



## THE CHALLENGES AND SOLUTION PROPOSALS FOR TEACHERS FROM NON-SPECIAL EDUCATION FIELDS WORKING WITH INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED STUDENTS

(Research article)

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### Abstract

This study aims to determine the experiences, challenges, and solution proposals of teachers from non-special education fields who work with intellectually disabled students. The research was conducted with 10 teachers employed at two different private special education institutions serving intellectually disabled children on the European side of Istanbul. In the study, data were collected from teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities using a semi-structured interview form, which was developed based on literature review and expert opinions. After a pilot study, necessary revisions were made, and the interview form was finalized. Content analysis was employed to analyze the data obtained from these interviews. The findings revealed various issues such as insufficient training background, feelings of professional inadequacy, lack of institutional support, and insufficient collaboration between families and experts. Proposed solutions included increasing in-service training opportunities, enhancing inter-institutional communication and coordination, and improving effective collaboration processes with families.

**Keywords:** Intellectually disabled; special education; teachers' experiences

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## **1. Introduction**

Special education can be described as an intensive and individualized instructional process that utilizes educational programs, methods, and materials tailored to the unique needs of individuals (Friend & Bursuck, 2018; MEB, 2018; Heward, 2013). Among the subfields of special education, the education of intellectually disabled individuals holds significant importance. These individuals often exhibit differences in cognitive processes, communication, or behavior management compared to their peers and typically require long-term support (Friend & Bursuck, 2018; MEB, 2018; Kırcaali-İftar, 2018; Heward, 2013). The primary goal of special education processes is not only to foster the academic development of intellectually disabled students but also to help them acquire social, communication, and daily living skills, enabling them to function independently in their communities (MEB, 2018; Brown et al., 2013; Emerson et al., 2010).

These processes are carried out by teachers in schools. Managing these processes requires not only teaching skills but also theoretical and practical competencies. The literature frequently emphasizes the necessity of developing special education teaching skills through specialized training involving unique methods, techniques, and ethical approaches (Çınar & Eratay, 2024; Tümkeya, 2024; Batu, 2019). However, due to teacher shortages in special education, legal regulations, employment opportunities, and similar factors in Turkey, teachers from other branches who are not graduates of special education programs also work in institutions serving intellectually disabled students (MEB, 2018; Karakaya & Çiçek, 2019).

Teachers from non-special education backgrounds bring certain advantages and disadvantages to working with intellectually disabled students. Advantages include diverse perspectives, creative material development skills, or experience applying general educational principles. However, the lack of knowledge and confidence in applying specialized practices such as developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), behavior management, alternative communication methods, and collaborating with families and experts can lead to challenges in the education of intellectually disabled students (Çınar & Eratay, 2024; Yılmaz & Şahin, 2023; Çıkılı et al, 2020; Kırcaali-İftar, 2018).

Programs that train special education teachers emphasize a broad theoretical foundation (covering developmental characteristics, legal regulations, behavior modification methods, etc.) and intensive practical experience (e.g., internships, school practice, application courses) (Ozsoy et al., 2018). Conversely, courses related to special education in other teacher training programs are often limited to a few credits and focus primarily on theoretical knowledge. For instance, courses labeled "inclusive education" or "special education applications" often fail to provide adequate practical training (Kırcaali-İftar, 2018). This limitation leaves teachers ill-

prepared when faced with the realities of educating intellectually disabled students in actual classroom settings, causing heightened anxiety and uncertainty (Batu, 2019). Consequently, teachers from non-special education branches require substantial support in practical skills and adaptation strategies.

Special education is a multidisciplinary field that necessitates the collaboration of teachers, families, doctors, psychologists, speech therapists, and other specialists (Tümkiye, 2024; Çıkılı et al, 2020; Batu, 2019). This multidisciplinary approach is crucial for supporting intellectually disabled students across cognitive, communicative, behavioral, and sensory domains. However, effective education depends on how teachers interact with these specialists, their ability to collaborate, and the institutional management of these processes (Patton, 2015). Continuous professional development activities, such as in-service training, workshops, peer collaboration, and mentoring, are critical for enhancing teachers' skills and ensuring their growth (Ataman, 2017). Nevertheless, due to heavy workloads and financial constraints in many special education institutions, systematic professional development opportunities remain limited (Çınar & Eratay, 2024; Çıkılı et al, 2020; Kırcaali-İftar, 2018).

