IEP Team Members' Experiences on the Process of Preparing Individualized Education Program in A Secondary School*

Bir Ortaokuldaki Bireyselleştirilmiş Eğitim Programı (BEP) Hazırlama Sürecine İlişkin Ekip Üyelerinin Deneyimleri

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ABSTRACT: Phenomenological design was used in this research to determine the experiences, opinions and suggestions of the stakeholders in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) development team during the IEP preparation process. Nine parents 20 teachers and a school administrator who were in the IEP team and took part in the IEP preparation process participated in the research. Researcher diary, demographic data form, observation and semi-structured interviews were used in accordance with the principle of data triangulation while collecting data from the participants. The data were analyzed with the QSR Nvivo 11 package program. As a result of the research, it was concluded that parents should be involved in the IEP development process, but this would be possible depending on some preconditions, and one of these preconditions was family education. It has been observed that the stakeholders in the team have developed a communication system based on information sharing. It was observed that the stakeholders had difficulties in the IEP preparation process due to reasons such as insufficient training on the process, insufficient knowledge about the process and laws, and inexperience. According to another result of the research, it was stated that it would not be appropriate for individuals with special needs to take part in the IEP preparation process, but they could be included in the process if certain conditions were met. In addition, as a result of the research, various suggestions were presented on deep research and applications for the IEP development process.

Keywords: Special education, individualized education program (IEP), IEP team, IEP preparing process.

ÖZ: Bireyselleştirilmiş Eğitim Programı (BEP) geliştirme biriminde yer alan paydaşların BEP hazırlama sürecindeki deneyim, görüş ve önerilerini belirlemek amacıyla gerçekleştirilen bu araştırmada fenomenolojik desen kullanılmıştır. Araştırmaya katılımcı olarak BEP ekibinde bulunan ve BEP hazırlama sürecinde yer alan dokuz aile, 20 öğretmen ve bir okul yöneticisi dahil edilmiştir. Katılımcılardan veri elde edilirken veri çeşitlemesi ilkesine uyularak araştırmacı günlüğü, demografik veri formu, gözlem ve yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelerden yararlanılmıştır. Veriler analiz edilirken QSR Nvivo 11 paket programından yararlanılmıştır. Araştırma bulgularına göre ailelerin BEP geliştirme sürecinde yer alması gerektiği, ancak bazı ön koşullara bağlı olarak bunun mümkün olacağı, bu ön koşullardan birinin de aile eğitimleri olduğu sonucu ortaya çıkmıştır. Ekipte yer alan paydaşların daha çok bilgi paylaşımı odağında bir iletişim sistemi geliştirdiği görülmüştür. BEP hazırlama sürecinde paydaşların; sürece ilişkin geçmiş eğitimlerinin yetersiz olması, süreç ve yasalar anlamında yetersiz bilgiye sahip olması ve deneyimsiz olması gibi nedenlerden dolayı zorluk yaşadıkları görülmüştür. Araştırmadaki bir diğer sonuca göre özel gereksinimli bireylerin de BEP hazırlama sürecinde yer almasının uygun olmayacağı, ancak bazı koşullar yerine getirilirse sürece dahil edilebilecekleri ifade edilmiştir. Ayrıca araştırmada katılımcılardan elde edilen bulgulardan yola çıkılarak BEP geliştirme sürecine yönelik ileri araştırmalar ve uygulamalar konusunda çeşitli önerilerde bulunulmuştur.

Anahtar kelimeler: Özel eğitim, bireyselleştirilmiş eğitim programı (BEP), BEP geliştirme ekibi, BEP hazırlama süreci.

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Individualized Education Programs (IEP) is a written document prepared to meet the needs of individuals with special needs such as self-care, communication, academic and social skills, and to ensure that the individual benefits from the best possible educational environments and supports for the individual. As a document, IEP contains the content of the goals determined for the individual with special needs, by whom, in which environments, for how long and with which methods, techniques, strategies and materials the services to be provided will be provided. The process of IEP planning requires a team to work in cooperation. In this cooperation process, the parents or official institution responsible for the care of the individual with special needs, the teachers working in the institution or institutions where the individual receives education, and the field experts who should be involved in the IEP process should take part. However, in this cooperation process, the IEP prepared for the individual should be approved by the parents before it is put into practice (Felix & Tymeson, 2016; Kargın, 2007; Salend, 2007; Vuran, 2006).

The IEP development process plays a key role for the individual with special needs to reach the same level as his/her typically developing peers both in social life and in education and training. Providing the most appropriate education and support services for the individual will only be possible through a functional IEP development, implementation, and evaluation process. Due to this importance in the individual's life, it is imperative to prepare an IEP in accordance with the needs and priorities of the individual immediately after the educational diagnosis and placement in the appropriate educational environment. Preparing an IEP is a process with certain stages. When we look at the stages of the IEP preparation process; (a) forming a team to prepare an IEP, (b) evaluating the individual with special needs and determining the level of functioning, (c) determining the support services and the environments where these services will be provided, (d) determining the appropriate individualized curriculum for the individual, (e) implementing, monitoring, evaluating and making changes in the IEP when necessary, and distributing the duties and responsibilities related to all these processes to the necessary people (Bateman & Linden, 1998; Felix & Tymeson, 2016; Vuran, 2006). IEP development process is of key importance for the individual with special needs and his/her parents. However, it is legally obligatory to prepare an IEP for a student with special needs who is placed in the educational environment not only because of ethical requirements but also because of legal obligations.

