

An Examination of Special Education Support Services in the Turkish Education System in Terms of Bureaucratic Accountability: A Qualitative Research

Türk Eğitim Sisteminde Özel Eğitim Destek Hizmetlerinin Bürokratik Hesap Verebilirlik Açısından İncelenmesi: Nitel Bir Araştırma

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the practical quality of special education support services in a region of Türkiye within the framework of bureaucratic accountability. The main issue discussed is whether, in light of the inclusive paradigm, the legislation creates pedagogical depth or procedural compliance in the field. This study adopted a qualitative case study design based on an interpretive paradigm. Ten Learning Support Teachers (LST) working in middle schools and eight middle school students with mild intellectual disabilities participated in the study, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with these participants. The data were analyzed thematically using an inductive approach, and three themes emerged: pedagogical divergence, legitimization of symbolic success, and methodological adaptation. Under these three themes, the following emerged: a lack of cooperation and interaction, the legitimization of symbolic achievements that overshadow actual performance, and methodological adaptations in the face of physical environments and material deficiencies. In conclusion, this study shows that bureaucratic accountability transforms LST into paperwork-focused bureaucrats rather than focusing on their teaching role. Therefore, it is recommended that authorities conduct studies on qualitative accountability and that resource rooms be regularly supported with physical and material resources.

Keywords: Resource room, bureaucratic accountability, special education support services, learning support teachers, intellectual disability

Öz: Bu çalışma, Türkiye'nin bir bölgesinde sunulan özel eğitim destek hizmetlerinin uygulama kalitesini bürokratik hesap verebilirlik çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Araştırmanın temel odağını, kapsayıcı eğitim paradigması ışığında, mevcut mevzuatın pedagojik bir derinlik mi sağladığı yoksa yalnızca prosedürel bir uyumla mı sınırlı kaldığı sorusu oluşturmaktadır. Yorumlayıcı paradigmaya dayalı nitel vaka çalışması olarak tasarlanan araştırmaya, ortaokullarda görev yapan 10 destek eğitim öğretmeni ve hafif zihinsel yetersizliği bulunan 8 ortaokul öğrencisi katılmıştır. Yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler aracılığıyla toplanan veriler, tümevarımsal tematik analiz yöntemiyle çözümlenmiştir. Analizler sonucunda; pedagojik farklılık, sembolik başarının meşrulaştırılması ve metodolojik uyum olmak üzere üç temel tema saptanmıştır. Bu temalar altında; paydaşlar arası iş birliği ve etkileşim eksikliği, gerçek performansı maskeleyen kağıt üzerindeki başarılar ve yetersiz fiziksel/materiyal koşullar altında geliştirilen zorunlu yöntemler ön plana çıkmaktadır. Araştırma bulguları, mevcut bürokratik hesap verebilirlik mekanizmalarının, destek eğitim öğretmenlerini asıl rollerinden uzaklaştırarak onları "evrak işlerine odaklanan bürokratlara" dönüştürdüğünü göstermektedir. Bu doğrultuda, karar vericilerin niteliksel hesap verebilirliği esas alan yeni denetim modelleri geliştirmesi ve destek eğitim odaların fiziksel/maddi altyapısını düzenli olarak desteklemesi önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Destek eğitim odası, bürokratik hesap verebilirlik, özel eğitim destek hizmetleri, destek eğitim öğretmeni, zihinsel engellilik

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Introduction

Inclusive education is an educational paradigm that values all individuals equally, without discrimination based on cultural, religious, linguistic, racial, gender, past experiences, socio-cultural structures, or special needs. It centres on personal interests, needs, and abilities based on equal opportunity, and provides all learners with a qualified and equitable development while taking individual differences into account. Florian et al. (2010) similarly define it as the implementation of arrangements in schools regardless of students' social, emotional, intellectual, cultural, and disability statuses. The inclusive education process aims to enable all individuals in risk groups, especially those with intellectual disabilities who are labelled in societies with a disability-based perspective Sakız et al., (2024), to live their lives as individuals and feel a sense of social belonging. In this study, we will focus on children with intellectual disabilities, who are among the disadvantaged groups within the scope of inclusive education. This independence and social belonging for those with

intellectual disabilities are made possible by teachers in schools who take a strong, inclusive stance and adopt adaptive perspectives (Florian, 2019). In the Turkish context, Sakız et al., (2024) examined the qualitative dimensions of inclusive practices and noted that certain systemic structures and the interconnected value judgments of teachers directly influence the inclusive process. Similarly, Hazır and Harris (2025) discussed how these systemic limitations have a significant impact on curriculum implementation in the education of individuals with special needs.