This study aims to identify the challenges faced by teachers who work with intellectually disabled students but lack a special education background and propose solutions to address these challenges. By shedding light on the current situation, the study seeks to offer recommendations for teacher training programs, in-service training policies, and mechanisms for collaboration between families, experts, and teachers.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Participants and Selection*

The participants of this study consist of 10 teachers working in two different private special education institutions serving intellectually disabled students on the European side of Istanbul. These teachers are from various fields and have not received undergraduate education in special education. Purposeful sampling was employed to select participants, based on the following criteria:

1. Not being a graduate of a special education program,
2. Having at least one year of experience working with intellectually disabled students,
3. Being employed in private special education institutions on Istanbul's European side.

The professional experience of the participants ranges from 1 to 10 years. Some began their careers in these institutions, while others had prior experience in inclusion classrooms or

rehabilitation centers. For ethical reasons, the participants were assigned codes from K1 to K10. Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the participants.

Table1. Characteristics of the Participant Teachers

Participant Code	Undergraduate Program	Professional Experience (Years)	Experience in Institution (Years)
K1	Elementary Education	5	2
K2	Early Childhood Education	3	1
K3	Psychology	7	3
K4		6	2
K5	Early Childhood Education	4	2
K6	Early Childhood Education	8	3
K7	Elementary Education	10	2
K8	Guidance and Counseling	2	1
K9	Guidance and Counseling	3	1
K10	Elementary Education	4	2

## 2.2. Research Design

This study was designed as a qualitative research project to identify the experiences, challenges, and solution proposals of teachers from non-special education fields working with intellectually disabled students. A phenomenological research design was adopted, as this approach values individual experiences and perceptions, providing a framework for understanding the meanings participants attribute to the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology enables researchers to analyze phenomena without generalizing, instead focusing on exploring and explaining individual experiences and perceptions.

## 2.3. Data Collection Tools and Process

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection tool. To prepare the interview questions, a review of the literature was conducted, and preliminary questions were drafted. These questions were then reviewed by two experts in special education with doctoral degrees, and necessary adjustments were made based on their feedback. A pilot study was conducted with three teachers who were not part of the main study but worked with intellectually

disabled students, to test the appropriateness of the questions and interview duration. Following the pilot study, the interview form was finalized.

The semi-structured interview form focused on the following topics:

- Experiences of working in the field of special education,
- Main challenges encountered (pedagogical, institutional, communication-related, etc.),
- Perceptions of professional competencies in special education,
- Collaboration processes with families and experts,
- Institutional support mechanisms and practices,
- Solution proposals for encountered challenges.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded with the participants' consent, and lasted approximately 30-35 minutes. The recordings were transcribed for content analysis. Personal information about the participants was kept confidential, and ethical principles were followed during the coding process.

#### 2.4. *Data Analysis*

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using content analysis, which involves four main steps:

1. **Coding the Data:** The transcribed interviews were carefully read, and meaningful units were identified. These units were then transformed into thematic codes related to the research questions.
2. **Identifying Themes:** The codes were grouped into themes based on their similarities and differences.
3. **Organizing and Describing the Data:** Subcategories were created within the themes, and the data were structured according to these categories.
4. **Interpreting the Data:** The themes were interpreted descriptively and conceptually, supported by direct quotes from the participants to enrich the findings.

#### 2.5. *Reliability and Validity*

To enhance the reliability and validity of the study, strategies proposed by Creswell (2014) were employed. These strategies included triangulation of data sources by collecting input from teachers working in two different institutions, expert review of the interview form and analysis process, and member checking by sharing summaries of interviews and initial findings with

participants to correct any misunderstandings or omissions. Direct quotes were used to make the findings more transparent and reliable.

### **3. Results**

In this section, the findings are presented within the framework of four main themes that emerged from the data analysis. Each theme is elaborated in detail, supported by direct quotations from the participants' statements.

#### *3.1. Perceived Professional Competence and Educational Infrastructure*

##### *3.1.1. Lack of Special Education Pedagogical Formation*

The majority of participants expressed that they had not received comprehensive training in both theoretical and practical aspects of special education, leading to feelings of inadequacy. It was frequently emphasized that university programs' courses, such as "Introduction to Special Education" or "Inclusion," remained theoretical, with minimal opportunities for practical application.

