



## “I am not a caregiver!” Experiences and Views of Paraeducators about Their Roles and Responsibilities

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### ABSTRACT

The participation of paraeducators in education is a new topic discussed in Turkey. The roles and responsibilities of paraeducators vary depending on the school and class, and in some cases, there are differences in the job descriptions of paraeducators even working in the same school. In Turkey, there is a lack of legal regulations concerning the involvement of paraeducators in inclusive classrooms. This study was considered necessary with the objective of offering valuable insights to decision makers, administrators, practitioners, and academicians in order to develop job descriptions for paraeducators, establish employment conditions, define their qualifications, design educational content, and plan legal regulations related to these processes. The aim of the study is to determine the experiences and opinions of paraeducators working in inclusive settings. In this study, the experience and opinions of paraeducators were examined, and recommendations were made accordingly. A phenomenological design was used in this study, and semi-structured interviews were held with 15 paraeducators working in the field of special education. The data analysis involved a thorough examination of information obtained through semi-structured interviews, employing a systematic content analysis method. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) preservice, (b) experience and views about roles and responsibilities, (c) needs, and (d) recommendations. The findings highlighted the importance of clarifying the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators. In addition, the importance of providing professionals with training, employment, and job security was emphasized.

**Keywords:** Teacher assistant, paraprofessional, special education, inclusion, roles and responsibilities

## “Ben bakıcı değilim!” Özel Eğitimde Öğretmen Yardımcılarının Rol ve Sorumluluklarına İlişkin Deneyimleri ve Görüşleri

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### Öz

Eğitimde yardımcı personellerin yer alması Türkiye için yeni tartışılmaya başlanmış bir konudur. Öğretmen yardımcıların rol ve sorumlulukları, bulunduğu okula ve sınıfa göre değişiklik göstermekte, hatta bazı durumlarda aynı okulda görev yapan öğretmen yardımcıların bile görev tanımlarında farklılıklar olmaktadır. Türkiye’de, kaynaştırma/bütünleştirme sınıflarında öğretmen yardımcıların yer almalarına ilişkin yasal düzenlemelerde eksiklik bulunmaktadır. Bu araştırmaya öğretmen yardımcıların görev tanımlarının yapılması, istihdam koşullarının oluşturulması, niteliklerinin belirlenmesi ve eğitim içeriklerinin oluşturulmasında karar alıcılara, yöneticilere, uygulamacılara ve akademisyenlere katkı sağlayacağı düşüncesiyle gerek duyulmuştur. Araştırmanın amacı, kaynaştırma ortamında çalışan öğretmen yardımcıların deneyim ve görüşlerinin belirlenmesidir. Araştırmada, öğretmen yardımcıların deneyim ve görüşleri incelenmiş ve bunlara dayalı önerilerde bulunmuştur. Araştırma yöntemi olarak fenomenolojik desen kullanılmış ve özel eğitimde çalışan 15 öğretmen yardımcısı ile yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Veri analizinden dört tema ortaya çıkmıştır: (a) hizmet öncesi, (b) rol ve sorumluluklara dair deneyim ve görüşler (c) gereksinimler ve (d) öneriler. Bulgular, öğretmen yardımcıların rol ve sorumluluklarının netleştirilmesinin önemini ortaya koymuştur. Ayrıca, öğretmen yardımcılarına eğitim, istihdam ve iş güvencesi sağlamanın önemi vurgulanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Öğretmen yardımcısı, özel eğitim, kaynaştırma/bütünleştirme, rol ve sorumluluklar

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## Introduction

Education's principle of inclusiveness advocates for equal participation in educational environments regardless of factors like ethnicity, health, or disability (Francisco et al., 2020). With the increasing number of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, there is a growing need for additional classroom staff such as paraeducators or teacher assistants (Angelides et al., 2009; Patterson, 2006; Douglas et al., 2019). In countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Finland, paraeducators constitute a significant portion of the education workforce, comprising more than 25% (Radford et al., 2011; Webster & Blatchford, 2013). The involvement of paraeducators in inclusive education is governed by various legal regulations (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Pickett et al., 2003). It is expected that paraeducators possess specific competencies (Carter et al., 2009). In the United States, under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), it is legally mandated that paraeducators have at least a high school diploma and receive at least two years of supervised training.