An inclusive learning system with a teacher who can make adaptations is always necessary for children with intellectual disabilities to learn academic and social skills (Forlin, 2010; Sharma et al., 2012; Bouck & Park, 2016). However, conditions within the existing system may not always be suitable for co-learning; in this case, special education support services act as a bridge for these individuals. In Türkiye's Special Education Services Regulation (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2018), special education support services are defined as

"The education program taken by students diagnosed in the general intellectual ability field, related to all areas and disciplines (article 4-j),...and the environment established to provide special education support services in the areas they need to students continuing their education through full-time inclusion/integration and gifted students (article 4-i).... special education support services are also provided to these individuals to ensure that their educational goals are achieved at the highest level (article 4-d)...."

As this legal framework shows, the goal of maximizing benefits for individuals with intellectual disabilities extends beyond allocating a room; it also indicates that it is a pedagogical intervention and that quality is considered. However, the quality expectations of this legislation risk falling behind the standards of "bureaucratic accountability" faced by education systems in recent years. In fact, bureaucratic accountability focuses more on the regular recording of documents and stakeholders acting in accordance with these rules than on the qualitative outcomes of education. For this reason, the pedagogical quality of support services risks being overshadowed by quantitative requirements. Therefore, this study will examine whether the requirements outlined in the legislation have been transformed into a qualitative reality alongside quantitative realities in the context of Türkiye.

Literature Review

The special education support service is designed to enable students with intellectual disabilities to receive education appropriate to their needs within the educational program they follow. Various studies have been conducted in Türkiye on the content and systemic structure of support education services for students with intellectual disabilities; literacy (Akay, 2023); students' academic achievements (Güven, 2021a; Yıldırım et al., 2024); and their social integration (Bozak & Çay, 2023; Altunkaynak, 2024). Furthermore, meta-synthesis studies on support education rooms conducted in Türkiye (Aktan, 2025; Talas et al., 2022) have also mentioned systematic limitations. In addition, Bal Çelik and Çelik (2025) and Yazıcıoğlu (2020) mentioned inadequate physical environments, Tosun and Almış (2023) mentioned limited material support, Arslan Armutçu et al (2024) and Şahin and Gürler (2018) mentioned teachers' competence in individualized education planning. Furthermore, the above studies generally criticize the fact that teachers assigned to support education rooms are assigned from outside the field. Güven has discussed that this situation aims to be carried out with a focus on quantity, disregarding quality (Güven, 2021b; 2021c).

In the international literature, special education support services are generally discussed in terms of evidence-based models such as universal learning design (Al Hazmi & Ahmad, 2018) or response to intervention (RTI) in classrooms (Björn et al., 2016). In Finland and the US (Björn et al., 2016; Bouck & Maher, 2019), this special education support serves different purposes; while the US designs a special education support system based on diagnosing and preventing RTI situations, in Finland, this model aims to run the bureaucracy through a support mechanism that focuses more on managing the system. Similar situations are also discussed in the international literature; in countries such as Malaysia (Liew & Loh, 2023), Oman (Al Mamari, 2022), and Palestine (Allaham et al., 2022), it is stated that special education support services can only be successful with qualified language and

communication technology specialists and schools with an organized and structured culture.

Bureaucratic Accountability

Accountability, simply put, is the obligation to explain one's actions to a higher authority and face consequences for them. As is well known, Türkiye has a centralized education system, which creates a vertical bureaucratic expectation (Pekince Kardaş, 2019). Bureaucratic accountability, on the other hand, centres on hierarchical control, where rules are prioritized and strictly followed, and regulatory requirements are rigorously monitored (Al-Humedhi, 1999; Murphy, 2009; O'Loughlin, 1990). In such systems, accountability is always seen as a quality control mechanism, but there is also a risk that quantity, rather than quality, will be perceived as a mere procedure within this education system.

In special education, bureaucratic accountability may leave stakeholders at risk of becoming part of a procedural ritual. The current situation in Türkiye has been discussed as having a gap between practice and policy, with the system being run on quantitative paperwork tracking, as seen in some studies (see Sakız & Sarıaçlı, 2019). McLaughlin and Thurlow (2003) also criticized this very situation and discussed the creation of continuous quality-focused accountability that goes beyond the seductive legal compliance of stakeholders.

However, bureaucratic accountability is not always a negative system. Türkiye's centralized education system acts as a balancing mechanism against the unequal distribution of resources by providing special education services within a standardized framework across the country (Pekince Kardaş, 2019). For example, creating an individualized education program (IEP) ensures that students' individual needs are formally recognized and monitored. Similarly, compared to a system where these students were completely invisible in the inclusive education period, the opening of learning support rooms and the documentation of the services provided in these rooms represent significant progress. As seen in the Finnish example, central government can organize support mechanisms (Björn et al., 2016). Therefore, the critique of this study is not the complete elimination of bureaucratic responsibility, but rather the transformation of procedural compliance into pedagogical quality.