"I graduated as an elementary school teacher. Our pedagogical training was already designed for regular classroom management. We did take a special education course, but it was only three credits, and we hardly had any practical experience." (P1)

##### *3.1.2. Need for Theoretical Knowledge and Limited Practical Applications*

Some teachers reported attempting to gather information on special education through literature reviews or online resources. However, they highlighted a lack of institutional guidance and systematic training. This situation occasionally leads to hesitation in their approach to students.

"When I first encountered a student with an intellectual disability, I struggled a lot. I looked up videos online to figure out what I could do. But every child is different; there needs to be a specific guide." (P3)

##### *3.1.3. Feeling of Inadequacy in Professional Development*

The majority of teachers expressed that they often experience feelings of failure or inadequacy due to their shortcomings in the field of special education. They stated that questions

such as “Am I using the right techniques?” and “Am I positively influencing the student’s development?” frequently occupy their minds.

“Sometimes, at the end of the day, I feel completely helpless. I keep wondering if I should approach things differently or try another method. I constantly question myself.” (P5)

### 3.2. *Institutional Support and Coordination*

#### 3.2.1. *Lack of In-Service Training*

Participants criticized their institutions for often being profit-oriented, which they believe hinders the organization of systematic and regular in-service training programs. When specialists are invited once or twice a year, the content is reported to be too general or insufficiently tailored to meet the specific needs of all teachers.

“The institution organizes a few seminars for us, but they are very general so that everyone can attend. No one asks me what I specifically need.” (P7)

#### 3.2.2. *Lack of Mentorship and Guidance*

The need for guidance from experienced special education teachers or academics was another frequently mentioned issue. Participants noted that most institutions lack an experienced “special education coordinator” or “mentor teacher,” leaving teachers to learn through their own efforts.

“The institution has a counseling service, but it only conducts sessions; there is no one providing mentorship for us. If someone guided us and shared their experiences, we could have avoided many mistakes from the start.” (P2)

#### 3.2.3. *Lack of Inter-Institutional Communication*

Another criticism was the absence of experience-sharing between different institutions. Teachers expressed their desire to meet with colleagues facing similar challenges and exchange ideas. However, factors such as competition, time constraints, and lack of accessible platforms prevent this from happening.

“We hear that there are excellent practices in other institutions, but there is no platform to observe or learn how they are implemented. And there’s no time either.” (P6)

### 3.3. *Collaboration Between Families and Specialists*

#### 3.3.1. *Limited Family Involvement*

Despite the importance of family participation in the educational process, particularly for students with intellectual disabilities, it was observed that effective collaboration with many families could not be established. Factors such as socioeconomic conditions, lack of knowledge, or the family’s inability to accept the child’s disability were highlighted as reasons for limited involvement in the educational process.

“Family involvement is very important. However, most parents say, ‘We can’t do it; you handle it here.’ Or due to the fatigue of the day and other issues at home, they cannot dedicate enough time to the child’s education.” (P9)

### 3.3.2. *Lack of Coordination with Specialists*

The absence of joint planning with specialists such as doctors, psychologists, speech therapists, and physiotherapists makes it difficult to holistically assess the student. Teachers expressed frustration over insufficient institutional support and noted that families do not make enough effort to connect teachers with specialists.

“The child has several specialists, but we don’t know who is applying which treatment or setting which goals. Families bring reports, but we rarely discuss the details.” (P4)

## 3.4. *Teachers’ Proposed Solutions*

### 3.4.1. *In-Service Training and Practical Workshops*

Participants suggested organizing regular in-service training seminars through collaboration with both internal and external institutions (e.g., universities, NGOs). They emphasized that practical applications, case-based studies, and workshop activities would make learning more permanent.

“We don’t just want PowerPoint presentations; we want case studies, role-playing techniques, or hands-on workshops. For example, we’d like to see practical demonstrations of how to intervene in a child’s aggressive behavior.” (P1)

### 3.4.2. *Mentorship and Collaboration Networks*

Another significant suggestion was establishing mentorship relationships between experienced special education teachers and newcomers. Additionally, participants advocated for creating professional networks or platforms to enhance inter-institutional sharing.

