From Conflict to Coping: Experiences of Early Childhood Teachers on Inclusion

Çatışmadan Başa Çıkmaya: Okul Öncesi Öğretmenlerinin Kaynaştırmaya İlişkin Deneyimleri

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to investigate the experiences of early childhood teachers on inclusion by specifically focusing on the challenges experienced them and coping strategies they have developed as well. We utilized case study, focusing on single preschool in İstanbul. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures, allowing for the identification of key themes related to teachers' challenges and perceived coping strategies regarding inclusive education. The findings revealed significant challenges faced by early childhood teachers, particularly in areas such as parental involvement and classroom management. Teachers expressed difficulties in communicating with families and managing classroom dynamics effectively, specifically upon the entry of children with special needs. However, perceived coping strategies were identified, highlighting teacher's adaptation process of activities and specific teaching strategies. The themes extracted from the data provide valuable insights into the current state of inclusive education in Türkiye's early childhood settings. This research contributes to the existing literature by shedding light on the complexities of inclusive practices and the need for further support and training for educators in promoting inclusive environments for all children.

Keywords: Inclusive education, early childhood teachers, teachers' experiences, perceived coping strategies

Öz: Bu çalışmanın amacı, erken çocukluk öğretmenlerinin kaynaştırma eğitimi ile ilgili deneyimlerini, özellikle karşılaştıkları zorluklara ve geliştirdikleri başa çıkma stratejilerine odaklanarak incelemektir. İstanbul'daki tek bir anaokuluna odaklanılarak durum çalışması yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Veriler, görüşme, gözlem ve doküman analizi yoluyla toplanmıştır. Veri analizi, bu süreçte öğretmenlerin karşılaştıkları zorluklar ve algılanan başa çıkma stratejilerine ilişkin temel temaların belirlenmesine olanak tanıyan tematik analiz prosedürleri izlenerek gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışma, erken çocukluk öğretmenlerinin özellikle aile katılımı ve sınıf yönetimi gibi alanlarda önemli zorluklarla karşılaştıklarını ortaya koymuştur. Öğretmenler, ailelerle etkili iletişim kurma süreci ve sınıf dinamiklerini yönetme konusunda, özellikle özel gereksinimli çocukların sınıfa katılımıyla birlikte, güçlükler yaşadıklarını ifade etmişlerdir. Ancak, öğretmenlerin etkinlikleri uyarlama süreci ve belirli öğretim stratejileri gibi algılanan başa çıkma stratejileri de belirlenmiştir. Verilerden elde edilen temalar, Türkiye'deki erken çocukluk bağlamında kaynaştırma eğitiminin mevcut durumuna dair değerli bilgiler sunmaktadır. Bu araştırma, kaynaştırma eğitimi uygulamalarının karmaşıklığını ve tüm çocuklar için kapsayıcı ortamların teşvik edilmesinde eğitimcilerin daha fazla destek ve eğitime ihtiyaç duyduğunu ortaya koyarak mevcut literatüre katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kaynaştırma eğitimi, okul öncesi öğretmenleri, deneyimleri, başa çıkma stratejileri

Introduction

Inclusion is defined as striving for the highest possible participation in early childhood education, as well as minimizing exclusion from other schools and society at large (Nutbrown & Clough, 2006). As outlined in the Special Education Services Regulation (2024, June), it refers to an education approach in which students with special needs and their typically developing peers learn together in general classrooms. More broadly, promoting active participation in all learning activities and supporting children through individualized education plans is recognized as a fundamental step toward successful inclusive education (Odom et al., 2004). This foundational understanding has been emphasized by a growing body of research emphasizing the significance of inclusion in early childhood settings (Chen et al., 2019). This emphasis might stem from the research findings highlighting the advantages of inclusion in early years for both children with special needs and typically developing children.

Implementing inclusive practices from an early age provides significant developmental benefits for children with special needs (Lawrence et al., 2016) particularly across all developmental domains (Odom, 2000; Holahan &

Costenbader 2000). In nurturing and inclusive environment, studies have shown that these children demonstrate improved language development and social skills (Raferty et al., 2003). Guralnick et al. (2008) further argued that inclusion facilitates early social interaction, improves verbal and non-verbal communication skills, and contributes to the development of autonomy and self-confidence by offering opportunities to engage in everyday classroom experiences alongside their peers. Since, in a successful and caring inclusive early childhood settings, children with epical needs are not only exposed to age-appropriate models of behavior and language, but also participate in shared routines, cooperative activities, and problem-solving situations, all of which support their cognitive and social-emotional growth. For typically developing children, inclusion enhance their capacity for social skills (Henninger & Gupta, 2014), positive attitudes towards diversities (Odom & Bailey, 2001), and designing more fair and inclusive plays (Diamond & Hong, 2010). Additionally, Katz and Chard (2000) suggested that inclusive practices help typically developing children become academic role models and may boost their academic potential. Therefore, it should be considered that inclusion is not merely

a theoretical concept, but an age-appropriate implementation from the early childhood years.