In systems dominated by such bureaucratic pressures, the discourse regarding students with intellectual disabilities often shifts toward measurable, yet superficial, metrics. The Special Education Services Regulation (MoNE, 2018) states that the system has been established with a "maximum benefit" perspective for students with special needs. However, if bureaucratic accountability is predominantly seen, expectations vary accordingly. That is, the focus is on "how many hours of special education support the student receives" and "when the LST arrives at/leaves the school" rather than what the student actually learns and how. In this case, educators may become bureaucrats who implement administrative regulations rather than fulfilling their primary duties. Or, if a teacher is more concerned with whether the IEP complies with technical regulations than with whether the IEP's objectives are appropriate for the children, it is quite likely that the implementation of these practices will amount to "paying lip service." Various studies have been conducted in the international literature on bureaucratic accountability and bureaucracy (see Al-Humedhi, 1999; McLaughlin & Thurlow, 2003; Murphy, 2009; Weerheijm et al., 2026). As can be understood from the literature, this situation is also discussed as a problem in various countries. This study will

also discuss bureaucratic accountability in light of data related to the implementation of special education support services in Türkiye.

Problem Situation and Research Question

Although legislation in Türkiye dictates that special education support service should be learning-focused by implementing best practices for students, various limitations are observed in studies directly or indirectly related to special education support: gaps in the curriculum of teachers' pre-service training (Hazir & Harris, 2025), institutional material deficiencies (Tosun & Almış, 2023), physical environment inadequacies (Bal Çelik & Çelik, 2025), and LSTs' perceptions of insufficient competence (Arslan Armutçu et al., 2024). This situation can create significant limitations in the independence of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, although special education support appears appropriate on paper, it is necessary to reveal the fundamental reasons for the existence of these invisible, immeasurable limitations. However, there is no study in Türkiye that examines these limitations within the framework of bureaucratic accountability, and this study aims to contribute to the literature theoretically. Thus, this study seeks to answer the following question:

To what extent does the predominant focus on bureaucratic accountability standards in special education services, as set out in the special education services regulation, affect the practical quality of these services?

Method

In this study, a case study method, a qualitative research design, was adopted to examine the experiences of stakeholders in special education support practices at the middle school level, specifically students with intellectual disabilities and support education teachers. Yin (2018) states that the case study is an important research method for investigating contemporary phenomena within their real-life context, particularly when the researcher has little control over events and asks questions about the events based on the "how" and "why" questions. To reveal participants' subjective perspectives, inner worlds, and the meaning of special education support in depth, the data were analysed within an interpretive framework.

This study does not focus solely on participants' individual narratives; it also aims to evaluate practices in the support education room by examining the alignment between pedagogical promises and procedural realities. Therefore, to examine the alignment between legislation and practice, policy documents such as the special education services regulation have been thoroughly examined and compared. This dual focus aims to make visible the experiences of groups that are often "unheard" or "unexplored" in educational settings and to make sense of the processes faced by individuals positioned within the inclusive structure.

Participants

In line with the study's purpose, participants were selected through criterion sampling, a purposive sampling method, followed by snowball sampling, which was achieved through participants referring others to the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Participants who met the criteria of having provided at least one term of special education support in middle school for the LST group, and having a mild intellectual disability diagnosis, having received at least one term of special education support at the middle school level, and having the

ability to express themselves were included in the study. The diversity of the participants allows for a multidimensional approach to the subject (Cohen et al., 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Information about the participant group is presented in the table below. Table 1. When examined, it is seen that LST teaching in the special education support service within the middle school comes from different disciplines, but the mathematics and Turkish language disciplines are more numerous than the others. The professional seniority of the LSTs ranges from 22 to 31 years. Regarding the students, those in grades 7 and 8 constitute the majority, and all of them are diagnosed with a mild intellectual disability.

Data Collection Tool

The interview technique is a fundamental tool for exploring individuals' thoughts, experiences, feelings, and meanings in depth (Brinkman & Kvale, 2014). In this study, semi-structured interview forms were developed to comprehensively reveal the experiences and perspectives of both participant groups regarding the special education support process. Questions were prepared based on similar studies in the literature, the special education services regulation, and policy documents related to special education support to answer the research question. The interview questions prepared by the researchers were differentiated according to the cognitive and professional levels of the student and LST groups and adapted contextually. The LST form included questions that would reveal the content of special education support, its classroom implementation, and teacher collaboration. The student interview form focused on perceptions of special education support, relationships with the class, and experiences. The draft form was first submitted to experts in special education, secondary education, and Turkish for their opinions on its content validity and comprehensibility. A pilot interview was conducted with an LST who provided special education support but was not included in the participant group, using the interview form revised based on the feedback received. The final form was finalized based on the feedback received from the pilot interview.