Today, IEP has legal foundations both in Turkey and in many other countries. However, IEP is based on the law numbered PL. 94-142, which first came into force in the United States of America (USA). For the first time, the preparation of an IEP became mandatory with this law (CEC, 1999; Özyürek, 2010; Zirkel, 2016; Zirkel & Hetrick, 2017). For the first time in Türkiye, the preparation of an IEP was made compulsory with the Decree Law on Special Education (Decree Law No. 573) published in 1997. In subparagraph f of Article 4 of this decree, it was emphasized that IEPs should be prepared for individuals with special needs and that these programs should be individualized and implemented. However, although the preparation of IEP was made compulsory in this decree, detailed information on how to prepare it and what the definition of IEP is was not included. However, IEP is defined in more detail in the Regulation on Special Education Services, which was first published in the Official Gazette by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in 2006 and lastly re-published

and updated in 2022. According to this regulation, IEP is defined as "a special education program that is prepared within the framework of the developmental characteristics, educational performance and educational needs of the individual with special needs and also includes other support services for the individual with special needs". The regulation also mentions the components that an appropriate IEP should include. Accordingly, the IEP should include; (a) long and short-term goals to be achieved annually, (b) by whom and how supportive education services will be provided, (c) the duration, type and frequency of these supportive education services, (d) which tools and materials will be used for assessment and teaching, which methods and techniques will be used, (e) the organization of the educational environment, (f) measures to be taken to prevent problem behaviors, and (g) information about the individual with special needs (MoNE, 2022). When the relevant article of the regulation is analyzed, it is possible to say that for the first time a detailed framework has been officially established regarding the content of the IEP.

According to the Regulation on Special Education Services published by the Ministry of National Education (2022), the IEP should be prepared by the special education evaluation board and the IEP development unit in cooperation. The IEP should also be implemented and evaluated by the team. Before starting the IEP preparation process, the IEP team should focus on the needs and strengths of the student diagnosed with special needs. After the characteristics, needs and strengths of the student are determined, the IEP preparation process should be initiated in collaboration with the team. After determining the special needs of the individual, that is, after receiving an educational diagnosis and placement in the appropriate environment, the team members who will decide on the IEP preparation, implementation and evaluation processes should be determined immediately and an appropriate team environment should be created. The responsibility for the fulfillment of this task lies with the school administration. When forming the IEP team, the school administration should first consider the priority needs of the individual with special needs (Bambara & Kern, 2005; Friend & Cook, 1992). The IEP focuses on the needs and strengths of the student with special needs and their progress is recorded. In this process, the main purpose of the team in preparing the IEP is to eliminate the individual needs of the student with special needs and to ensure that he/she gets the highest efficiency from the educational processes (MoNE, 2022). Legal obligations in our country require a team approach in IEP preparation, implementation, and evaluation processes. Both the educational and other support needs of the individual in the fields of social, emotional, etc. should be met with this approach (Batu, 2006; Friend & Cook, 1992). Information on the composition of the team is also included in the Special Education Services Regulation (2022). According to the regulation, the school principal or a vice principal assigned by the principal forms the IEP team and chairs it. The team should include the teacher who is responsible for preparing an IEP for the individual with special needs (usually the classroom teacher or special education teacher of the individual), the classroom teacher of the individual, the branch teachers who teach the lessons, the psychological counselor (guidance counselor), the special education teacher (if not present at the school, a teacher who provides special education services by traveling), the parents of the individual with special needs or the person or institution responsible for his/her care, and of course, finally, the student for whom the IEP is prepared (MoNE, 2022).

Literature Review

The IEP team has some important goals for the individual and his/her parents. One of these is to develop an education program for the individual and to determine and implement other support services required in this process (Batu, 2006). In this context, the focus of the IEP team is always on the individual and his/her parents. The team makes plans for the areas that the individual needs by focusing on the areas and strengths of the individual (Bateman & Linden, 1998). However, the experiences and expectations of teachers, families and other stakeholders involved in IEP preparation, implementation and evaluation processes that require teamwork may differ from each other (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). Initiating and maintaining the IEP process in cooperation with stakeholders who bring all these different experiences and expectations to the team is extremely necessary to provide the most appropriate educational processes and support services to the individual with special needs (Murray, 2000; Winterman & Rosas, 2014). For the process to be carried out in cooperation, it is also necessary to share responsibilities, suggestions, and all kinds of opinions among the stakeholders in the team, to support equal contribution between stakeholders and to develop positive relationships. It is also important to facilitate the participation of team members in decision-making processes (Bambara & Kern, 2005).

When the literature was examined, it was found that the experiences of parents of individuals with special needs regarding IEP meetings were examined (Fish, 2008; Kirksey et al., 2022; Macleod et al., 2017; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2010), parent-expert cooperation in the IEP development process was discussed (Broomhead, 2013; Mereoiu, et al. 2016; Murray, 2000; O'Connor, 2008), studies on the role of stakeholders in the IEP team in the IEP development process (Eratay et al., 2012; Gilliam & Coleman, 1981), and a study examining how the process works in IEP meetings attended by students with special needs (Royer, 2017). In addition, school administrators and classroom teachers (Çuhadar, 2006), Guidance Research Center (GRC) staff and special education teachers (Avcıoğlu, 2011; Öztürk & Eratay, 2010; Bafra Tike & Kargın, 2009), the difficulties faced by school administrators regarding the IEP development process and their suggestions for solutions (Yaman, 2017; Yılmaz, 2013), and the experiences and difficulties experienced by teachers (Akcin, 2022; Kozikoğlu & Albayrak, 2022). However, when the literature was examined, no study was found in which the experiences and opinions of all stakeholders of the IEP team, which directly affect the education and social life of individuals with special needs, regarding the IEP preparation process were determined. Therefore, from this point of view, this study is needed to reveal the experiences and opinions of all stakeholders in the IEP development team regarding the IEP preparation process with a holistic understanding. In addition, it is seen that each of the team members has unique experiences regarding the difficulties experienced in the IEP preparation process of individuals with special needs. The fact that the findings to be obtained from the study in which these difficulties are taken from a holistic perspective will play a key role in the formation of IEP teams and the operation of IEP preparation processes constitutes the need for this study.