Early childhood teachers, on the other hand, are at the forefront of this process. Their experiences have potential to shape the effectiveness of inclusion. In Turkish preschool classrooms, teachers are expected to simultaneously meet curricular goals, adapt activities for developmental differences, collaborate with families, and create inclusive classroom environments. The Special Education Services Regulation (2024) and national preschool curricula require early childhood teachers to implement individualized education plans (IEPs) and ensure equal participation in all activities. This multifaceted professional role requires not only strong pedagogical competencies but also institutional support and targeted professional development. However, a review of the literature reveals several critical factors that hinder the effective implementation of inclusive practices in early childhood education (Pivic et al., 2002; Sadler, 2005; Gök & Erbaş, 2011; Odom, 2000; Bruns & Mogharberran, 2009). Despite increasing political and academic emphasis, many studies report that early childhood teachers frequently encounter substantial challenges in applying inclusive strategies. These challenges generally fall into three categories: limited knowledge of inclusive education (Pivic et al., 2002; Sadler, 2005), inadequate skills in adapting classroom activities (Gök & Erbaş, 2011), and the lack of structural and institutional support (Odom, 2000; Bruns & Mogharberran, 2009).

To begin with, insufficient understanding of inclusion has been consistently reported as a significant barrier (Pivic et al., 2002; Sadler, 2005). For example, in a study by Bruns and Mogharberran (2009), early childhood teachers reported limited awareness of strategies and interventions for supporting children with special needs. Similarly, Sucuoğlu et al. (2014) and Batu et al. (2017) found that teachers in Türkiye felt inadequately informed about inclusive education practices. Additionally, teachers face difficulties in modifying daily routines and instructional activities to accommodate the diverse needs of learners (Gök & Erbaş, 2011). Another significant challenge is the absence of support systems, such as school leadership, guidance counselors, and collaborative team structures, which are often cited as essential for effective inclusion (Odom, 2000). In light of these challenges, the present study aims to explore the everyday realities of inclusion in a single preschool setting. Specifically, it seeks to understand the difficulties early childhood teachers encounter and the strategies they employ to address these obstacles. This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are early childhood education teachers' challenges in teaching process of children with special needs?
2. What are early childhood teachers' strategies to solve these challenges in teaching children with special needs?

Methodology

We employed a case study, which is one of the qualitative research methods and widely used in educational research (Merriam, 1988). According to Creswell (2013), a case study involves an in-depth exploration of a real-life, bounded system using multiple sources of data. Similarly, Fraenkel et al. (2023) emphasize that case studies allow researchers to investigate a single individual or group in detail. In our study, a case study design was appropriate as we aimed to explore the challenges and coping strategies of early childhood teachers working with children with special needs in a specific school setting, based on teachers' experiences. Since this study investigates teachers' experiences on the challenges they face regarding inclusion and their coping strategies within the context of a single school, it was designed as a single case study.

The Context of the School

The case in this study is a preschool located in İstanbul, Türkiye. On the lower floor of the school, facilities include a playground, a dining hall, a classroom, and club rooms for recreational activities. During dining and play times, children utilize marble stairs to access this area. On the middle floor of the school, there are three classrooms, an officer's room, and a manager's room, while the remaining four classrooms are located on the top floor. In total, there are eight classrooms staffed by eight teachers in the building. The preschool caters to a total of 163 children between the ages of 3 and 6. During the research, we accessed three classrooms as not all of them housed children with special needs. Physical features of observed classrooms are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Physical features of observed classrooms

Teacher	Floor	Notable Physical Features
Gamze Teacher	Ground	No windows, no carpet, large central table, toys out of reach, proximity to the dining hall and playground
Ezgi Teacher	Second	Emergency door access, larger space, toys at eye level, improved visibility
Cansu Teacher	Third	Emergency door access, larger space, toys at eye level, improved visibility

The Sample

We employed purposeful sampling to select participants for this study. As described by Creswell (2013), purposeful sampling involves selecting participants and sites in a manner that can purposefully contribute to understanding the research problem. Our decision to choose this school was based on the warm reception and willingness of the administrators to participate in the study. The inclusion criteria for the teachers in the school were having prior experience working with students in inclusive settings, willingness to participate in the study, and currently having at least one student with special needs in their classroom. Therefore, out of the eight teachers at the school, only three were included in the study as they had inclusion students. Demographic information of participant teachers is presented in Table 2.

Data Collection Instruments

A robust qualitative case study should provide an in-depth understanding of the case through the collection of various forms of qualitative data, as stressed by Creswell (2013). Therefore, we used three data collection techniques to understand teachers' perspectives regarding their challenges and coping strategies in inclusive education.

Table 2. Demographic information of participant teachers

Teacher	Experience	Degree	Class Size	Age Group	Inclusion Children
Gamze Teacher	27 years	B.A. in Child Development	12	4 years	ADHD, Autism and Sensory Deprivation
Ezgi Teacher	4 years	B.A. in Early Childhood Education	10	4 years	Down Syndrome
Cansu Teacher	7 years	B.A. in Child Development	10	4 years	Autism

Semi-Structured Interviews: Three early childhood teachers were identified as valuable sources of information for these interviews, considering their varying years of experience and their voluntary participation in the study. A semi-structured interview protocol consisting of six open-ended questions was employed. Protocol was prepared based on the existing literature and modified after seeking two experts' opinions in the early childhood education field. We employed pilot study with two teachers and finalized interview questions. Example questions include: How do you define inclusion? How do you adapt your daily routine for children with special needs? How do you adapt your activities for children with special needs?