Ethical Approval

All stages of the research were conducted in accordance with ethical principles and the World Medical Association's Helsinki Declaration (2013). Prior to data collection, the necessary legal permissions were obtained from the Ordu University Educational Research Ethics Committee with decision number 2025-100 dated May 23, 2025. Participants in the study were provided with verbal information, and written consent was obtained before the interviews. The families of the participating students were also contacted, and consent was obtained. Pseudonyms were used in the analysis and reporting to keep participants' identities and institutions confidential.

Data Collection Process

The data for this study were collected during the Spring 2024-2025 semester. Following consultations with vice-head teacher, teachers and students with intellectual disabilities were selected. Interviews with teachers lasted between 21 and 24 minutes. Student interviews lasted 8 to 10 minutes, taking into account the cognitive levels and attention spans of students with special needs.

Table 1. Participants' demographic information

Teacher	Subject	Years of experience	Students	Grade	Type of Disability
Kahraman	Math	22	Muharrem	6	Mild intellectual disability
Nazire	Science	25	Aysel	7	
Ökkeş	Turkish	27	Hayriye	8	
Eftelya	Turkish	20	Rabia	7	
Döne	Math	31	Mustafa Can	8	
Ruşen	English	25	Kadir	7	
Celahir	Social Science	24	Hikmet	7	
Feride	Math	26	Esra	8	
Nazlı	Social Science	26			
Hamit	Turkish	27			

Following this, further questions were asked to encourage a follow-up interview with the same student at a later time, bringing the total interview time to 18 to 20 minutes to ensure sufficient data collection for each student. The interviews were audio recorded with the teachers' permission. A time slot was chosen when teachers did not have classes, and their routines would not be disrupted. In addition, interviews with students with special needs were conducted during lunch breaks, after meals, so as not to disrupt their routine. Data from teachers and students were collected in a separate, quiet room. The student with special needs was accompanied by a guidance teacher, who did not speak in the room. When questions were asked to the students, if the student remained silent, the question was slightly modified and supported with images and asked again, and if they did not understand, it was simplified verbally and supported with images and repeated. The data collection process continued until data saturation was reached, meaning that no further data was obtained from the students and teachers.

Data Analysis

The interview data from the study were analyzed using thematic analysis methods. An inductive approach was adopted during the coding process to generate themes and category from the data (Code-Category-Theme). The analysis process began with the researchers reading and re-reading the data several times to achieve immersion and familiarity. During the coding phase, raw codes were generated directly from the data without being constrained by pre-established frameworks, and the similarities, continuities, and differences among these codes were meticulously examined. Related codes were then grouped to define categories, and the combination of these categories led to the identification of overarching primary themes regarding the support education process. Throughout the analysis, the original structure of the data was preserved to reflect the participants' experiences in their purest form. Furthermore, constant comparisons were made between the emerging themes and the raw data to verify the accuracy and rigor of the analysis.

Trustworthiness

The quality and accuracy of the findings obtained from qualitative research are explained by the concept of "trustworthiness" (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For the credibility dimension, both LST and student opinions were used in the research to ensure a diverse set of data sources. This study examines four criteria proposed for qualitative research in relation to the concept of "reliability": reliability, transferability, consistency, and verifiability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). *Credibility*: To enhance the internal validity of the study, data source triangulation was employed by gathering perspectives from both branch teachers

and students receiving support education. The data collection tools and the analysis process were refined through expert reviews to ensure content validity. Furthermore, interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached—the point where no new themes or categories emerged—to ensure the depth and breadth of the data. *Transferability*: A "thick description" of the research context, participant demographics, and the implementation process was provided to facilitate the potential application of the findings to similar educational settings. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure they best represented the experiences of middle school-level special education support services. *Dependability*: To strengthen the reliability of the research, all stages, including data collection, transcription, and coding, were recorded and documented step-by-step. The researchers independently coded the data, and consensus was reached on the final codes to ensure consistency of the analytical process. *Confirmability*: To demonstrate that the findings are derived directly from the participants' expressions rather than the researchers' subjective biases, direct quotations were frequently used in the reporting phase. All raw data and analytical records have been archived to maintain an audit trail verification. *Researcher's Role*: Throughout the data collection process, the researcher established rapport with the participants based on trust. During the analysis, the researcher employed the "bracketing" technique to set aside personal preconceptions and prior experiences, thereby assuming the role of an objective facilitator and interpreter of the data. Furthermore, regarding inter-coder reliability in the study, analyses were conducted by two researchers through independent coding, and the reliability of this analysis process was calculated using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, which was found to be .85, indicating a high level of agreement.