When paraeducators were first defined, they were seen as responsible for children's self-care and for preparing materials, making photocopies, and carrying out other classroom duties (Blalock, 1991). In the following years, they provided support by undertaking a wider variety of tasks such as, instruction, material modification, peer interaction facilitation, behavioral intervention implementation, and personal care support (Carter et al., 2019; Douglas et al., 2019; French, 1998; Reddy et al., 2020). According to the annual report of the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. DOE, 2021), approximately 1 million paraeducators are employed in inclusive classrooms that include individuals with Special Education Needs (SEN) between the ages of 3 and 21. Similar situations have been reported in different countries (e.g., Angelides et al., 2009; Köpfer & Böing, 2020; Zhao et al., 2021). However, research indicates that there are discrepancies between legal definitions and actual practices (Giangreco et al., 2010).

Carter et al. (2009) and Douglas et al. (2019) have noted the absence of established standards for paraeducator services in many countries. It is emphasized that further research is needed to describe the current state of affairs in terms of the roles and responsibilities, employment conditions, and job descriptions of paraeducators (Blatchford et al., 2012; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Pickett et al., 2003). The lack of clear definition of roles and responsibilities for paraeducators is recognized as a significant issue. Paraeducators are expected to take on certain classroom tasks to allow classroom teachers more time for instructional activities (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Pickett et al., 2003). According to legal regulations, paraeducators are expected to conduct training under the supervision of a classroom teacher, provide support for behavioral problems, facilitate social skills, assist with

self-care, and ensure safety (Downing et al., 2000; Mason et al., 2021; Patterson, 2006). However, research shows that paraeducators often assume various and complex roles, such as providing direct education, and one-on-one support for special needs students, rather than serving in a supportive role (Blatchford et al., 2012; Downing et al., 2000; Farrell et al., 2010; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Giangreco, 2003; Mason et al., 2021; Patterson, 2006; Webster & Blatchford, 2013). This lack of clarity continues to persist (Downing et al., 2000; Mason et al., 2021).

Many researchers emphasize the need for paraeducators to receive specific training (Douglas et al., 2019; Giangreco et al., 2010; Mason et al., 2021) and the crucial role of working beneath the supervision of a professional (Giangreco et al., 2010; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Radford et al., 2015; Stewart, 2019). Research indicates that paraeducators often provide instruction to students with SEN independently, separate from the classroom teacher (Demirdağlı & Kizir, in review; Blatchford et al., 2012; Downing et al., 2000; Giangreco, 2003; Patterson, 2006; Webster & Blatchford, 2013). This highlights the importance of defining the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators and establishing specific standards.

Over time, the roles of paraeducators have become more diverse, with a significant focus on instructional activities. However, despite increased responsibilities, their wages have not kept pace, and they are often not recognized at the same professional level as teachers (Douglas et al., 2019; Kerry & Kerry, 2003; Mason et al., 2021; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). Patterson (2006) highlighted the variations in roles and responsibilities of paraeducators across different schools and classrooms, sometimes even within the same school. Douglas et al. (2019) argued that the ambiguity in roles can lead to burnout and attrition among paraeducators in this field. It has been reported that many paraeducators tend to pursue careers in other fields where they can progress quickly or find better-paying jobs (Angelides et al., 2009; Giangreco et al., 2010; Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

The literature was searched to clarify the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators. Fisher and Pleasants (2012) conducted a comprehensive survey that included 12 roles defined for paraeducators in the literature. The research results revealed that the roles undertaken by paraeducators are complex and diverse, lacking a consistent standard in practice, and not aligning with the definitions established by legal regulations. The researchers emphasized the need for further in-depth research to concretely define the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators. Douglas and colleagues (2016) examined the situation of classroom teachers providing supervision, which is a requirement according to legal regulations. For this purpose, they conducted semi-structured interviews with special education teachers. The research findings indicated that effective

collaboration was not established between paraeducators and general classroom teachers, and supervision support was mostly provided by special education teachers through one-way communication. Paraeducators were found to have a passive role in this process. However, the research is limited to the experiences and views of special education teachers and does not encompass the perspectives of paraeducators, which is considered important for determining their views and experiences on the crucial aspect of supervision. Zobel and Hwang (2020) aimed to reveal the current status of paraeducators through a survey study that covered various issues, including pre-service processes, requirements, roles and responsibilities undertaken, and job satisfaction. The research results support the qualitative uncertainty in defining the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators in the field of special education. They emphasized the importance of concretely defining roles and responsibilities.