Observations: We used an observation protocol form to systematically record the data obtained during classroom observations. The form included both structured and open-ended sections. Structured parts focused on specific indicators such as challenging situations in classroom environment, teacher's interaction with children with special needs, types of instructional adaptations made during activities. It was also noted significant events, spontaneous situations, and contextual factors not covered by predefined categories in open-ended sections.

Documents: Documents in the form of activity plans implemented during observation hours were obtained from three teachers. These activities were designed in accordance with the Ministry of National Education framework, which outlines expectations for activity planning. As per this framework, teachers are required to delineate the objectives and indicators of the activity, materials required, unfamiliar words and terms, activity procedures, assessment methods, parent involvement strategies, and adaptation processes. It is worth noting that all activity plans were developed under the assumption that all children have typical development. However, an adaptation section was included in the plans to address the needs of children who may not be at the same developmental level as their peers. These activity plans served as valuable documents for understanding both the reported and actual practices of teachers regarding children with special needs. These documents helped triangulate data by providing concrete evidence of both observed and self-reported inclusive practices.

Data Collection Procedure

First, the consent form was taken from each participant. Then, interviews were conducted before observations. in an empty classroom and each lasted 40-50 minutes. Afterwards, observation schedule was planned with teachers. Before the observation, teachers were asked to share their activity plans belonging to the day of observation. During the observation phase, the primary researcher assumed the role of a non-participant observer, intending to gain insight into teachers' authentic practices regarding children with special needs across all classrooms. While she successfully conducted non-participant observations in two classes, she had to adopt a participant observer role in Gamze Teacher's class. In an unexpected turn of events, Gamze Teacher entrusted the class to the researcher and temporarily left. Over the course of 25 minutes, the primary researcher actively engaged with the children as a participant observer. Additionally, she observed the classes of three other teachers in the morning session. Each observation session spanned approximately 4 hours and was meticulously recorded using an observation protocol form. The primary focus during observations was on the experiences of teachers and dynamics between the classroom teacher and children with special needs. Furthermore, we documented the daily routines and activities of the teachers throughout the observation sessions.

Data Analysis Procedure

Our approach to using thematic analysis aligns well with Braun and Clarke's (2006) description of the method as a means to identify, analyze, and report patterns and themes within data. In our study, we applied thematic analysis to explore how early childhood teachers experience inclusive education. To initiate the analysis, we systematically organized all collected data and transcribed the interviews. Subsequently, we engaged in comprehensive reading of the data to develop a holistic understanding of the case and grasp the teachers' overarching experiences regarding inclusive education. During this process, we took margin notes to capture key insights, which served as the basis for forming initial codes. As we delved deeper into the data, small categories of information coalesced into codes, which were subsequently grouped into meaningful categories. At this stage, two researchers independently coded the data. Later, they came together to discuss overlapping and differing data, reaching a consensus. The inter-coder reliability was calculated using the Miles and Huberman (1994) formula, and it was found to be 94%. These categories were then synthesized into provisional themes. Following a thorough review of theme relevance and alignment with the data, we refined the definitions of the themes, resulting in the emergence of clear themes and subthemes. This systematic approach to thematic analysis allowed for a comprehensive exploration of early childhood teachers' challenges and coping strategies in inclusive education, based on their perspectives.

Validation of Findings

To ensure the validity and credibility of the study, triangulation was employed as a core strategy. As Creswell (2013) highlights, triangulation enhances the trustworthiness of qualitative research by using multiple sources of data to cross-check and support findings. Similarly, Fraenkel et al. (2023) emphasize that when a conclusion is supported by data collected through different instruments, its validity is strengthened. In this study, three complementary data collection tools were used to capture early childhood teachers' perspectives Additionally, detailed descriptions of the case and themes were provided to offer rich insight to the readers.
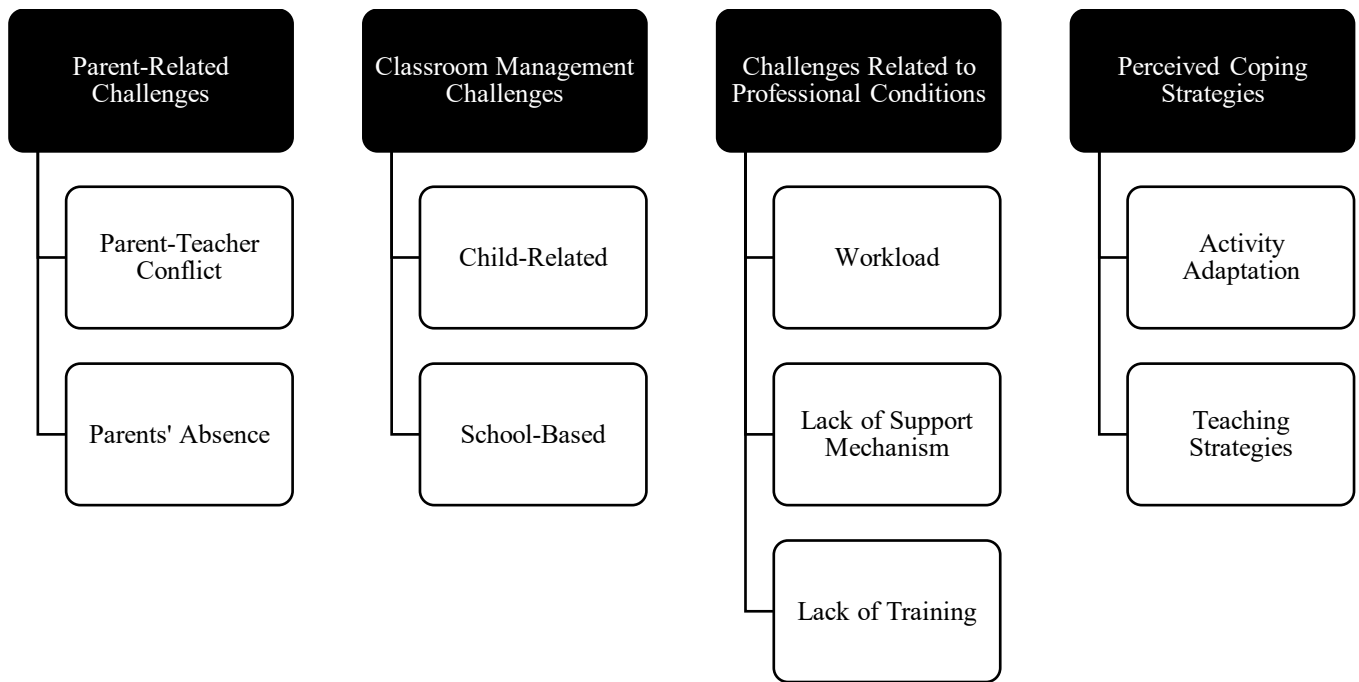
Figure 1. Summary of main themes and sub-themes