Lastly, the interviews were conducted in Turkish and translated into English using the back-translation method to ensure accuracy. Two special education experts who hold PhDs from the United Kingdom and the United States independently translated the transcripts, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Findings

The analysis of the data collected from the LST and students with intellectual disabilities in this study will be presented below under three main themes: pedagogical divergence, legitimization of symbolic success, and methodological adaptations.

Pedagogical Divergence

The inclusive education paradigm envisions a holistic collaboration and mutually supportive structure between general education classes and special education support classes. However, this study reveals a disconnect between the

LST and the classroom teacher. The most striking finding in the analyzed data is that the IEP is prepared separately by both the LST and the classroom teacher. This practice directly contradicts the Special Education Services Regulation (MoNE, 2018), which mandates in Article 47-1 that the IEP must be developed by the 'IEP Development Unit' through a collaborative process. While the IEP should serve as a guide for everyone involved with the student, the lack of collaboration between teachers has led to the need to prepare the IEP again due to the teachers' need to protect themselves bureaucratically; *"There is no collaboration [with the classroom teacher] regarding the content of the lesson... I have my own separate plan... Yes, I prepared the IEP myself."* (Döne [LST]). Similarly, LSTs Ökkeş and Celahir stated that they experienced events similar to those of LST Döne. Furthermore, they noted that LSTs face qualitative problems and are only focused on paperwork, stating, *"...the regulation remains formal..."* (Ökkeş [LST]). This 'formal' stay of the regulation highlights the gap between the administrative mandate for 'active participation of all relevant stakeholders' in the Educational Practices through Inclusion/Integration (MoNE, 2017) and the isolated reality of IEP preparation in schools.

During the collaboration process, teachers view LSTs as private special education teachers for students with intellectual disabilities (Ruşen, Nazire). In this process, LST Hamit said, *"He asked me to prepare an exam for his student to use in class,"* and LST Döne also said, *"Now he sometimes wants me to prepare the questions... She said that this year's teacher couldn't pay much attention to Muharrem (pseudonym) in class and that his class was very crowded. That's why he asked me to prepare the exam questions, and I did."* Eftelya (LST) made similar comments to Döne (LST): *"The classroom teacher said, 'I can't pay much attention to Aysel in class,' so she said, 'You take care of her'"* (Eftelya [LST]). This isolation creates gaps between the expected inclusive learning environment and special education support. Although Article 25-1 of the Special Education Services Regulation (MoNE, 2018) stipulates that the primary responsibility for the education of students with special needs lies within the general education classroom through differentiated instruction, the findings suggest a delegation of professional responsibility to the LST. Muharrem, a student with intellectual disabilities, pointed out the difference between the classroom and the special education support room, saying, *"The teacher is explaining something else in class, while we are painting or doing multiplication here... This lesson is not the same as the one in class." This disconnect ignores the requirement in Section 2.1 of Circular No. 2017/28 (MoNE, 2017) that activities in the support room should be planned to support the student's progress in the common curriculum.*

The most critical indicator of pedagogical fragmentation is the lack of a tracking system to assess how the goals achieved in the special education support room affect participation in the general education classroom. This absence of a follow-up mechanism is a significant failure in implementing Article 25-g of the Special Education Services Regulation (MoNE, 2018), which emphasizes the 'monitoring of student development' as a core component of support services. Teachers focus more on being in that room at the time specified in the regulations or on the classroom teacher sending the student to the special education support room at that time, rather than on the qualitative outcome of the service they provide. Feride (LST): *"...now we can't follow [their progress]. I'm not sure if it has a negative effect in the classroom when I don't attend the*

child's class. I find out if a fellow teacher tells me... Now, even for students whose classes I have attended for 3-4 years, I can't follow up." This lack of coordination also undermines the role of the IEP Development Unit as defined in Article 48-1 of the Special Education Services Regulation (MoNE, 2018), which is responsible for evaluating student success across all educational settings.

Similarly, Nazlı, Hamit, and Nazire attribute the fundamental reason for the failure to transfer success in special education support to success in the classroom to the lack of communication between teachers and the weakness of the mechanism for providing feedback to each other in cooperation, which is limited to preparing exam papers. Mustafa Can, a student with intellectual disabilities, says, *"My teacher in class doesn't know about my homework here, and my teacher here doesn't know which page I'm on in class..."* Another student with intellectual disabilities, Hayriye, says, *"My friends are solving problems there [in class], and my teacher is teaching me the hours here [in the special education support room]. I want to solve problems like them, but my teacher says, 'You will do something else with the other teacher.'" Taking the student out of the same class for special education support is a situation restricted by Article 25-d of the Special Education Services Regulation (MoNE, 2018), which states that support education should ideally be provided outside the hours of core courses where the student receives instruction with their peers.*