Özaydın (2020) investigated the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators based on stakeholder views. Data were collected from paraeducators, parents, and classroom teachers. The research results indicate that stakeholders have different views on roles and responsibilities. Differences were observed not only in the qualifications of paraeducators and the roles and responsibilities they should undertake but also in the elements that stakeholders identified as problematic in practice. This once again emphasizes the need for concrete definitions of roles and responsibilities. Another significant factor in the schools where the research was conducted was the absence of legal foundations for paraeducator practices (Özaydın, 2020).

When considering the collective body of research, a prominent requirement emerges for the clarification of paraeducators' roles and responsibilities. While legal regulations outline certain responsibilities such as educational support, behavior management, social skills promotion, and assistance with self-care and safety, the practical implementation often lacks clarity. Job descriptions for paraeducators are often ambiguous, leaving room for unwritten and undefined tasks (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). Although their instructional roles may increase, their involvement in safety and self-care skills remains limited (Mason et al., 2021; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). This lack of clear definition for the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators can impact the effectiveness of their services (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012).

This study thoroughly investigates the experiences and perspectives of paraeducators concerning their roles and responsibilities. The insights derived from the experiences and viewpoints of current practitioners of paraeducator services will significantly contribute to the delineation of these roles and responsibilities.

The inclusion of paraeducators in education is a topic newly discussed in Turkey. Although teacher assistants have been more common in inclusive classrooms especially in recent years in Turkey (Özaydın, 2020), the number of studies on this subject is limited (Demirdağlı &

Kizir, 2023; Güleç-Aslan, 2022; Özaydın, 2020). In Turkey, there is no explanation in the legislation of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) regarding the job descriptions or employment of paraeducators in educational environments (Demirdağlı & Kizir, 2023, Demirdağlı & Kizir, in review; Güleç-Aslan, 2022; Özaydın, 2020). In many cases, paraeducators are hired directly by parents and lack a formalized structure within schools (Demirdağlı & Kizir, in review; Özaydın, 2020). There is a lack of clear job descriptions and regulations specifying the qualifications that paraeducators should hold.

Despite the legal framework, there is a need for further research and understanding of how paraeducators are effectively integrated into inclusive education settings to ensure meaningful and impactful support. The importance of providing clear and concrete definitions for the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators is frequently emphasized, as the lack of clear delineation of roles and responsibilities can lead to confusion for paraeducators, classroom teachers working with them, and families. This study was conducted with the belief that its findings would assist decision makers, administrators, practitioners, and academicians in developing job descriptions for paraeducators, creating employment conditions, determining their qualifications, and creating educational content. The findings of this study will greatly benefit families and teachers. For this reason, the purpose of this study was to examine both pre- and postservice processes based on the opinions and experiences of paraeducators. In line with this purpose, answers to the following questions were sought:

- (1) What are paraeducators' experiences and views about the preservice process?
- (2) What are the working conditions of paraeducators?
- (3) What are paraeducators' experiences and views about their roles and responsibilities?
- (4) What are the needs of paraeducators?
- (5) What are paraeducators' recommendations for the whole service process?

## Method

### Research Design

In this study, a phenomenology design, which is one of the qualitative research methods that allows individuals to reveal their experiences, perceptions, perspectives, and opinions specific to certain situations (Heigham & Croker, 2009; Merriam, 1997), was used to determine the opinions and experiences of paraeducators. This methodology allows researchers to uncover the "essence of things" and provides insights into social phenomena (Lin, 2013, p. 469).