Ethical Consideration

All ethical permission was taken from Bahçeşehir University, Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee, as per the decision taken in the meeting dated 25.12.2024 and numbered 2024/11. In the research, all teachers participated voluntarily. The researchers exclusively listened to and transcribed all audio recordings. Furthermore, to ensure confidentiality, the names of both teachers and children were altered. Throughout the data collection process, teachers were informed of their option to withdraw from the study at any time.

Findings

The data emerged 4 themes: Parent-Related Challenges, Classroom Management Challenges, Challenges Related to Professional Conditions, and Perceived Coping Strategies. All themes and sub-themes are presented in Figure 1.

Theme 1: Parent-Related Challenges

Throughout the interviews, teachers discussed parent-related challenges within the classroom environment and activities. Some expressed difficulties in communicating effectively with families whose children with special needs during the educational process. Furthermore, it was noted that certain families may lack awareness regarding their child's issues, resulting in limited involvement. Despite the interview questions not specifically addressing parenting issues, teachers voluntarily shared their experiences on the matter. There are two sub-themes under this main theme.

Sub-Theme 1: Parent-Teacher Conflict

Teachers in the current study have reported encountering conflicts with parents, primarily revolving around classroom management or daily activities.

> *"Family plays a crucial role. Take, for instance, the challenge we face with one child who arrives at the classroom with a babysitter. Both the mother and I agree that the child should attend without the babysitter, so we've been gradually reducing the babysitter's presence, aiming*

for 5-10 minutes each day. However, the mother insists on a longer transition, citing 1-2 hours, which the child isn't ready for. We attempted a longer period last week, around 10-20 minutes, and the child responded positively. Yet, it becomes impractical on days when my assistant isn't present, as we need to attend to various tasks like restroom breaks or meals. (Ezgi Teacher)"

Cansu Teacher also shared her experiences with parents of children with special needs.

> *"Parents need to collaborate with us about attending of children. While his mother wants him to attend full-time, his development necessitates a half-day schedule. The classroom environment isn't entirely suitable for him, given its size and configuration. However, conveying the need for a half-day to his mother becomes a point of contention. (Cansu Teacher)"*

It seems that sometimes conflicts between parents and teachers can lead to pressure from parents on the teacher. Teachers have specifically mentioned that families persistently exert pressure on them until they comply with their wishes. Gamze teacher stated that:

> *"For example, a mother wants her child to interact more with her peers, which I'm already facilitating. During free play, I encourage one of my students to spend time with their friend for 20 minutes. This arrangement usually works, but the child with special needs prefers to have her own space. However, the mother insists that someone should spend time with her child and assigns another child to play with her. I'm already addressing this, but the mother doesn't seem to understand. So, it seems the primary issue lies with the mother. (Gamze Teacher)"*

Sub-Theme 2: Parents' Absence

Early childhood teachers reported challenges related to the implementation of individualized education plans (IEPs), particularly due to limited parental involvement.

> *"I have a child with language problems. His mother does not talk too much with him at home. The child gets training in the support room. When he comes to school, I play with him with toys to socialize. I mean I have to… we will talk*

with the family. Only then can we give the necessary education to the child. I've invited the family over and over, but they haven't. I'm going to apply IEP, but the family doesn't exist (Gamze Teacher)"

Cansu Teacher also pointed out the same issue with the family.