It is thought that the findings of this study may shed light on how the IEP development process should be in order to increase the participation of individuals with special needs in independent life. Considering the various needs of students with special needs both in the school environment and in their social lives, it is hoped that this study

will provide a new perspective to all stakeholders who will take part in the IEP team in terms of understanding the experiences of stakeholders in the IEP preparation process carried out with a team approach and putting them into practice at the end of this interpretation process. In addition, it is thought that the experiences of the families in the study can be a guide for the families who will be included in the IEP team for the first time. In addition, considering the positive effect of the IEP prepared for the student with special needs in the process of the individual's inclusion in independent life, it is thought that the findings of the study can be used for the benefit of the society. On the other hand, it is hoped that the results of the study will provide important contributions to the experts who are in the process of forming an IEP team for the first time in terms of creating and guiding ideas. Finally, since there is no study in the national literature that examines the experiences of all stakeholders involved in the IEP team in depth, it is thought that this study may contribute to further research on this subject.

The aim of this study is to reveal the experiences of the stakeholders in the IEP team formed in a middle school regarding the IEP preparation process in an in-depth manner. In line with the research aim, the following questions were sought to be answered:

1. What are the experiences of family members of individuals with special needs regarding the IEP preparation process?

2. What are the experiences of branch teachers who teach the lessons of individuals with special needs regarding the IEP preparation process?

3. What are the experiences of special education teachers regarding the IEP preparation process?

4. What are the experiences of school counselors (psychological counselors) regarding the IEP preparation process?

5. What are the experiences of the IEP team leader regarding the IEP preparation process?

Method

In this study, which was conducted to determine the experiences of all stakeholders in the IEP team regarding the IEP preparation process, phenomenological design, one of the qualitative research approach designs, was used to reveal the experiences of the participants with an in-depth perspective (Creswell, 2016). In the phenomenological design, the researcher understands and explores the life experiences of the participants with an in-depth look (Gay et al., 2012; Merriam, 2009; Smith et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2015).

Participants

In this study, criterion sampling technique, one of the purposeful sampling types, was used. In the criterion sampling technique, since the number of individuals who have experienced the studied phenomenon may be high, some criteria are determined and, in this way, it is easier to select participants for the study (Saban & Ersoy, 2016). While selecting participants for this study, the criteria determined by the researcher considering the research purpose are as follows:

- Being a middle school with an IEP team.

- Completion of at least one IEP meeting by the IEP team at the school.

- An IEP was prepared by the team for the individual with special needs.

- Families of individuals with special needs are also involved in IEP meetings as a stakeholder.

In the study, nine parents, 16 branch teachers, two guidance counselors (school psychological counselor), two special education teachers, and one school administrator, whose detailed demographic information is given in Table 1 and Table 2 and who met the criteria for participating, were included as participants.

Table 1

Demographic Information about the Families Participating in the Study

No	Pseudonym	Age	Number of Children	Educational Status	Monthly Income	Job
01	Emel	38	2	Elementary school	1000-1500 TL	Not working
02	Müjgan	48	3	Elementary school	1000-1500 TL	Not working
03	Gülşah	41	4	High School	500 TL	Not working
04	Kadriye	28	3	Elementary school	1500-200 TL	Not working
05	Mine	46	5	Elementary school	500 TL	Not working
06	Nuri	48	3	Elementary school	1000-1500 TL	Not working
07	Büşra	41	4	Elementary school	500 TL	Not working
08	Sude	47	3	Elementary school	500 TL	Not working
09	Sıla	43	3	Elementary school	1000-1500 TL	Not working

Table 2

Demographic Information about the School Personnel Participating in the Study

No	Pseudonym	Age	Experience (Years)	Branch
01	Turan	38	5-10	Math
02	Meliha	33	5-10	Music
03	Rafet	46	12	Physical education
04	Melis	37	14	Science

Table 2 (Cont.)

Demographic Information about the School Personnel Participating in the Study

No	Pseudonym	Age	Experience (Years)	Branch
05	Züleyha	36	13	Social studies
06	Seray	34	5-10	Science
07	Furkan	30	5-10	Physical education
08	Esen	32	5-10	Math
09	Cem	32	5-10	Turkish language
10	Suna	30	5-10	Information Technologies
11	Ferhat	38	14	Religious culture and ethics
12	Asuman	33	5-10	English language
13	Şeyma	29	5-10	Turkish language
14	Remzi	36	16	Social studies
15	Serhat	33	5-10	Turkish language
16	Özlem	30	5-10	Math
17	Figen	50	14	Counseling and gudance
18	Selen	26	1-5	Counseling and gudance
19	Mahir	42	12	Special education
20	Demet	30	5-10	Special education
21	Mehmet	32	1 (as a principal)	School principal

Data Collection, Coding and Analysis

Within the scope of the study, demographic information form, researcher's diary kept by the researcher, observations made by the researcher, and semi-structured interviews with the stakeholders in the IEP team were used as data collection tools to obtain data on their experiences in the IEP preparation process. While a qualitative researcher conducting qualitative research strives to obtain in-depth data on the views and opinions of the participants regarding their experiences through interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Gay et al., 2012), he starts the interview with the interview questions he has prepared through semi-structured interviews and elaborates the questions depending on the content of the interview (Gay et al., 2012).

Based on this purpose, interview questions were prepared by the researcher for each stakeholder in the team in line with the literature and research questions. The semi-structured interview questionnaires prepared by the researchers were sent to five experts who have conducted qualitative research and studies on the IEP preparation process. The experts were selected from faculty members working in various universities with doctoral degrees in special education and education of the mentally disabled. The interview questions were finalized by taking into account the feedback from each expert. After this process, 17 questions were prepared for subject teachers, 11 questions for parents and 14 open-ended questions for school administrators.

During the data collection phase, a total of seven observations were carried out over one month, coinciding with the interview sessions. The observations aimed to understand the interaction and communication processes among the stakeholders in the IEP team and to ensure data triangulation. Observation data and the researcher's diary were used as secondary data to support the interview data.

In order to obtain data from the participants in the study, families of students with special needs attending a secondary school affiliated to the Ministry of National Education in Eskişehir, teachers, school counselors (psychological counselors) working in the guidance service and a school administrator were selected as participants and semi-structured interviews were conducted with these participants, a researcher diary was used and observations were made.