### Participants

In this study, a snowball sampling technique, which is a purposeful sampling method, was used. This technique "identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know people who know what cases are information

rich, that is, good examples for study, good interview subjects” (Patton, 2002, p. 182). Prior to participant selection, the authors of this qualitative research engaged in discussions regarding criteria for identifying participants. Factors such as their expertise, education levels, experiences, and work environments were considered. However, given the absence of legal regulations or standardized practices for paraeducators in Turkey, the authors concluded that it would not be feasible to establish specific criteria. The participants initially contacted ( $n = 3$ ) were provided with detailed information on the purpose, process, and ethical principles of the study (such as nondisclosure of information to third parties, confidentiality of records, anonymization of names, and voluntary withdrawal from the study) through face-to-face preliminary interviews and a written informed consent text. Subsequent interviews were conducted over the phone with participants who volunteered, and the informed consent text was conveyed via WhatsApp. Appointments were then made for interviews with those who expressed willingness to participate, following a similar process as with the initial participants. In brief, the process started with the paraeducators whom the authors knew and continued with more participants they suggested. During this process, 18 paraeducators were reached, but interviews could not be conducted with three of them due to their high workloads. In this study, 15 paraeducators living in different cities of Turkey were reached for in-depth interviews. The participants were anonymized due to ethical rules (e.g., with code names P01 through P15). Table 1 presents the participants’ demographic backgrounds.

### **Data Collection Tools**

In line with the aims of the study, a semi-structured interview technique was employed, and interview questions were developed to conduct the interviews. In this process, initially, both authors conducted a literature review and determined the framework of the interview questions. Then, each author individually prepared potential interview questions. Due to the authors residing in different cities, they discussed and finalized 16 questions via video-conference. Subsequently, they sought expert opinion from a specialist with a doctoral degree in special education and academic experience.

Based on the expert feedback, it was decided to keep the same number of questions but make some changes in the wording. Next, the second author conducted a pilot interview with a participant over a voice call which was used to test the interview questions. The interview was transcribed by the first author, and then the authors discussed the interview questions. After the pilot interview, it was decided to remove three questions. Two of these questions were related to roles and responsibilities in the special education room, and one was related to the determination of needs that drive roles and responsibilities. Finally, a total of 13 open-ended questions were developed, covering the preservice processes, roles and responsibilities, needs, and

suggestions of paraeducators. Ethical approval was obtained from the Uludag University Ethics Committee (PN: 2022-07/21).

### **Data Collection**

In this study, the semi-structured interview technique was used to obtain in-depth information about the views and experiences of the participants and to enable the interviewer to act flexibly (Glesne, 2013). Moreover, in this qualitatively conducted study, a semi-structured interview format was employed as participants’ experiences about a subject were aimed to be elicited in their own words.

After the pilot interview, the authors made interview appointments with the participants via text messages to determine the days and times they were available. Participants were offered the option of conducting the interviews via phone or video conferencing (e.g., Skype or WhatsApp). All participants preferred to conduct the interviews over the phone. During the pre-interview sessions, participants were asked to ensure a quiet and comfortable environment and to avoid any distractions during the interview. Availability was confirmed with each participant via text message 30 min before the scheduled interview time, and interviews were conducted if the participants were ready. Each participant was reminded of ethics principles prior to the interview. Accordingly, participants were informed that their names would remain confidential, voice recordings would not be shared with any third parties, their statements would be transcribed verbatim, and they could withdraw from September 1 and 20, 2022. The interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants for transcription purposes. The interviews ranged from 24 to 55 min. Overall, the interviews lasted for a total of 9 hours and 6 min.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected using a semi-structured interview method were analyzed in depth with systematic use of a content analysis method. First, the audio recordings were transcribed. A separate file was opened for each participant, and the texts transferred included a total of 229 pages. In the analysis process, the codes were determined first. While coding, repetitive words or sentences were determined and named. Next, emergent categories and themes were identified depending on the coding. In this process, the codes that were related to each other were combined, and the categories were determined considering their common features.

Afterwards, the themes were determined according to the common characteristics of the categories. At each stage, the data were read repeatedly, and the codes, categories, and themes obtained were systematically arranged and interpreted. During the data analysis process, the first author conducted her analysis independently, and then, through discussion with the second author, the codes, categories, and themes were finalized upon mutual agreement. Accordingly, we agreed on 34 codes, 12 categories, and four themes.