“Each teacher could be assigned a mentor. That way, we would know who to consult when facing challenges. Also, I’d like to see information sharing between institutions. This would increase the prevalence of effective practices.” (P7)

### 3.4.3. *Parent Training Seminars*

To involve families in the educational process, participants proposed organizing regular informational seminars and workshops. These sessions could focus on home-based activities suited to the child’s disability, behavior management tips, and communication techniques.

“We need to incorporate parent training into the system. For example, there could be a parent seminar once a month, where we demonstrate practical applications and assign them homework. Only then can it become holistic.” (P2)



#### 3.4.4. *Regular Meetings Among Specialists*

A coordinated work schedule among the student's doctor, therapist, psychologist, and teacher could facilitate close monitoring of the student's progress. Participants emphasized the necessity of institutional planning to achieve this.

"Children with severe intellectual disabilities especially need multiple specialists. If these specialists come together periodically to set common goals, progress would accelerate." (P9)

### 4. Discussion

In this section, discussions and evaluations based on the research findings are presented in connection with the literature. The challenges faced by branch teachers without special education pedagogical training when working with students with intellectual disabilities, as well as their proposed solutions, are compared with similar studies in the literature, leading to field-specific insights.

#### 4.1. *Lack of Pedagogical Training and Feeling of Professional Inadequacy*

Research findings indicate that teachers who graduated from fields other than special education and work with students with intellectual disabilities frequently experience feelings of inadequacy and openly express their need for specialized training in special education. As highlighted by Ataman (2017) and Kırcaali-İftar (2018), this is due to the fact that special education requires not only theoretical knowledge but also practical application and experience. Similarly, studies have shown that the limited "special education courses" offered in early childhood or elementary teacher education programs are insufficient for real classroom experiences (Batu, 2019; Özsoy et al., 2018).

At this point, the concepts of "teaching styles" and "individualized learning" developed by Dunn and Dunn (1993) should also be noted. The fact that each student has different learning styles is even more critical for students with intellectual disabilities. However, teachers without special education training face greater challenges in identifying these differences in practice and determining appropriate methods for them. This aligns with the research findings. Therefore, the lack of pedagogical training is not only a knowledge gap but also undermines teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy and professional motivation (Bandura, 1997).

#### 4.2. *Institutional Support and Lack of Communication*

The findings reveal that special education institutions fall short in areas such as in-service training, guidance, and mentorship, leaving teachers to manage on their own. This points to the absence of "school-based professional development" models. When an effective learning

community and peer support do not exist in the field of special education, teachers are left to acquire practical skills independently or learn from their mistakes (Kırcaali-İftar, 2018).

Coleman and Vaughn (2000) emphasize that successful practices in special education rely on the collaborative efforts of teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, and families working as a team. However, the current research findings indicate that institutions fail to meet teachers' needs due to both financial and organizational limitations. The lack of communication and experience-sharing among institutions also prevents the dissemination of effective practices, leading to repetitions described as “reinventing the wheel” (Patton, 2015).

#### *4.3. Lack of a Multidisciplinary Approach in Family and Specialist Collaboration*

The education of students with intellectual disabilities requires a multidisciplinary and even interdisciplinary approach. When professionals such as doctors, psychologists, speech therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, guidance counselors, and classroom/subject teachers collaborate, the goals for students can be determined more realistically and holistically (Özsoy et al., 2018). However, the research findings reveal that such coordination is highly limited, leaving teachers to manage an educational process where they often feel “on their own.”

The insufficient inclusion of expert opinions in the preparation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), weak family involvement, and challenges in carrying out assessment and evaluation processes aligning with findings in other studies (Batu, 2019). For instance, Gersten and Brengelman (1996) note that in environments where family-teacher collaboration is weak, delays in tracking the developmental milestones of students with intellectual disabilities occur, and instructional planning becomes unsustainable.

#### *4.4. Feasibility of Proposed Solutions*

The solutions proposed by teachers—such as increasing in-service training, implementing a mentorship system, organizing family seminars, and conducting coordination meetings among specialists—align with the “best practice examples” highlighted in the literature (Kırcaali-İftar, 2018; Özsoy et al., 2018). Structuring in-service training programs beyond one-way information-sharing seminars to include case studies, simulations, workshops, and professional sharing sessions can strengthen teachers' practical and applied skills. Additionally, methods such as “peer observation” and “co-teaching” allow novice teachers to accelerate their learning by observing experienced teachers' classrooms.