The interviews with the teachers were conducted in the school library. The school library was chosen as the data collection environment with the recommendation of the school administration because it provides a quiet environment that allows the interviews to be conducted and has tables and chairs where the participants can sit comfortably. Choosing this environment also made it easier for the participants not to be disturbed by anyone from the outside during the interviews. However, despite this situation, the door was closed during the interviews in case the interviews were interrupted and a sign "There is an interview, please do not disturb" was hung on the outside of the door with the permission of the school administration. The interviews with the families were conducted in the meeting room on the ground floor of the middle school building. This room was named "knitting room" by the families. In the meeting room, families of individuals with special needs knit and have daily conversations with each other. On the days and hours when the meeting room was not suitable, in cases where some of the families were not available to come to the school, appointments were made with the participants and the interviews were held at the participants' homes on

the days and hours determined. Since the school administrator stated that he was very busy, the office of the second researcher was used for the interview with the school administrator.

The observations made to understand and make sense of the interaction and communication processes between the stakeholders in the IEP team were conducted simultaneously during the time interval when the interviews were conducted. Each of the five observations conducted by the first researcher lasted approximately 40 minutes, providing valuable insights into the interaction and communication processes among the stakeholders. The observations were conducted in the teachers' room. Observation data were reflected in the researcher's diary and in the reporting of the findings.

The data obtained in this study were analyzed through inductive analysis. In this analysis technique, the researcher aims to reach concepts and relationships to explain the data collected. As a result of the analysis, it is extremely important for the researcher to consider the literature on the relevant subject (Merriam, 1998).

In this study, the steps stated in the literature were taken into consideration in the process of analyzing the data. The steps followed by the researchers in the data analysis process can be briefly summarized as follows:

- Written transcription of the data obtained by the first researcher

- Listening to and verifying 30% of the transcripts by an expert who has at least a master's degree and has worked in one of the qualitative research methods

- Transferring the transcripts to the Nvivo package program by the first researcher

- Preparation of data for analysis by the researchers

- Coding of data

- Ensuring inter-coder reliability by coding 30% of the data by an expert who has worked in one of the qualitative research methods

- Reaching themes and sub-themes by the researchers

- Presentation of the findings obtained by the researchers under the themes.

Credibility

In this study, the participants of the research were selected through purposive sampling method, and the interview principles and the principle of data triangulation were followed while conducting interviews with the participants. While utilizing the data in the reporting process, the researchers included positive and negative examples in the data set. The data obtained were described in detail. All data obtained during the research process were backed up by the researchers. In addition, the researchers used representative data from the data source while writing the findings in the reporting process.

Although reliability is an expression generally used in quantitative studies, it is also an issue that should be emphasized in qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). After the themes were reached by the researchers, the data were given to an expert who has worked in at least one of the qualitative research methods in the field of special education in order to ensure inter-coder reliability, and this expert reached some themes by making his own coding. Afterwards, the expert and the researchers came together again and the inter-coder reliability agreement percentage was calculated. This

percentage was determined using the formula "Agreement/(disagreement + agreement) X 100" (Creswell, 2016). Although the inter-coder reliability was determined as 90% before the reconciliation, the inter-coder reliability was determined as 100% after the reconciliation.

Ethical Procedures

This research was conducted in accordance with ethical rules after obtaining the Ethics Committee Approval dated 31.01.2018 and numbered 2739 Protocol No. 2739 by applying to the Anadolu University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee. The purpose of the research was explained by conducting a preliminary interview with the participants, verbal permission was obtained and the principle of voluntariness was followed. After verbal permission was obtained from the participants, they were included in the research process by obtaining their wet signatures through the voluntary participation form. In case they did not want to participate in the interview, the researcher explained to them in a clear and understandable language that they could not participate from the beginning of the study if they wished, or that they could leave the study at any point of the study if they wished. The voluntary participation form included the responsibilities and rights of the participants. Participants' questions about the research were answered openly and honestly by the researchers. Participants were given code names in the reporting part. The findings obtained at the end of the research were then shared with the participants and participant confirmations were obtained.

Findings

In this section, the themes obtained as a result of observations and semi-structured interviews with parents, teachers and school administrators who participated in the study are presented.

Table 3

Themes

No	Themes
01	Family Participation
02	IEP Preparation Process
03	Being IEP Team
04	Students With Special Needs

Family Participation

The school administrators and teachers who participated in the study expressed various opinions about parent involvement in the IEP preparation process. For example, Mr. Cem, a Turkish teacher, stated that parents should be given the right to have a say in the IEP preparation process when setting goals for students with special needs and planning for the future as follows

...I don't know, we are setting goals for these children and parents should have something to say. I think this is their most natural right. For example, I don't know what my child will be in the future or I don't know, I want my child to be like this, we have to listen to them.

Mrs. Melis, a science teacher, stated that all stakeholders should make more effort than usual in the IEP preparation process and that she believed that parents participation was important in the process, but that mothers were more prominent than fathers as follows

First of all, the family knows the child best. The mother knows the child, more precisely, the mother knows the child, not the parents. She can tell us better about her child, how to behave and what to do. That's why it's the family's opinion. Of course, let's not deny the fathers here, they also have ideas and things, but it is better for us if the mother and father always come to us with a common opinion. Because how the child is, how he/she grows up, what needs to be done, did he/she have an illness as a child, did other things happen? You know, what is the reason for this mild level? Was it like this from the beginning?.... I mean for those who have IEPs afterwards. We get information about these from the family. Anyway, for a normal student, the school, parents and teachers all have to work together, but for a student with IEP, we have to work together twice as much, so I believe in the importance of the family. When the family is involved, they feel better, they get along better with us anyway, there is no problem, but I mean, of course, it gets better.

Mrs. Esen stated that teachers took a more active role in the IEP preparation process than the families, and that parents unconditionally approved, "...as I said, they don't say much, they approve more, they say okay, they ask how are the lessons?" When Mrs. Emel was asked why the families behave in this way, she said, "they don't have any information, they don't know their children, so they accept what is put in front of them. That's why they mostly ask how are their classes? How are their exams?".