The audio recordings and password-protected folder were stored in an encrypted storage area to ensure data security, to which only the authors had access. Additionally, video conferencing meetings were conducted with password protection. To protect participant confidentiality, their identities, names, or other identifying information were not shared with third parties, and the researchers took care to maintain the participants' privacy. In order to avoid bias and conduct the analysis impartially, the researchers independently conducted their analyses and evaluations of the data. Furthermore, healthy and regular communication was established between the researchers to ensure that the steps, decisions, and interpretations of the findings during the analysis process were transparent and understandable.

### Validity and Reliability

The credibility of the study was ensured by obtaining sample participant confirmation ( $n = 5$ ). Confirmability was also evaluated in this study. In this process, the researchers worked on the transcripts of the five sample interviews and used Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula of "[Agreements/Agreements + Disagreements) x 100]" to calculate confirmability. As a result, the confirmability average was 87.5% (range = 50–100%).

### Findings

Four themes emerged as a result of the analysis of the responses given to the interview questions: experiences and opinions about the preservice process, experiences and views regarding roles and responsibilities, needs, and suggestions. The findings are presented under these four themes, accompanied by quotes from the participants' comments. Additionally, categories and codes, along with their frequencies, are demonstrated in a table for each theme. It should be noted that in presenting the findings, the number of responses exceeded the number of participants in cases where a participant provided multiple responses to a single question (i.e., included multiple codes).

#### Experiences And Opinions About The Preservice Process

This theme included paraeducators' knowledge of the employment processes and their roles and responsibilities. The categories and codes, along with their frequency information, are provided in Table 2 for this theme.

Regarding the recruitment process, all the participants emphasized that they were recruited by families. P03 mentioned the process, saying, "The school did not support paraeducators anyway. Everything was completely under the family's responsibility, depending on the family's wishes," and P08 stated, "Everything (regarding the recruitment process) happened between me and the family. Whether it was financial matters or information about the child. Everything was provided by the family." The majority of the participants expressed that their connection with the family during the

recruitment process was through a friend or an acquaintance. Regarding this matter while P09 mentioned, "We had a friend. He was a paraeducator in that institution, and there was a need. He suggested me, and that was how we communicated."; P11, "...the owner of the daycare is someone we know. They said, 'We are looking for a shadow teacher. Do you want to work?' and offered me the job. That's how I started working." Some participants expressed that they connected with families through job postings on internet websites and WhatsApp groups. Regarding this, P08 said, "We have a WhatsApp group for our university class. There was a post in the group about looking for a shadow teacher for a student with autism of a certain age. I contacted the family through that." On the other hand, P14 shared her experiences with the following words:

*...I was already working while studying at university. I used to be a playmate and do babysitting for hourly pay. Then one day, I was staying with a friend and was unemployed at the time, so I fell into depression. Later on, I saw a job posting for a shadow teacher on one of those caregiver websites. I went to meet with the child's mother. She asked me very enticing and pressing questions like 'Can you do this?' and 'Are you capable?' I said, 'I can do it, try me, give me a chance.' She said, 'Okay, let's make it a 1-month trial period.'*

It has been determined that the connection of the participants hired by families with the school is generally provided by the family. During this process, it was observed that no formal recruitment procedure was applied and participants were mostly not asked for any documents. In relation to the official procedures for recruitment, P06 said, "No one asked me for any documents. Only the family met the school administrators, and I got employed," and P09 said, "Obviously, there was no formal process." There have been instances where some institutions have requested documents from the participants. However, these documents have been mainly aimed at verifying the participant's identity rather than providing proof of their qualifications for providing paraeducator services or to become official employees. In this regard, P05 said, "The school only asked me for my criminal record and vaccination certificate. The child's parent went to the school and talked about the situation. As the family pays the wages, it was enough to inform the school." P10 stated, "I went to the school principal and submitted my student certificate. I filled out a letter stating that I took responsibility on my own behalf. That's how I did it, you know." Similarly, P11 narrated her experience by saying, "I showed the certificates I received."