Mentorship programs, particularly for novice teachers, offer an effective approach to facilitating professional adaptation and addressing errors early in their careers (Ingersoll &

Strong, 2011). Leveraging the guidance of an experienced teacher or academic in special education can provide significant support for branch teachers new to the field. Creating inter-institutional “networks” or “online platforms” can address the communication gaps mentioned by participants, allowing effective practices, materials, and activities to be shared with a broader audience (Patton, 2015).

Family training and informational seminars are crucial for supporting students outside the school environment. Equipping families with accurate information about their child’s disability, teaching them about appropriate activities to implement at home, and encouraging communication with teachers can accelerate the student’s development (Gersten & Brengelman, 1996). Designing these seminars to be regular, structured, and inclusive to ensure participation from all families is a responsibility of institutions.

Finally, coordination meetings among specialists embody a multidisciplinary approach in practice. Regular meetings held in person or online among doctors, psychologists, therapists, teachers, and families enable comprehensive evaluations of a student’s progress and the establishment of shared goals. This coordinated approach ensures that interventions are not carried out in isolation but are consistent and informed by mutual communication. The feasibility of this approach depends on institutional planning and the willingness of the specialists involved to collaborate (Batu, 2019).

## **5. Conclusions**

This study examined the challenges faced by teachers working with students with intellectual disabilities who have received undergraduate education in fields other than special education, as well as the solutions they proposed to address these challenges. Based on the findings and discussions, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. **Lack of Pedagogical Training and Professional Inadequacy:** Teachers from different fields often feel inadequate in their practices due to the lack of comprehensive pedagogical training in special education.
2. **Lack of Institutional Support:** Limited in-service training, the absence of mentorship mechanisms, and poor communication between institutions negatively impact teachers’ professional development.
3. **Limited Family and Specialist Collaboration:** Although the roles of families and specialists (e.g., doctors, psychologists, therapists) are crucial in the education of students with intellectual disabilities, this collaboration is rarely carried out in a systematic manner.

The proposed solutions from teachers and best practices from the literature can be summarized as follows:

**Increasing In-Service Training:** Institutions should regularly organize hands-on, case-based in-service training seminars. Workshops on topics such as IEP preparation, behavior

management, communication skills, and alternative and augmentative communication methods should be conducted.

**Mentorship and Inter-Institutional Sharing:** A mentorship system should be established, pairing experienced special education teachers with novice branch teachers. Collaborative networks or platforms between institutions should be created to enhance sharing of resources and practices.

**Family Training and Awareness:** Families should be encouraged to participate in regular seminars and workshops, where simple yet effective educational and therapeutic methods applicable at home are demonstrated. Families should be motivated to take an active role in the process.

**Coordination Meetings Among Specialists:** Doctors, psychologists, physiotherapists, speech therapists, and teachers should hold periodic meetings to monitor the student's progress and set common goals collaboratively.

## **6. Recommendations**

### *1. Regular Meetings Among Specialists*

1. Comprehensive “Special Education Practices” courses should be included in the curricula of elementary and subject teacher education programs at faculties of education, with increased opportunities for practice (internships).

2. Collaboration projects between special education and subject teacher education departments at universities should be encouraged, with joint courses or workshops organized.

### *2. Institutional-Level Suggestions*

1. Special education institutions should design year-long in-service training programs differentiated by levels (e.g., for beginners or experienced teachers).

2. Under mentorship programs, additional responsibilities and incentives should be provided to experienced special education teachers to accelerate the adaptation process of newly hired subject teachers.

3. Continuous information and training activities for families should be organized within a structured institutional plan.

### *3. Recommendations for Stakeholders*

1. The Ministry of National Education or related institutions could develop mandatory certification programs or continuous professional development modules for subject teachers working in special education institutions.

2. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and universities could strengthen inter-institutional communication and experience sharing by organizing “sharing conferences,” “practice fairs,” or “professional development days” in the field of special education.

#### 4. Recommendations for Future Research

1. Similar studies can be conducted in institutions across different regions to examine the impact of regional conditions on teachers' experiences.
2. Mixed-method studies could be conducted to evaluate teachers' quantitative levels of self-efficacy, burnout, and motivation in conjunction with qualitative findings.
3. Research offering a multidimensional perspective (e.g., embedded multiple case studies) could be conducted with the participation of families, specialists, and administrators

#### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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