Furthermore, according to the student's IEP, the lessons are being taught as described; however, if the student has such a request, a parallel plan can be developed with peers who do not need special education, considering both social and academic skills. Not engaging in similar activities with their peers can also lead to students being labelled. Rabia and Hayriye, who have special needs, also stated that their peers saw them as "failing children" and that they "never spoke" in class. Parallel planning with the IEP and curriculum can be implemented, and collaboration among teachers can be developed. To avoid these situations, it is emphasized that the physical and social environment must be organized to ensure the 'full participation' of students with special needs and to prevent social exclusion (MoNE, 2017). However, while support teachers criticize classroom teachers for being uncommunicative and unwilling to collaborate, it is also important that their own value judgments and competencies are positive: *"It is better for the class if a slow-learning child with an intellectual disability is removed from the lesson."* (Ruşen [LST]). Such perspectives can be shown as one of the fundamental reasons for the qualitative failure of special education support that serves inclusion. Furthermore, this viewpoint reflects a mindset that contradicts the fundamental principle of inclusion mentioned in Article 5-a of the Special Education Services Regulation (MoNE, 2018), which prioritizes the right of individuals with special needs to receive education in the same environment as their peers.

Legitimizing Symbolic Success

The findings show that, in the special education support process, the understanding is that students with intellectual disabilities learn through the fulfilment of bureaucratic duties. In other words, rather than a performance-oriented approach, the completion of the task reveals a situation of bureaucratic legitimization. The student's actual performance, whether they know it or not, is overshadowed by the creation of a symbolic situation of success. Students with intellectual disabilities are recognized for their success by receiving certificates of

appreciation or thanks at the end of the special education support period. *"...academically, it works like this; since we test these students according to their own levels, they can easily receive commendations and letters of appreciation... In other words, all children who receive special education support already receive commendations and letters of appreciation..."* (Döne [LST]). This widespread practice of awarding certificates based on simplified criteria contrasts with the spirit of Article 54-1 of the Special Education Services Regulation (MoNE, 2018), which stipulates that the evaluation of students with special needs should be based on the objectives in their Individualized Education Programs (IEP) to reflect their genuine developmental progress.

LSTs Nazlı and Hamit also stated that such certificates make parents happy and reduce pressure on teachers. They also said that they positively affect the school administration's special education success statistics. Furthermore, Eftelya (LST) believes that these symbolic achievement certificates will increase social acceptance, saying, *"When a student receives a certificate of appreciation, they feel that they have performed equally well among their peers in the class. It's good in that sense."* However, LSTs are not aware that students with intellectual disabilities have the opposite experience with these symbolic success initiatives: *"My teacher gave me a thank-you certificate, I was very happy...but my friends said, 'The teacher gave it to you so you wouldn't be upset.'"* (Hikmet, a student with intellectual disabilities). This situation indicates that the "social acceptance" goal mentioned in is being implemented through superficial rewards that may ironically lead to further peer stigmatization instead of genuine inclusion (MoNE, 2017).

Additionally, Kahraman (LST) approached making these academic courses "passable" from a different perspective. *"This situation also makes teachers feel more relaxed, because when you can't teach a child with intellectual disabilities, you don't try too hard, thinking they'll pass anyway."* However, this situation tends to create a simplified system rather than one adapted for individuals with intellectual disabilities, which also shows that LSTs are falling into a trap of helping. Esra, a student with intellectual disabilities, said, *"The exams here are easy; my teacher asks me things I know... The ones in class are very difficult; I can't do those questions..."* This simplified assessment approach bypasses the requirement for "differentiated and diversified assessment" emphasized in the Circular (MoNE, 2017), replacing qualitative pedagogical adaptation with a mechanism for mere administrative passage.

In addition, LSTs Feride, Nazlı, and Hamit stated that they compensate for students with intellectual disabilities' academic failures by awarding them high grades, thereby keeping the child within the system. *"At least they feel like they are on par with the class... high grades have a positive social impact on them... anyway, the normal children in the class have no communication problems with children with intellectual disabilities"* (Ruşen [LST]). However, Aysel, a student with intellectual disabilities, said, *"My dad is happy when I get good grades, but some of my friends say, 'The teacher asks you easy questions, that's why your grades are high,'"* indicating that she is actually aware of the situation and that reinforcing her actual performance with symbolic success grades has negative consequences in terms of peer acceptance, in addition to its positive results. This practice reveals a significant discrepancy; while Article 23-1 of the Special Education Services Regulation (MoNE, 2018) identifies the goal of special education as preparing individuals for active social

roles and independence, the reliance on artificially inflated grades the fact that peers are aware of this situation does not go beyond creating a social and academic barrier where the student with special needs is viewed as 'less capable' by their peers. The fundamental question here is why peers who do not need special education know that the questions are easy for this student? Furthermore, why are these peers aware that this student receives special education support? While LSTs state that they give high grades with good intentions to increase social acceptance, the fact that peers are aware of this situation does not go beyond creating a hierarchy between these children and their peers in terms of cognitive achievement. This outcome suggests that the 'social acceptance' aimed for in the Circular (MoNE, 2017) is undermined when bureaucratic success metrics supersede the pedagogical necessity of supporting the student's genuine competence and social standing.