Another finding obtained from the interviews is that the paraeducator service fee, as expressed by P04 with the words "I received wages from the family on a weekly basis," was confirmed by all participants. Furthermore, the majority of paraeducators emphasized that they were not official employees of the school and that the employer was the family, thus they were not covered by the social security system, working informally, and

therefore, they had no insurance. P1 expressed her experience as follows: "I am not a teacher or an assistant teacher of the school. I am just someone who has a relationship with the parent... There is no insurance, I only receive payment from the family." P13 also shared her experience: "My insurance was not paid for 3 years. So, I had nothing legal." Only two participants stated that they were included in the social security system by

showing that they were working at the families' own workplaces and that their insurance was paid by the families. P14 explained this situation with the following statement: "My insurance was paid by the family. The family I worked for is very established and wealthy..." and P06 said, "The family is making my insurance. They have their own factories. They pay for my insurance through the factory, but I work at the school

Table 1. Demographics of participants

Code	Age	Gender	Education	Profession	Working Place	Special Need of Student	Age of Student
P01	28	Female	Bachelor	Technology design teacher	Special education school	<sup>a</sup> ASD	5
P02	31	Male	Bachelor	Gym teacher	Inclusion	ASD	12
P03	22	Female	Undergraduate student	Special education teacher	Inclusion	ASD	8
P04	25	Female	Undergraduate student	Special education teacher	Inclusion	<sup>b</sup> ADHD	7
P05	22	Male	Bachelor	Sociologist	Inclusion	ASD	7
P06	31	Female	Bachelor	Turkish language teacher	Special education class	ASD	8
P07	26	Female	Undergraduate student	Special education teacher	Inclusion	ASD	9
P08	22	Male	Undergraduate student	Special education teacher	Inclusion	ASD	7
P09	21	Male	Undergraduate student	Special education teacher	Inclusion	ASD	6
P10	24	Male	Undergraduate student	Special education teacher	Inclusion	ADHD	7
P11	21	Female	Associate degree	Business administration	Inclusion	ASD	5
P12	22	Female	Undergraduate student	Child development	Inclusion	<sup>c</sup> PWS	4
P13	25	Female	Associate degree	Child development	Inclusion	ASD	9
P14	27	Female	High school	None	Inclusion	ASD	7
P15	33	Female	Bachelor	History teacher	Inclusion	ASD	10

Note. a Autism Spectrum Disorder. b Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. c Prader-Willi Syndrome.

Table 2. Categories and Codes for the Preservice Process Theme

Categories	Codes	f
Employers	Employers are families	15
Unofficial workers	There is no official basis	15
	Has no insurance	13
	The family is responsible for the insurance	2
	Family pays the wage	15
Salary	I knew	8
	I didn't know	7
Awareness of Roles and Responsibilities	Through colleagues/teachers	7
	Through experience	6
	Through research	4
	Through education	3
	Through observation	2
	Through parents	2
	Through acquaintance	7
	Through a friend	4
	Job postings on websites	2
Finding a job via job postings	Job postings shared on WhatsApp groups	2
	Criminal record and vaccination certificates	2
Required documents	Letter of intent to volunteer	2
	Student certificate	1
	Certificates	1

Note: f: frequency.

Table 3. Categories and Codes of the Experience and Views About Roles and Responsibilities Theme

Categories	Codes	f
Supporting social skills	Social skills	15
Intervention to problem behavior	Problem behavior	13
Supporting self-care skills	Self-care skills	8
To be with student during activities	School activities	8
Supporting academic skills	Academic skills	6
After-school times	No responsibility	8
	Responsibility present	7
Ensuring student safety	Safety	4
Developing IEP	IEP team and even the IEP absent	6
	Not a part of IEP team	4
	No role and responsibility	3
	I prepare the IEP	3
	I only implement the IEP	2
	I prepared the IEP together with the teacher	1

Note: f: frequency.

Table 4. Categories and Codes of the Needs Theme

Categories	Codes	f
Salary	Wages	11
Cooperation with teachers	Cooperation	8
Acceptance and appreciation	Shift in perspective (Caregiver)	7
	Acceptance and validation	7
Training needs	Behavioral management	7
	Special education	6
	Training	4
	Informing about roles and responsibilities	4
Knowledge	Guidance	3
Supervision	Supervision support	1
	Breaktime	3
Breaktime needs	Permanent employment and job security	3
Job guarantee	Insurance	1
Source needs	Manual/handbook/guidebook	2

Note: f: frequency.