"How many times did I call the family? I expected them to come. I want them to do activities at home because we're reinforcing something. (Cansu Teacher)"

Theme 2: Classroom Management Challenges

Not only during interviews but also through observations, it became apparent that teachers faced challenges with classroom management, particularly upon the entry of children with special needs. These difficulties primarily stem from interactions among the children and the school environment.

Sub-Theme 1: Child-Related Challenges

Teachers have highlighted child-related classroom management issues stemming from physical violence. Certain disability groups may exhibit physical violence due to limited language and cognitive abilities, using such behavior as a means of expression. This poses a challenge for early childhood teachers, who must manage multiple children simultaneously and ensure classroom safety. At times, they find themselves focusing solely on one child, leaving others unattended.

"The adaptation process is particularly challenging. The child (with special needs) always stays close to me because I can't leave him with his peers; he tends to hit them, or they may hit him. It's quite a struggle. Every child is special, but some require even more attention. (Gamze Teacher)"

"This age group can be quite harsh. Other children may emulate certain behaviours, such as hitting, or they may unfairly blame a peer for a conflict. (Cansu Teacher)"

During observations in Cansu Teacher's class, a similar scenario unfolded. When the teacher attempted to distribute playdough, she noticed that some had been mixed. Upon inquiry, some children pointed fingers at Selim, who is diagnosed with autism. Consequently, the teacher withheld playdough from Selim. In the classrooms observed under Gamze Teacher's supervision, children with disabilities such as ADHD and autism were present. During the observations, it was noted that these groups often experience difficulties in social interactions and have trouble following classroom rules. The teacher stated that she found this situation challenging in terms of classroom management. A similar issue with rule-breaking behavior was also observed in Ezgi Teacher's classroom.

"We're facing challenges here. Initially, the other children needed to adjust. Many of them have never encountered a child with special needs before. Some even remark that he behaves strangely. Despite my efforts to establish rules, he struggles to follow them. Consequently, other children question why he seemingly has more freedom than them and may model his behavior further undermining classroom discipline. (Ezgi Teacher)"

In addition to the problems reported by teachers, conflicts between typically developing children and those with special needs were observed. During observation time in Gamze Teacher's class, a child with language difficulties struggled to introduce himself properly, resulting in laughter from his peers. Gamze Teacher intervened, reminding them of the classroom rules.

Sub-Theme 2: School-Based Challenges

In addition to challenges related to individual children, the physical and social environment of the school also poses difficulties for teachers. During observations, it was noted that fire exit doors were present in both classrooms, and these doors also led to the toilets. Two teachers expressed concerns regarding this issue:

"We have a fire exit in our classroom, and the child often tries to go out there. (Ezgi Teacher)"

"The door to our toilet is easily accessible, and the child frequently attempts to go there. (Cansu Teacher)"

During observation in Ezgi Teacher's class, the child with special needs attempted to access the fire exit door multiple times during activity time. The door was designed to be easily opened, sometimes leading the child to wander toward the toilet or stairs. With no second teacher or trainee present, Ezgi Teacher divided her attention during these instances, leaving the other children alone in the classroom while she attended to the child with special needs. This occurred repeatedly throughout the activity.

In Cansu Teacher's class, there was an intern present. Initially, Cansu Teacher wanted the intern to sit with the children during the activity. However, the child with special needs repeatedly attempted to access the fire exit door to retrieve his vest from the cloakroom. Eventually, Cansu Teacher directed the intern to stand in front of the child to prevent him from reaching the door. Both teachers highlighted that the absence of the intern on certain days made it more challenging to manage the classroom effectively.

"When I don't have an intern, I struggle to attend to the other children. For example, during outdoor activities, if I don't have an intern that day, I have to focus on the child with special needs constantly. (Ezgi Teacher)"

"It's impossible to carry out certain activities when the intern is absent. The child with special needs is integrated into the class regardless. If the intern hasn't arrived that day, I have to manage either him or the other students. It's very difficult for us when there are no assistants. (Cansu Teacher)"

The presence of an intern in the classroom appears to provide relief for teachers. In Cansu Teacher's class, the teacher instructed the intern to stay with Selim while he played with blocks, allowing her to focus on other children. Similarly, in Ezgi Teacher's class, the intern engaged with the child with special needs while the teacher prepared daily activities. Furthermore, the layout of the triplex building proved challenging for children with special needs. After breakfast, while other children climbed the stairs to return to their classrooms, the inclusion children struggled to keep up. The handrails were difficult for them to grasp, making it challenging to ascend to the second floor. In situations where there was no assistant in the classroom and the environment was inadequate, another concern raised by teachers was the overcrowded classrooms.

"The class is too crowded to manage. (Gamze Teacher)"

"Classrooms should not be overcrowded for inclusion of children. The number of inclusion children should be taken into consideration. (Ezgi Teacher)"

Theme 3: Challenges Related to Professional Conditions

Teachers narrated their difficulties related to workload, lack of support mechanism and lack of training.

Sub-Theme 1: Workload

Teachers have expressed concerns that their workload—particularly the demands of preparing individualized education plans (IEPs) and managing crowded classrooms—negatively affects their ability to effectively implement inclusive education. One significant factor contributing to teachers' workload is the overcrowded classrooms. The high number of children impedes both classroom management and effective education. During the observation of Gamze Teacher's classroom, the teacher had to frequently pause activities to manage the inclusive children. Similarly, Ezgi Teacher and Cansu Teacher found themselves constantly dividing their attention to accommodate inclusive children in crowded classrooms.