Mrs. Meliha stated that parents have not yet fully accepted the special needs of their children, therefore they cannot look at the process with a professional approach as much as teachers, instead they approach the process more emotionally, which has a negative impact on cooperation and communication as follows

I think teachers look at it more realistically. The family, of course, looks at it a little more emotionally, inevitably, so sometimes we can get into a conflict with the parents. That's why they can misunderstand what the teacher says. Or sometimes the family may not approach cooperation because of this. I think the problem will continue unless the family accepts it.

Mrs. Emel (mother) stated that they took part in the IEP preparation process for the first time and that they were very pleased with the interest of the school administration in this process as follows

We participated for the first time this year. I don't want to lie, I didn't know what an IEP was, although I still don't know exactly, but at least I know what it does, why it is applied to my child. God bless my teacher Mehmet. Thanks to him, he took care of everything. We can reach him whenever we call, of course we don't call him all the time, but we call him when it is convenient. He also took care of us during the meetings.

Mrs. Kadriye (mother) emphasized parents involvement in the entire IEP preparation process with the following words:

Where were they until now? Shouldn't this process have been prepared for my child before? I think this process is too late. Okay, I am a high school graduate, I am not very knowledgeable about these issues, I also have mistakes, I should have researched more, but at least the school knows these things. If it wasn't for Mehmet teacher, we wouldn't be in the process. Forget us, I think they wouldn't have been in the process either, because in the past, we were only asked for signatures, we didn't know the rest, so we didn't participate. So, I made this child, don't we have any rights as parents? I want good things for my child, so I should be involved. This

process will definitely not work without me. Either the father or me, at least one of us should be involved. I think our opinion should be taken.

Mr. Nuri (father) stated that he was involved in the IEP preparation process with the initiatives of the school administrator and that he was, in his own words, "taken for granted for the first time"

> Hodja, I am a primary school graduate, I am a worker, I am ignorant, in short, but I am worried about the future of my child. These things do not change my thinking. Sometimes they say, "Parents are so ignorant. They don't know anything" and so on. Okay, then teach me, brother, what is your job? You will do what you want with my child and you will not ask me. Can such a thing happen? Of course not. I was taken for granted for the first time this year, teacher. My teacher Mehmet called me and said, "We need to do such and such a process with your child. We have to do it." I was very happy, I said, "OK, hodja, you can do as you wish. I am all for this process. I am for the sake of my child, teacher.". I participated in this process so that my child can get somewhere in the future. Thanks to my teacher Mehmet, he informed us. We informed the teachers about our child as much as we could. They constantly asked us about our wishes. No more or less, but our requests were asked. Apart from that, they should actually always teach us how this process is, and they do, thanks to them.

Mrs. Emel expressed her cooperation in the IEP preparation process and her communication with other stakeholders in the team as follows

> As for communication, as I said, we have no problems with our teachers. We can call and ask questions whenever we want. Especially with my teacher Mehmet, he is always at school whenever we want, we can meet with him as long as he is not too busy. Our guidance counselors are the same way, they never break us when we want to meet, thanks to them.

Unlike Mrs. Emel, Mrs. Kadriye stated that there was no cooperation between herself and the team, and that there was only a unilateral decision-making process as follows

> Yes, everything is good, but no one tells us exactly what we need to do in this process. More precisely, if he says, "These are the characteristics of your child," I will act accordingly. He tells me, "We have made this decision." I say, "OK." Okay, but this is not cooperation. I think this is unilateral decision-making.

IEP Preparation process

The teachers who participated in the study expressed their experiences about what kind of resources they utilized while preparing IEPs. Mr. Cem expressed what kind of resources he used in the IEP preparation process with the following words,

> Honestly, I benefited more from the internet, and I benefited from our assistant principal at work. ...We did not receive any training on how to prepare an IEP before, so I benefited more from the internet...

Ms. Meliha stated that she mostly used rough evaluation forms, the internet and the guidance service in the IEP preparation process,

> There are rough assessment forms that we have done before. We look at the child's competencies and try to prepare a plan accordingly. For example, if the child has speech difficulties, if the child has trouble speaking at work, we cannot expect the child to recite 10 stanzas of the National Anthem by heart at the end of the year. Accordingly, we adjust our expectations accordingly by paying attention to distant and near goals." "...the internet, the resources available to our guidance counselors. I don't think there is anywhere else we can benefit from.

Ms. Seray expressed that she felt inadequate in the IEP preparation process and that she experienced some difficulties due to this, "...I mean, as I said, we were inexperienced at first because it was the first time, we did not know the process

completely, I can say that this was the common difficulty we all had, but I think things will get better gradually.". Mr. Rafet attributed some of the difficulties he faced in the IEP preparation process to his inability to fully predict the behaviors of students with special needs and said,

> ...for example, I learn all the habits of these children in the fifth and sixth grades. In the seventh and eighth grades, I don't interfere. Because I know what the child has. But you don't know these children. Very different things happen. They do things you don't expect.

Mr. Cem expressed the training he had received before regarding the IEP preparation process as follows

> I mean, before I came, if I don't remember wrongly, in my student years, it was either 2nd or 3rd grade, we took a course, it was about children, but how to prepare an IEP? Even what is IEP? We didn't even learn that I learned the definition of IEP later (laughed)", "I mean, we only learned the superficial characteristics of these children in the course.

Mr. Rafet stated that all teachers in the IEP team should be provided with various trainings on IEP preparation through experts working in the field of special education,

> I will make a self-criticism now. Some of us know what IEP is only superficially, let me say most of us. This is where the real problem starts. We are swimming in a sea we don't know, and then we drown. We get overwhelmed. For this not to happen, okay, we have not been trained in the past, but it is not too late. Am I right? We are constantly taking seminars, etc. Let's not let these be idle, someone should come and tell us about these things so that we can learn...