Table 5. Categories and Codes of the Suggestions Theme

Categories	Codes	f
Official or government agency employment	Employment	7
Pre service and inservice Training	Training	6
Legal working	Legal rights	4
	Official employment	4
Assisting teacher instead of supporting only one child	Supporting all students	4
	Helping the teacher	1
Inspection and assesment	Inspection	2
	Assesment	1
Informing	Informing families	2
	Informing teachers	2
	Informing school staff	1
Definition and clarification	Identification	2
	Clear role and responsibility definition	1
Proficiency and expertise boundary	Competence	2
	Expertise boundary	2

Note: f: frequency.

Paraeducators in this study expressed diverse opinions regarding their roles and responsibilities in the preservice process. While some stated that they lacked general knowledge, others claimed to possess knowledge and offered various explanations about the sources of their knowledge. Clearly, their knowledge was acquired through the guidance of colleagues and parents, as well as through experience, observation, education, and personal research. In relation to this, P01

said, "How can it be done? I had no idea, so I learned a little by experience. They also made me observe a few people (parents) just before starting my job. These provided me with some guidance." P08 said, "I had friends who did this job before. As I had talked to them, I knew about what they were doing... by chatting among ourselves, we were getting information about the job." P15 said, "...beforehand, the families talk to me about what I need to do and how much intervention is

necessary.” P13 said, “I found out through my research on the internet. Everyone said I should be with the child. I didn't know it wasn't just about being with the child. I already knew about special education. I didn't know as much as a teacher who specialized in special education, but I had attended special education courses...” Another participant, P11, shared her experiences and reported that she learned about the roles and responsibilities through her own efforts, saying,

... I watched videos on the internet, social media, YouTube. What kind of education is given to a child with special needs, how to behave, which toys, which actions. I mean I usually watched this. I trained myself at first. Then, I got a certificate at work and continued training in that way. There was no talk of ‘You will do it this way, this will happen.’ I've learned on my own with my own efforts...

P06, on the other hand, drew attention to the negative experiences she had in the process of obtaining information:

...beforehand, I investigated what I should do, what is done in the profession, what is not done, what I can be involved in, and what I cannot be. During my time at school, I also learned from the mistakes I sometimes made. For example, as a paraeducator, I should definitely not undertake the duties that the classroom teacher should do, or for example, when I try to help other children even with good intentions, we can sometimes be exposed to adverse or harsh reactions from the teacher. That's why I am more or less aware of what my responsibilities are, sometimes by trial and error, and sometimes, as I said at work, due to the things we experienced before...

In this theme, all participants reported the use of different procedures in practice; the absence of a formal recruitment process, informal employment, hiring by students' families, payment of wages by families, and generally working without insurance. It was seen that while no official documents were requested from institutions when starting work, various documents were occasionally required. It was determined that paraeducators found their jobs mostly through acquaintances and sometimes through job advertisements. Some participants stated that they were knowledgeable about the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators in the pre-service process, while others were not. However as the interviews deepened, it was determined that they were generally knowledgeable about the service process rather than the preservice process.

### ***Experiences and Views Regarding Roles and Responsibilities***

This theme included the experiences and views of the paraeducators regarding their roles and responsibilities during class time, recess/leisure time, out-of-school time, and the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process. The categories and codes related to this theme and frequency information are presented in Table 3.

