Weishaar (2010) emphasizes the importance of the qualified preparation and systematic implementation of IEP on the basis of successful inclusion practices. In the study, some of the teachers had a similar view on the systematic preparation and implementation of IEP. As a matter of fact, these teachers argue that a qualified education process cannot be realized without a plan and program. However, some of the teachers have negative attitudes towards IEP. They define IEP as a program that is theoretically useful but not functional in practice. It can be said that reasons such as lack of knowledge about IEP, inadequate collaboration with stakeholders, lack of ideal teamwork, and overcrowded classrooms underlie this negative perspective.

Stakeholders involved in the IEP development phase include the general education teacher, special education teacher, counselor, family, school administrators and, when necessary, the student himself/herself (Heward, 2013). In the study, the participants did not mention IEP preparation teams. In this respect, it can be stated that a process that is inconsistent with the literature in the context of the IEP team is progressing. In general, it is understood that the classroom teacher prepares the education plan using ready-made formats. It is seen that the classroom teacher is described as the person who will know the student best, set the goals and prepare the objectives. Similar to this finding, it is reported that general education teachers are the IEP team members who spend the most time with students with special needs in inclusive classrooms and observe the educational needs of students the best (Siegel, 2004). Therefore, it is in line with the literature that classroom teachers take the main responsibility in the IEP preparation process.

Inadequate collaboration is one of the main problems experienced in the IEP preparation process. Uncertainties in the roles of stakeholders such as parents, subject teachers and administrators, not fulfilling their responsibilities or being reluctant to do so are among the main problems. Similar problems related to collaboration (Camadan, 2012; Eratay & Öztürk, 2010) and a process that does not work consistently (Can, 2015; Çıkılı et al. 2020; Çuhadar, 2016; Eratay & Öztürk, 2010; Söğüt & Deniz, 2018; Vuran at al. 2017) are seen in studies.

In addition to the preparation process, it is understood that problems such as intensive curriculum, crowded class sizes, lack of materials, lack of knowledge and experience are also experienced during the IEP implementation process. In the studies in the literature; lack of knowledge about IEP preparation (Avcıoğlu, 2011; Camadan, 2012; Güzel, 2014; İlik, 2015; Pektaş, 2008; Tike-Bafra & Kargın, 2009), problems in realizing instructional adaptations (Can, 2015; Avcıoğlu, 2011; Kuyumcu, 2011), inadequate physical arrangements (Sezgin & Sarıca, 2021; Yılmaz & Batu, 2016). As a matter of fact, it is understood that the findings overlap with the literature.

Alternative practices such as segregated education, increasing class hours for one-to-one education, assigning a special education teacher to each school, assigning an assistant teacher to the classroom and providing on-the-job coaching training were also among the findings. The segregated classroom is a completely opposite perspective to mainstreaming education. Inclusive education is defined as individuals with special needs attending the same school with their peers (Kargın, 2004) and being in the same environment (York & Tundidor, 1995). As a matter of fact, teachers who hold this view do not find mainstreaming meaningful and do not see the IEP as functional. Improving the supportive education process (Günay, 2021; Talas et al., 2016; Yazıcıoğlu, 2020), assigning special education teachers to general education schools with inclusive classrooms (Demir & Kale, 2019), assigning assistant teachers to inclusive classrooms (Sivrikaya & Yıkmış, 2016) and mentoring for the professional development of teachers (Akay & Gürgür, 2018; Dempsey & Christenson-Foggett, 2011) are alternatives emphasized in the literature. Since the implementation of these alternatives will increase the time and effort allocated to mainstreaming students, it can be thought that they will benefit all steps of the IEP.

As a result, it can be stated that similar problems have not been overcome in many studies conducted from past to present. On the other hand, the fact that the workload in the steps of preparation, implementation and evaluation is not shared fairly also triggers a negative perspective. The inadequacy of the intensive curriculum and physical conditions in the current education system creates doubts about the functionality of the IEP. To summarize, IEP does not find the value to be taken into consideration in the intensive and exhausting education system.

When all this is considered together, it seems essential to ask the same question that Zigmond et al. asked in 2009. To what extent can students with special needs be provided with "special education", which is defined as education "provided by specially trained personnel in appropriate environments..." as promised by the law, in the IEP and mainstreaming process, which is a legal obligation? Despite all these setbacks, is the idea that IEP, mainstreaming and even integration are "good" and that these problems occur because the stakeholders involved in the process are "bad" a perception or a reality?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers have suggestions for increasing the quality of IEPs and solving the problems experienced in the preparation and implementation process. These suggestions can be listed as

increasing family involvement, increasing pre-service trainings on IEP preparation and implementation, eliminating material deficiencies, expanding the support education room practice, improving the financial conditions of teachers working in these rooms, and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders involved in the process. Among the suggestions of the researchers are reducing the class sizes of students with special needs, providing additional budget for mainstreaming schools, and ensuring that IEP trainings include examples of good practices.

Limitations

The research was designed as a phenomenology research, one of the qualitative research methods. Therefore, the research findings are limited to 9 classroom teachers working in 3 different schools in the suburbs of Eskişehir.

In order to be able to work in the suburbs of Eskişehir, service scores must be high. For this reason, although the years of service and experience of the participants are quite high, the fact that it has been a long time since their undergraduate education can be considered as a limitation in terms of IEP preparation.

The fact that only teachers were interviewed among the stakeholders in the IEP team and other stakeholders (counselors, school administration, parents) were excluded from the process can be considered as a limitation.

Suggestions for Further Research

Studies can be carried out with practical designs (such as action research) in order to see the failing aspects of the process more easily and to increase its functionality. A more comprehensive research can be conducted with the participation of all stakeholders in the IEP team.

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