Ms. Emel expressed that she saw her lack of knowledge as the source of the difficulties she experienced in the IEP preparation process in the following words:

> I mean, what is IEP? Thanks to my teacher Mehmet, he gave us a training like a lesson before these processes started, he taught us what to do, he relieved us a little bit, but since our teachers mostly did the IEP preparation part, there was not much, there was no problem, but in general, of course, I personally had difficulties in the process.

Ms. Kadriye, on the other hand, put her inability to be involved in the process as much as she would like at the root of the difficulties she experienced and stated the following

> I don't know what the IEP is. I attended meetings, I don't know much about what it is. I couldn't attend Mehmet teacher's training. Other than that, I come to school all the time, but if I need something, I can do it. But I can't prepare an IEP, I was never involved in that process, so I didn't have any difficulty. Our teachers prepared it and I just signed it.

Being IEP Team

Ms. Esen expressed her communication especially with guidance counselors among the stakeholders in the team with the following words, "We also have guidance counselors, I can't meet with them much. At first, they said, "Do the IEP like this". We were very confused, then Mehmet Hoca said something else and we relaxed and we did it more easily.". In the following part of her speech, Ms. Emel stated that her communication style with other stakeholders, teachers and vice principals, was more positive than that of guidance counselors

> ... I mean, we meet with the teachers in the class on the phone and at meetings in the teachers' room. Apart from that, we mostly meet with other branch teachers in the teachers' room. I don't know, we can meet with Mehmet teacher whenever we want. There is also a whatsapp group, so we can talk there even if there are more announcements. That's it.

Mr. Furkan expressed his experience of using WhatsApp, a phone application, as a means of communication with the IEP team as follows

> You know, while I was sleeping at home at 10 pm, while I was playing with my family and my own child, a message comes. It says here is the guidance counselor: "Friends, let's gather tomorrow on this and that topic." I think it is useful both as a reminder and when it is used for its intended purpose. Because my world is not only here or that child with IEP. Sometimes after working hours, okay, we have 300 children in our heads, but when you are living your own life, after a certain time, there are subjects that you forget or skip. I think it is useful.

Ms. Züleyha expressed her experiences regarding the responsibilities of team members in the IEP preparation process with the following words

> As I said in IEP meetings, there is always the official side, the paper side, the paper side. You know, they talk and talk and talk and talk, and it comes to this: "Okay, which things are we going to fill in, which things are we going to write down? Where are we going to sign? What are we going to do?" It always comes down to the official signature part. What should we do for the child? Where should it be placed in the classroom? I mean, if there are 10 of us, two or three or five or numerically less. Not everyone can do it. They don't want to be so interested or they think, "There are 30 people in the class, I can't deal with him alone". You know, if you don't allocate 40 out of 40 minutes to him, it's not possible anyway. So the way things work for us is like this: the classroom teacher has the most work. If you have a student with IEP in your class, you prepare a thick file for him/her. You fill it in. After the class teacher fills it out, the other classmates prepare a two-page thing as a task. Of course, none of us know who is doing what during the lesson when we do this in the official dimension. We don't know what each other is doing.

The branch teachers in the IEP development team were asked whether they had been involved in a process similar to the IEP preparation process before, and if so, they were asked to compare it with the current IEP preparation process. Mr. Cem stated that he had no previous experience with these processes, "No, only on paper, of course, I don't count that." Ms. Esen stated that it was her first time in such a process with the following experience:

> I mean, the team was formed every year, but not like this. There had never been a meeting before, for example, I don't know, it was the first time.". Ms. Meliha expressed her similar experiences with Ms. Emel with the following words: "Of course, I was in the IEP team before, but we did not do anything as branch teachers in the team. This year was different. This year we had a meeting once. Then we wrote the IEP, but we did it in a logical way.

When the researcher asked a question about the type of communication in the IEP team, Ms. Züleyha made the following statements about the type of communication within the team

> For this year, we already know the characteristics of the child before we enter the class. Whether it is our guidance teacher or us, we ask in which area the child needs support. I mean, our communication is usually in the teachers' room, for chatting. So when we leave the class, if you left the class of the child with the IEP and something happened in that class, we talk about it. But if nothing happened in that lesson, it is never mentioned... Sometimes we talk to find a solution. If there is a problem with that child in that class, it is talked about during the break. If there is someone who was there, we can direct each other in that way, "Oh, look, I did this, it happened like this, it happened like that". So we don't have any extra communication.

In parallel with the experiences of the teachers regarding the communication in the IEP team, the following statement was included in the observation notes of the researcher:

> Mr. Turan, Ms. Özlem and Ms. Emel, who are mathematics teachers at the school, exchanged ideas about which objectives and how they worked on the mathematics course during breaks (Observation No: 1, 01.03.2018).

When Mrs. Emel was asked who she would like to be in the team, she first stated that psychiatrists should be included in the team and continued, "I would like to know who is in the team, there is our vice principal, and there are teachers who teach, there are no others. Other than that, if you say, "Who should be in the team? I think there should be doctors in the team, there should be psychiatrists.".

Ms. Sude expressed that she considered families as the constant stakeholders of the team with the following words, "Naturally, who else will there be? The vice-principal, there were other classroom teachers, there were other parents in our meetings, I think they were also included, of course, everyone's own child is involved, but everyone's own child is involved."

When the participants were asked about the legal responsibilities of the team, Ms. Emel expressed the legal obligations of the team and what they should actually be with the following words:

> What legal duties does the team have? I don't know exactly, but for one thing, these meetings are mandatory, we understood that, I think this is in the law, so they did it. Apart from that, these prepared plans are mandatory, but I wish that the Provincial National Education would also follow up on the education of the children, it shouldn't just be on paper.

When parents were asked about their previous IEP team experiences, they said that they were mostly involved to sign and fulfill procedures.

When asked about communication in the IEP development team, parents stated that there was a positive communication climate. Ms. Sıla expressed that communication in the team was positive with the following words:

> We already talk at meetings, I mean, apart from that, the vice principal and teachers have numbers. When we ask for an appointment, they immediately say "OK". Also, when we come to school when we want, I don't know, we talk at parent-teacher conferences, during breaks, and so on. When we ask questions, they answer. We don't bother them as much as we can anyway.