Teachers also struggle with the workload associated with preparing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for inclusive children. Despite the necessity of IEPs, teachers find it challenging to prepare in overcrowded classrooms.

"It's difficult to implement IEPs with so many inclusive children in preschool. (Cansu Teacher)"
"There are too many students in one classroom. (Gamze Teacher)"

On the other hand, they believe that the duration and timing of inclusion sessions are crucial for providing effective education to children with special needs. Additionally, they suggest that starting inclusive education at an early age would benefit both the children and their families.

"Inclusion shouldn't be full-day. I prefer them to attend for 1.5 hours a day. (Ezgi Teacher)"
"Inclusive education should commence earlier because parents often lack understanding of special needs. (Gamze Teacher)"

Sub-Theme 2: Lack of Support Mechanism

Another burden on teachers is the lack of support mechanisms, particularly from guidance counsellors and families. While the school has a guidance counsellor, some teachers feel they do not receive enough support from her. However, Ezgi Teacher has managed to work collaboratively with the guidance counsellor, especially in preparing IEPs.

"I expect support from the guidance counsellor, parents, and the administration. When the counsellor isn't available, managing the inclusive student becomes my sole responsibility. Even though the counsellor has other duties, supporting the inclusive student should take priority. The school administration should ensure the counsellor's presence in the classroom. (Cansu Teacher)"
"I wish the school administration would prioritize providing support from the guidance counsellor. (Gamze Teacher)"
"We rely on the guidance counsellor to assist with preparing IEPs, especially as I have a background in Child Development, not Special Education. (Ezgi Teacher)"

Sub-Theme 3: Lack of Training

Early childhood teachers in this study reported that they feel inadequate to handle inclusive education, despite some teachers getting help assistance from counsellor. They criticized pre-service teacher training programs for failing to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to deliver quality inclusive education.

"Even though the guidance counsellor assists me, I still lack knowledge on how to prepare for IEPs. Summer and September seminars could focus on IEP planning. (Ezgi Teacher)"
"I haven't had to apply for an IEP in 27 years. I do not know how to do. (Gamze Teacher)"
"With the increasing presence of inclusive students in kindergartens, universities should also consider including courses on inclusive education. (Gamze Teacher)"
"We didn't cover IEP planning during our university education. We only know the basics. (Cansu Teacher)"

Theme 4: Perceived Coping Strategies

Despite narrating challenges related to families, classroom management, and professional conditions, teachers also highlighted their perceived coping strategies to manage the classroom and apply their activities. Teachers' first strategy is to adapt their activities according to the developmental needs of children with special needs. Secondly, teachers reported that they use some teaching techniques to support learning process of children with special needs.

Sub-Theme 1: Activity Adaptation

While the Ministry of National Education framework requires early childhood teachers to adapt activities for children with developmental differences, it was understood in the current study that the implementation of these adaptations varies among teachers. During interviews, some teachers mentioned adapting activities for children with disabilities. Besides, they wrote activity adaptation for children with special needs in their activity plans, but observations revealed discrepancies in their practice. For instance, Gamze Teacher described simplifying activities for motor development, ensuring all children perform tasks in a uniform manner. However, during observations, the child with autism was occasionally excluded from activities, despite adaptation plans outlined in activity plans.

"We do simple activities for motor development when they come. For example, if we are playing a game activity and something very complicated, my intern and I tell the children. If they have to jump three times in the game, we make it one for everyone. All children are doing the same way at the same time. We do all the activities according to him. (Gamze Teacher)"

Similarly, Cansu Teacher mentioned adjusting for art activities and providing fewer materials for certain tasks. Before art activity, the teacher took all children into the playground but the child with autism was left behind. Also, this child was not involved in the "Our Neighborhood" activity. However, when we read the activity plans which we took from teachers, we realized that there is an adaptation part for that activity. It was stated in the plan that the inclusion children are helped to cover the box, which is part of the activity, but teacher did not. Cansu Teacher also described more detailed but simplified adaptation activity in her lesson plans and interviews. However, during observations, Selim, the child with special needs, was often left out of activities without alternative adaptations, such as during painting sessions.

"As I said, if I'm going to do an art activity, for example, if I'm doing some cutting activity, I'm preparing a paper with less curl and no lines for him. For example, if we're going

to paint, he doesn't like very difficult things, like striped activities. I make it easier, for example, to paint a heart or a flower. I'm practicing this way (Cansu Teacher)"

Ezgi Teacher also discussed adapting activities, such as cutting paper and adjusting the number of items for hand-eye coordination tasks during interviews.

"For example, I cut off his paper, but I'll let him paint and paste. I'm having a water activity. I'm giving 6-7 cap to everyone and I'm giving him 3 caps because he has to learn. We do it for hand face coordination. I dumped the water in the glass the other day. Then he had to pour it into the bottle, but he couldn't. In that case, I poured it back into the glass. (Ezgi Teacher)"

However, observations revealed a lack of individualized activities during free play sessions, where the child with special needs was not provided with tailored tasks. Overall, while teachers acknowledged the need for activity adaptation, some of the observations indicated inconsistencies in implementation. This suggests a gap between teachers' intentions and their actual practice, highlighting the importance of ensuring that adaptation plans are consistently implemented to support the inclusion of children with special needs.