Methodological Adaptations

The findings indicate that for special education support services to be effective, the availability of a resource room equipped with appropriate and diverse materials is crucial. However, in practice, participants complained about inadequate conditions and discussed how they constantly had to find alternatives to fulfil their pedagogical duties. Nazire (LST) mentioned the lack of material support, saying, *"I would like to have more materials because children work better with materials... when the same activities are done without different materials, children get bored... so the special education support room needs to be fully equipped... there is a room, but it shouldn't be empty."* Ökkeş (LST) also highlighted the seriousness of the situation, stating, *"They call the storage room, which contains a table and two chairs, a 'special education support room'."* Students with intellectual disabilities Muharrem and Hayriye criticized the lack of materials: *"We always do the colouring... there are no game... sometimes I get very bored, I don't want to come here [resource room]"* (student with intellectual disabilities Hayriye). These physical inadequacies directly conflict with Article 25-ç of the Special Education Services Regulation (MoNE, 2018), which mandates that support education rooms must be equipped with materials suitable for the needs of the students and the specific objectives of the lessons.

Celahir (LST) also criticized the bureaucracy's indifferent expectations: *"The ministry tells us to open a special education support room, but they don't tell us what to put in it, they don't provide resources... we can only print from the internet, we bring the books ourselves... they don't send official activity books and materials, we always have to do something ourselves."* Ökkeş (LST) also supported this view and described the difficulty of finding materials. Döne (LST) stated that they implement methodological adaptations through individual efforts, saying, *"I find learning outcomes suitable for the students' level on the internet, download them, and we do them in class."* This reliance on individual teacher effort to procure resources bypasses the administrative commitment found in Special Education Services Regulations (MoNE, 2018), which stipulates that the school administration and local authorities are responsible for providing the necessary materials and educational tools to ensure the quality of support services.

Eftelya (LST) expressed feeling somewhat exhausted by this situation and lamented the isolation of LSTs: *"Actually, we are trying to perform miracles here... There are no resources, no guidance. Celahir's (LST) protest that no*

resources are sent by the Ministry of Education is actually our protest... We are just filling out paperwork here. Everything looks perfect on paper, but these children's right to education is being lost." The participants' accounts suggest that they are stuck in the role of paperwork-filling bureaucrats rather than specialized teachers. While the Circular (MoNE, 2017) envisions the support room as a specialized environment for "methodological differentiation," the lack of structural support transforms this pedagogical ideal into a mere bureaucratic requirement. Consequently, the gap between the "perfectly documented" resource room in official records and the "empty storage room" in reality highlights a significant failure in the qualitative accountability of special education services in Türkiye.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study analyzes the qualitative status of special education support services in a region of Türkiye within the framework of bureaucratic accountability, critically discussing the practical implications of the legal framework (MoNE, 2018) and its motto of "maximum benefit." The data obtained reveal a gap between quantitative completeness and pedagogical quality. The most noteworthy finding of the study is the disconnect and lack of collaboration between the LST's practices and those of the classroom teacher. For this reason alone, these two teachers create their own IEPs for a child with intellectual disabilities. Florian (2019) and Ainscow (2020) state that the fundamental inclusive criterion for the independence and daily living skills of a disadvantaged individual [in this case, an individual with intellectual disabilities] is the holistic structure of the education system. Similarly, Atbasi and Hazir (2025) mentioned that direct interaction between teachers (candidates) and individuals with intellectual disabilities positively affects professional development and empathy building and stated that practical interaction beyond the classroom setting is important in developing inclusive attitudes. Without this holistic structure, the child will be like an add-on within the system, becoming only an instrument of bureaucracy. In other words, they will be in a position where they are merely a subject of inquiry for a higher hierarchy. It is precisely this aspect of bureaucratic accountability that is criticized in this study. Murphy (2009) and Pekince Kardaş (2019) criticize this situation as creating a paper-based safety net rather than implementing quality pedagogical practices, demonstrating that the system is fully functioning bureaucratically on paper.

Another important issue is the symbolic rewarding of children with intellectual disabilities by ignoring their performance, due to the desire to please parents and reduce pressure on teachers. However, although this situation seems to satisfy stakeholders other than the main actor, the student with intellectual disabilities has stated that receiving reward certificates despite their low grades causes them discomfort and raises questions among their peers. Bouck (2010) criticizes that instead of contributing to the child's learning process, symbolic achievements allow them to participate in society with false successes and risk further exclusion when confronted with reality. Dessemontet and Bless (2013) argue that this symbolic grading reinforces labelling by creating a hierarchy among peers.