Mr. Nuri emphasized especially the communication of the vice principal and said the following

> Our teacher Mehmet was always interested, he gave me his number and said, "Look, you may have questions, we are all human beings. Always call, ask questions, let's meet at the school during working hours". This is important for me because it means that the vice principal and teachers care about me. They care about my child. This of course makes us happy. We say, let's do whatever we can together.

In addition to what the families said about the school administrator, the researcher included the following statements in her diary in line with the researcher's observations:

> In the light of my observations and interviews with stakeholders, the role of the vice principal among the stakeholders in the IEP team is both facilitative and supportive. However, it seems that the positive support of the vice-principal has yielded the most results on the families and that there is a concrete effect. I think one reason for this is that the current process requires special education knowledge, and the vice principal is a special education teacher. This situation made me wonder if similar positive situations would arise in other schools if special education teachers were the leaders in the process (Researcher diary, 16.03.2018, p. 41).

Student With Special Needs

Mr. Cem expressed the process of obtaining information about the student with special needs as follows, "Regarding these children, we actually learned something called a rough assessment form this year, and we applied it. That's how we got information about the child, or I don't know, we got information from the family. Apart from that, let me say that we did not receive any information from special education teachers or guidance counselors".

Mr. Ferhat stated that he obtained information about the students from the rough evaluation forms and by communicating and exchanging information with other teachers who were previously involved in the student's lessons.

When the teachers were asked about whether the student with special needs should be included in the IEP preparation process, Mr. Cem stated that it would definitely not be appropriate for the student with special needs to participate in the process as follows, "I don't think so, I mean, what will happen if the child participates, what will he add anyway, I think it will be worse, so it is unnecessary.".

Ms. Seray stated that students with special needs can participate in the IEP preparation process, but firstly, some prerequisites are required as follows

> Piece by piece. Now, in this case, the student can participate in the IEP meeting, but I think he should be aware of himself, just like the family, he should know himself, for example, this can benefit me a lot. For example, if the student tells me, "I understand better when you teach in this way", e... this is a plus for me. I can apply this to involve the student more in the lesson or to increase my ability to learn more, but I think it is not necessary for him/her to hear everything you say about him/her from the beginning to the end of the meeting. I think you can get his/her opinion at a certain point and then inform him/her about the prepared objectives.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to reveal the experiences of all stakeholders in the IEP development team in a middle school during the IEP preparation process. According to the findings obtained at the end of the research, it was revealed that families of individuals with special needs should take an active role in the IEP development process. However, some prerequisites are mentioned for families to participate in the process. The most important of these is to increase the level of knowledge and awareness of the parents about the process. It can be stated that parent trainings are extremely important for increasing parent awareness. In the light of the findings obtained from the families participating in the study, it can be stated that if school administrators and other team stakeholders encourage families by providing parent support, their participation in the process will be easier. In the study, it is thought that the fact that the school administrator was a special education teacher helped families to be included in the IEP preparation process more easily. School administrators and teachers in the IEP development team communicate with families mostly for information exchange. When the results of the research were analyzed, it was seen that not only families but also teachers experienced difficulties in the process. It is seen that teachers' difficulties are based on inadequate knowledge and inexperience in the IEP development process. The fact that teachers and families have insufficient knowledge in terms of laws causes them to experience confusion about their duties and responsibilities in the special education and IEP preparation process.

It is seen that three different views were expressed by the participants regarding the inclusion of the parents and the student with special needs in the process. Although it is known that families are an integral part of the process in the legal sense, some of the teachers expressed the view that the parents and the student with special needs should not be included in the process. Some of the teachers, on the other hand, stated that they should be included in the process when preconditions such as parent education or the low level of the student with special needs being affected by the disability are met. Some of the teachers, families and the school administrator stated that the parents should be unconditionally involved in the process. The participants who advocated for the unconditional inclusion of the parents in the process stated that they have more information about their children than teachers and that the information obtained from them is vital for the healthy progress of the process and to ensure cooperation. Participants also emphasized the importance of equal participation of mothers and fathers in parent involvement. Participants also argued that the low socioeconomic status of parents should not be an obstacle to their participation. The school administrator stated that failure to ensure parent participation would have negative effects on team success and the educational life of the child with special needs in the long term. In addition, the importance of parent participation in terms of the ownership of the process by other stakeholders in the team was also emphasized by the school administrator. When the literature is examined, it is stated that parent participation in the entire IEP development process is extremely necessary for a quality process, but families do not see themselves as equal stakeholders in the process. It has been stated that the reason for this is that families see themselves as insignificant in their children's education (Fish, 2006; O'Connor, 2008; Mereoui et al., 2016). In parallel with the positive experiences of the parents participating in the study, a similar study stated that families of individuals with special needs may have more positive experiences in the process when they are seen as decision-making mechanisms in IEP meetings, when they feel that they are valued and respected (Fish, 2008). It is in line with the findings of this study that in order for families to be involved in the collaboration in the IEP preparation process, they should be treated tolerant by the experts, be understanding and open to communication (Gilliam & Coleman, 1982; Macleod et al., 2017). However, in some studies on the IEP development process, there are also studies in which the cooperation between teachers and families is insufficient and negative. In these studies, the most important obstacle to collaboration is that the parents are not seen as equal partner in the team (Avcıoğlu, 2011; Fish, 2006; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014).