Sub-Theme 2: Teaching Strategies

This theme is mainly constructed based on the observation part of the study. It was observed that teachers employed various teaching strategies, including scaffolding and physical and verbal interventions, to support children with special needs during activities. For instance, Gamze Teacher provides constant assistance to a child while playing with dough, ensuring their engagement and participation.

"For example, I'm always standing next to him and helping him while he is playing dough. (Gamze Teacher)"

Additionally, during observations, we realized that Gamze Teacher used physical and verbal interventions are frequently. For example, during a table activity, one child diagnosed with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder is designated as the teacher's assistant to maintain focus. Teacher said to the child, *"I want you to hand out the materials today — you are my helper,"* and thus enabled the child to participate in the activity, even if only in a small way.

Verbal interventions are also employed, such as redirecting a child's behavior by reminding them to sit or comment on their engagement with the activity. For instance, In Cansu Teacher's classroom, when the child with special needs stood up and began wandering around the classroom during an art activity, the teacher gently said, *"Selim, we stay in our seats during painting time. Let's sit down and finish your picture"* thereby redirecting the child's behavior through a calm verbal reminder. Similarly, Cansu Teacher emphasizes constant supervision and guidance during free play and activities to ensure the child's safety and participation. When the child attempts to climb on the table during an activity, the teacher intervenes physically by guiding them back to their seat and provides clear verbal instructions about appropriate behavior.

Ezgi Teacher also utilizes physical proximity to support the child's engagement, sitting beside them to encourage participation and adherence to activity rules. Overall, these teaching strategies demonstrate the teachers' proactive efforts to scaffold learning and address the diverse needs of children with special needs in the classroom.

Discussions, Conclusions and Recommendations

In this study, we delved into the experiences of early childhood teachers regarding inclusive education. The focus was on challenges faced by teachers and their coping strategies in teaching process of children with special needs. From the study's findings, four primary themes emerged: Parent-Related Challenges, Classroom Management Challenges, Challenges Related to Professional Conditions, and Perceived Coping Strategies.

To begin with, early childhood teachers are typically tasked with collaborating closely with parents of children with special needs (Bruns & Mogharberran, 2009). However, in the current study, our analysis yielded that teachers had some conflict with these parents due to some factors such as parents' attempt to intervene with classroom management process or attend daily activities. This finding is compatible with international literature. Studies showed that not only in Türkiye, but in other countries such as Lebanon and USA, there are similar challenges and conflict situations between two groups (Aouad & Bento, 2020; Lake and Billingsley, 2000). In one study conducted in Lebanon, although teachers found collaboration valuable in special education process, they evaluated it very challenging in practice (Aouad & Bento, 2020). These conflicts might arise from the different expectations between parents and teachers regarding the educational needs of children with special needs. Supporting this idea, Lake and Billingsley (2000) found that discrepant views of a child are one of the most prominent factors that create conflicts between teachers and parents. Therefore, fostering open communication, mutual understanding, and shared expectations between teachers and parents is essential for strengthening collaboration and minimizing conflicts in special education.

Furthermore, early childhood teachers in the current study stated that parents of children with special needs were not accessible although parental participation in IEP meetings is important for organizing the child's educational process. There is an emphasis on parent involvement and IEP process in previous studies. Sen (2023) stressed that attending IEP meeting is one of the most critical forms of parent involvement in special education. Supporting the finding of the current study, Sen (2023) discussed that some challenges such as communication gaps affect negatively the potential of partnership between parents and teachers in special education. On the other hand, parents may not be equally involved in every stage of their child's educational process. For instance, Turnbull and Turnbull (2003) argued that although parents may be motivated to ensure their children receive necessary special education services, they may not demonstrate the same level of motivation or participation in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the factors that hinder parents' participation in school and make the necessary arrangements to involve families not only in IEP meetings but also in other forms of family involvement, such as home-based, community-based, and school-based participation.

Another finding of the present study stressed that teachers had difficulties in classroom management during daily flow. Supporting this finding, Gök's (2013) study found that teachers experienced problems in classroom management when there are children with special needs in the classroom. The relevant literature shows that this situation is related to teachers not receiving adequate training on inclusive education

(Babaoğlan & Yılmaz, 2010; Civitillo et al., 2016). Civitillo et al. (2016) stressed that teachers who have inclusion children in their classroom do not feel fully prepared to teach these children. In this context, providing pre-service, practice-based classroom management courses and updating this training post-service can be highly beneficial. By incorporating practical classroom management training into teacher education programs and offering follow-up courses throughout their careers, teachers can be better prepared to manage diverse classrooms, including those with children with special needs, fostering a more organized and inclusive learning environment.

Furthermore, in current study, it is understood that these difficulties in classroom management arise from physical aggression by children with special needs, their struggle to follow class rules, and problems in social interaction. This finding emphasizes a critical tension in inclusive classrooms: while inclusion aims to ensure the participation of all children, behavioral challenges can strain classroom management and hinder the teacher's ability to maintain an inclusive environment. Mclntyre ve Phaneuf (2007) highlighted that aggressive behaviors of children with special needs might be related to lack of social skills or knowledge of how to use these skills. Therefore, early childhood teachers should focus on social skills and social development process of children with special needs on IEP.