This study also found a similar result to previous studies: the inadequacy of the physical conditions of the resource room and the lack of materials (please see Tosun & Almış, 2023; Bal Çelik & Çelik, 2025). Teachers stated that they tried to compensate for these deficiencies through their own individual

efforts. However, this situation has limitations in terms of sustainability. This situation puts more strain on teachers, and its negative effects on burnout levels are also being discussed. As such, providing quality special education support may not always be possible under these conditions. The situation described by the teacher Eftelya is very important in this study; her lament that "*everything is perfect on paper, but these children's right to education is being lost*" is proof that pedagogical flexibility is not considered in terms of quality (Al-Humedhi, 1999).

Consequently, despite the idealistic rhetoric of Special Education Services (MoNE, 2018), special education support services in Türkiye are engaged in a qualitative quest within a context of limitations under the rule-bound, formalistic pressure of bureaucratic accountability. While symbolic success criteria overshadow the achievement of real success, the lack of interaction and cooperation among teachers, and teachers' tendency to burden each other with work, e.g., preparing exam questions, etc., insufficient materials and physical environment, accountability based solely on checking whether quantitative expectations in the regulations are met, do not push LSTs beyond procedural compliance. In conclusion, qualitative process-oriented accountability is much more valuable than quantitative output-oriented accountability.

Implications

First, in terms of education policy, the Ministry of National Education should transform this procedural compliance into a process and output-focused qualitative accountability model. Support classrooms should cease to be merely places where paperwork is completed and instead ensure active participation in the learning process by providing materials and physical environment adjustments to support individuals. To achieve this, the current MEBBİS/e-School (e-Okul) modules could be updated to include qualitative progress tracking beyond mere grade entry. Instead of only checking if an IEP exists, the ministry should implement peer-review or mentor-based monitoring systems where successful pedagogical adaptations are documented and shared. Furthermore, the provision of materials should not be left to individual teacher effort; MoNE should establish a centralized digital or physical "Resource Bank" specifically for LSTs, ensuring that every support room meets the physical standards mandated in Article 25-ç of the Regulation.

In a social context, to prevent students with intellectual disabilities from being labeled in the classroom, no one other than teachers should know that they have special needs. When they go to the resource room, it should be stated that they are leaving the classroom for a different purpose, so that the grades they receive and their achievements do not lead to exclusionary approaches such as "*you are doing this because they asked you easy questions.*" *School administrations should organize awareness-raising activities for all students on "individual differences in learning" to normalize the use of support rooms, framing them as "specialized learning hubs" available for various educational needs, rather than just for "failing" students.*

LST' cooperation and interaction within the curriculum is also required by law and is provided through in-service training, meaning that not only are the goals set for students with intellectual disabilities fulfilled on paper, but the importance of partnership can also be explained. To move beyond this formal requirement, MoNE should institutionalize 'Co-planning Hours' within the weekly schedule for classroom

teachers and LSTs, transforming the IEP Development Unit from a procedural entity into a functional partnership. In-service training should shift from theoretical lectures to 'Applied Collaborative Workshops' where teachers co-design inclusive lesson plans and assessment tools.

Future researchers can compare primary and secondary school special education support using larger and more diverse sample groups to identify how bureaucratic expectations evolve across different educational levels. Additionally, further studies should examine the correlation between bureaucratic accountability and teacher burnout levels, specifically investigating how 'procedural ritualization' and the pressure of symbolic success affect the professional well-being of special education providers. Such research would fill a critical gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence on the psychological and pedagogical costs of administrative-heavy accountability systems in Türkiye.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is that it is a qualitative case study. In this context, because participants' subjective experiences and perspectives describe their situation, there is a limitation in generalizability. There were eight individuals with *intellectual* disabilities in our study, and the absence of experiences from other disability groups is another limitation. Furthermore, our study was framed in terms of bureaucratic accountability; therefore, burnout levels, self-efficacy, and teachers' different perspectives were not addressed.

Author Contributions

The authors contributed equally to the preparation of this manuscript. Both authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Ethical Declaration

This study was conducted with the approval of the Ordu University Educational Research Ethics Committee, as granted at the meeting held on May 23, 2025 (Protocol No. 2025-100).

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of the study.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

No generative artificial intelligence tools (ChatGPT, Gemini, Bard, etc.) were used in any stage of this study's research, writing, analysis, or reporting processes. All content in this study was created through the original contributions of the author. Lastly, Grammarly has proofread the study for language-related errors.

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