According to the findings obtained from the teachers in the study, it was seen that they benefited from the documents shared on the internet, the vice principal of the school because they were special education teachers, and the resources published by the Ministry of National Education during the IEP preparation process, but they did not consult academic resources published on this subject. When the literature is examined, similar to the experiences of some teachers, it is seen that special education teachers, other teachers and resources on the internet are consulted while preparing IEPs. However, differently, it is seen that lecturers and academic books can also be utilized (Öztürk & Eratay, 2010). In addition, when the literature was examined, it was stated in one study that teachers found the MoNE resources insufficient in the IEP development process (Eratay et al., 2012). Although MoNE resources were found to be insufficient in

previous studies, it is possible to find new resources in the form of a road map for all teachers in the IEP preparation process in the guide published by the ministry in 2022. in this context, the continuous updating of the ministry has an important role in terms of being a resource for teachers. It is thought that the reasons why the teachers included in the study mostly utilize internet resources in the IEP preparation process are the inadequacy of the MoNE resources and the teachers' not knowing where they should apply in this regard. In addition, the fact that teachers had not received pre-service or in-service training before was also stated by the participants as a reason for the difficulties they experienced in the process. Participants also stated that their level of knowledge about the legal obligations related to the IEP development process was low. Although there are a limited number of studies on this issue in the literature, an international study shows that team members' knowledge of the laws positively affects their participation in the IEP development process (Fish, 2008). Another reason for the participants' lack of knowledge in the process may be the lack of any training on this subject in their pre-service education. The participants stated that staff trainings on the IEP development process are needed as a solution to overcome the problems and deficiencies experienced. When the literature is examined, it is stated that staff trainings are necessary for the IEP development process in parallel with the opinions of the participants (Ayanoğlu & Gür Erdoğan, 2019; Avcıoğlu, 2012; Burunsuz & İnce, 2020 Çuhadar, 2006; Yaman, 2017; Yılmaz & Batu, 2016). However, taking teacher needs into consideration while organizing these trainings will positively affect the quality of the trainings. Considering that branch teachers are inadequate not only in preparing IEPs but also in dealing with problem behaviors, organizing the education to be given, and preparing materials suitable for students during the implementation phase (Çetin, 2004), it can be thought that it would be more beneficial to provide staff training through applied trainings in cooperation with universities instead of just providing information. When the findings obtained from the teachers are examined, it is seen that there is a more positive communication environment among the branch teachers, but there is a more limited communication and cooperation process with the special education teacher and the school guidance service. The reason for this is that the guidance counselor is less willing to be involved in the processes of establishing cooperation. The special education teacher's limited ability to interact with other teachers due to her inability to leave her classroom negatively affected the collaboration process. On the other hand, it was observed that there was a positive cooperation and process between the teachers and the school administration. This is thought to be related to the school administrator being a special education teacher and being open to communication. When the literature is examined, it is seen that to talk about cooperation between stakeholders in the IEP development process, positive relationships and communication should be developed in the IEP development unit (Bambara & Kern, 2005). According to the findings of the study, it is seen that the reason why teachers communicate is to get information from other stakeholders when they do not know what to do. Both parents and other stakeholders expressed that the communication and cooperation between them was very positive. Families stated that they were encouraged to participate in the process when they were communicated with positively and that they felt both themselves and their children more valuable. The literature is similar to the findings obtained in this regard, and it is seen that if positive

communication is established with families, parents participation is ensured positively in all IEP development processes (Macleod et al., 2017).

It is thought that one of the reasons for the lack of cooperation within the team is related to the roles and responsibilities in the team. The school administrator was more active in determining the roles within the team. The reason for this is that he is more knowledgeable than other stakeholders in the process because he is a special education teacher. This research finding is similar to the findings obtained in the literature. When the literature is examined, it is seen that the person who plays a more active role in the IEP development process is the special education teacher (Gilliam, & Coleman, 1981). When the roles of other stakeholders in the team are examined, it is seen that families are more concerned with the work at home, branch teachers prepare IEPs, special education teachers transfer their knowledge and skills to other stakeholders, and guidance counselors share the information obtained by observing the student with teachers.

It is seen that there are differences of opinion between teachers and families regarding the participation of students with special needs in the IEP development process. Some of the teachers and families thought that it was unnecessary to include the student in the process without giving any reason, and some of them stated that the inclusion of the student in the process would cause confusion when the parents had not yet fully participated in the process. Some of the teachers argued that the inclusion of the student in the process could cause psychologically negative effects. Unlike other teachers, the counselor stated that students with special needs could be included in certain parts of the process. One of the teachers who argued that students could participate stated that preparation was required before students could participate. When the Special Education Services Regulation published by the Ministry of National Education is examined, it is seen that students are natural members of the IEP team. The regulation also emphasizes the student's right to express his/her opinion on the decisions taken about him/her (MoNE, 2012). In addition, in the literature, it is seen that in studies where students with special needs are included in the IEP development process, the process is carried out more functionally and more positive results are obtained for students with special needs (Allen et al., 2001; Arndt et al., 2006; Martin et al. 1996; Martin et al. 2006; Mason et al. 2002; Royer, 2017). Considering the results obtained from this study and the findings of the studies in the literature, it is thought that students with special needs should also participate in the IEP development process.

Implications

Based on the findings obtained from the participants in this study, several implications can be made for further research and practices regarding the IEP development process. It can be ensured that IEP development units in schools at all levels are continuously audited by MoNE and staff trainings can be organized to eliminate deficiencies at the end of these audits. In addition, trainings can be organized to involve families, who are natural members of the IEP development unit, in the process. In schools affiliated to the Ministry of National Education where mainstreaming practices are carried out, a supervision unit consisting of relevant experts can be established in order to make the IEP development process more efficient. In order to ensure that the IEP development unit works more functionally, studies can be

conducted in the field through action research, one of the applied qualitative approaches. Research can be conducted at all levels in which students with special needs are included in the IEP development process. Another suggestion is that IEP courses should be taught as a course in pre-service processes to cover all teacher education system.

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Statement of Responsibility

In the introduction and literature review part of the research, the first researcher contributed 50% and the second researcher contributed 50%. The first researcher contributed 60% and the second researcher contributed 40% in the creation of data collection tools. The first researcher contributed to 100% of the data collection processes. The first researcher contributed 50% and the second researcher contributed 50% in analyzing the data. The first researcher contributed 50% and the second researcher contributed 50% in the reporting of the findings, conclusion, discussion and recommendations.

Conflicts of Interest

We declare that there is no conflict situation in any of the stages, especially in writing the research, identifying the participants, applying the research, collecting, analyzing and interpreting the data.

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