Teachers' professional conditions are another factor that creates challenge in inclusion in the current study. Teachers mentioned their heavy workload and how it affects their ability to implement effective inclusive education. Overcrowded classroom increases teachers' workload as well. Similarly, in Döş et al. (2019)'s study, teachers stated that they could not pay attention to children with special needs due to overcrowded classroom. It limited their time to spend with the child and implement IEP and evaluate the children's development and learning. Besides, lack of adequate training on inclusive education also negatively affects teaching process of children with special needs. Upon reviewing the literature (Gök & Erbaş, 2014; Babaoğlan & Yılmaz, 2010), it became evident that similar challenges are present in teacher education programs, including in Türkiye. While introductory courses like Special Education provide some insight, they offer limited techniques and methods. Consequently, many educators, lacking specialized training, struggle with tasks like Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). This knowledge gap poses a significant barrier to effectively accommodating children with special needs.

Parallel to these findings, our analysis underscored the pressing need for additional training on inclusion practices to bolster the quality of education and enhance classroom management skills. The concept of developing individualized education plans remains relatively new to many preschool educators, even those with extensive experience. This challenge is not unique to Türkiye but is echoed in countries like Singapore, the USA, and India, highlighting the global significance of addressing this issue. Studies from various cultural contexts emphasize the importance of equipping educators with the necessary tools and knowledge to foster inclusive learning enviremnts effectively. This necessitates comprehensive training programs and ongoing professional development opportunities. Despite the legislative mandate for inclusion since 1992, there appears to be a disconnect between educational policies and the practical implementation thereof, highlighting the need for systemic reforms. In conclusion,

bridging the gap between policy directives and educators' competencies requires concerted efforts from educational authorities, higher education institutions, and practitioners. By prioritizing inclusive education within teacher training programs and providing ongoing support, we can strive towards creating more inclusive and equitable learning environments for all preschool children.

The current study highlighted the significant burden placed on teachers due to a lack of adequate support mechanisms. Teachers express a desire for assistance from guidance counsellors and families. Recent research indicates that preschool educators require more intervention programs and guidance services to effectively support children with special needs (Rheams & Bain, 2005; Scott-Little et al., 2003). This need arises partly due to challenges stemming from parents and principals within inclusion classrooms (Koçyiğit, 2015). Similarly, Villines' (2011) study found that preschool educators sought support from principals, specialists, therapists, and families. In Türkiye, Akalın and colleagues (2014) noted that teachers primarily required support from parents and other resources to develop individualized education plans and adjust their curriculum. Moreover, this study identified that the physical environment of the classroom could pose challenges for children with special needs. Teachers cited distractions such as fire exits or toilet doors within the classroom, hindering the learning environment for these children. Thus, while enhancing teachers' knowledge and providing support are crucial, addressing the physical classroom environment is equally essential. Observations revealed that teachers often had to constantly attend to children with special needs due to these environmental factors. Similarly, Kale and colleagues (2016) noted that the physical environment was not conducive to the needs of children with special needs.

Finally, teachers mentioned how they cope with challenges in education process of children with disabilities. Apparently, while educators implemented some adaptation strategies for children with special needs, they often hesitated to fully integrate these children into activities. For instance, during observations, we noticed an intern engaging with a child with special needs separately from other children. This reluctance to fully involve children with special needs may stem from a lack of knowledge, alongside workload issues and a scarcity of support mechanisms. Relying on relevant literature, it can be argued that teachers learn from their own experiences and find solutions themselves in the process. In Gök and Erbaş's (2011) study, teachers suggested that social activities and familial support should be increased, and teachers' communication skills should be promoted as well.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the complex obstacles early childhood teachers encounter when attempting to adopt inclusive education and the urgent need for institutional changes, focused training, and improved support systems. Therefore, this study offers several recommendations for teachers, administrators, and policy practitioners. For more successful inclusion practices, teachers should find more practical ways to reach parents of children with disabilities and involve them into IEP process. Administrators should also provide accessible support mechanism and take active role in designing classroom environment and rearranging class size based on the characteristics of children in the beginning of the semester. Additionally, the gap between policy expectations and classroom realities can be closed by making sure that educators receive ongoing training and direction on

individualized education plans and adaptive teaching techniques. In early childhood education, inclusive education can transcend a legal requirement and develop into an integrated and sustainable practice by encouraging cooperation between educators, parents, administrators, and legislators.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to a single preschool located in İstanbul. Therefore, the data may reflect specific demographic characteristics of participant teachers and institutional dynamics of the specified preschool. Besides, the researchers were the non-participant observers in the study. Although it contributes to subjectivity, it might be possible to effect participants' behaviors in the existence of observer. Therefore, similar studies can be conducted in different samples and schools.

Author Contributions

All authors have equally contributed to all stages of the article. All authors have read and approved the final version of the study.

Ethical Declaration

This study was conducted with the approval of the Bahçeşehir University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee, as per the decision taken in the meeting dated 25.12.2024 and numbered 2024/11.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any institution or individual within the scope of this study.

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