The findings obtained through the interviews indicate that the participants supported children in some basic areas both during class and outside of class time. These areas include intervening in problem behaviors, supporting social, academic, and self-care skills, being present during activities, and ensuring children's safety. The majority of the participants stated that their main responsibility during lessons was to intervene with the inappropriate behaviors of their students with SEN. In addition, they stated that they had roles and responsibilities for being with their students during activities and for supporting their academic skills as well as their self-care skills. P06, P07, and P08 reported their experiences as follows:

...I first started, they told me to just work with K... during breaks and lunchtime. That's how it started, but I realized there was no progress with the child and behavior problems were increasing. Plus, the child would cry every time I took him out. So, I talked to the parents and they talked to the classroom teachers. Also, because I gained the trust of the classroom teacher, they started to include me in the class. Because the child was calmer with me around, I started to attend classes and worked with the child for more than just 15 min. During the rest of the time, I followed my own program for my own student. I supported the child academically and with life skills as well. Sometimes, unpleasant situations arose (problem behaviors), and I would take the child and say 'Let me calm him down. Let me talk to him and help him calm down. Then we'll come back.' I would take the child out of the classroom or try to solve the problem in the classroom. That's how we solved behavior problems. I was the one who intervened more (P06).

...during class time, M... had an activity book. I had the child do whatever pages they wanted each day. Other than that, I didn't isolate the child completely during the hours they needed to be in the classroom. Interaction is also important among friends. I was constantly there for interaction. As I mentioned before, I was with the child for 3 hours, so we did an activity for 1 hour. After that, the child was interacting with friends for the remaining time (P07).

...to minimize the problem behaviors, because my student was easily distracted, got angry at the smallest thing, even teasing his friends... I taught him addition and subtraction individually... I went to the toilet with him to minimize any problem behaviors (P08).

The participants said that their roles and responsibilities were to deal only with students with SEN individually rather than helping the teacher and taking care of other students, and that they shadowed their students with SEN. In relation to this, P05 said, “We were like a class in a classroom. In no way did the teacher say, ‘Let's do this, do that.’ The teacher just left it to me,” and P07 said, “...I'm always chasing the child like a shadow.” In relation to this, P04 said, “First, my role in the lesson is to calmly sit that child down at the desk in class. Then, it is to apply the activities quietly that I prepared myself for the student.”



All of the participants stated that they had a responsibility to support their students' social skills during breaktime or free time. In relation to this, P14 said, "...we definitely played games with the other children, to socialize." In addition, P05, pointing out that they were also responsible for their students' safety, said, "We kept an eye on him during breaktime." In addition, some participants have also mentioned that they intervene in problem behaviors during break times. P09 shared their experiences regarding this issue as follows:

..We also shadow the child during breaks. I try to prevent negative behaviors in the yard or attend to the child's needs (self-care). As you can imagine, communication is a bit challenging. We act more like a barrier between them and the students or teachers.

The participants' views show that the paraeducators' responsibilities covered the entire school time. One of the participants, P15, drew attention to the fact that she spent almost all of her school time with the student and could not spare time for her own needs, saying, "Believe me, I was barely getting myself home. So much so that I never went to the toilet." In addition, participant P09 pointed out that constantly shadowing the child can be challenging for the paraeducator and can also hinder the child's socialization by making them dependent on the paraeducator. P09 expressed his views on this topic with the following words:

To be honest, we didn't really have a break during recess. We were still attending to the child even during recess. But I think this is the wrong approach. Because I was trying my best to stay away from the child so that I could encourage them to join the playgroups a bit more. When I first started, I also participated in the games. Later, I gradually withdrew and encouraged them to participate and communicate with others. I think this is the right thing to do. Sometimes we need to step back when necessary.

It was revealed that some of the paraeducators also had responsibilities to support their students outside school. Regarding this, P12 said, "I'm teaching skills. If there is homework, we do it, and if not, we play games." P06 related this situation to the employer's being a parent, saying, "...As the family pays the salary, it is how you dealt with them and how you talked to them." While some participants thought they should have responsibilities outside school, some did not agree with this view. P07 said, "What more can I do? Actually, this question has to be asked. It is necessary to follow the child even after lessons; it is not like 'I have finished and I am going.' I think it should be our responsibility. On the other hand, P15 said, "I don't think it should be our responsibility because the child is already with me for 6 hours... I am very worn out, but if I didn't love my student that much... I even came to the point of quitting my job from time to time."

The findings indicate that the participants had different views and experiences regarding the roles and responsibilities of the IEP team and the IEP process.

Some of the participants stated that there was no IEP team or plan for the child, while others claimed that they were not included in the IEP team, had no role or responsibility in the process, only implemented the plan, or prepared the IEP with the teacher or by themselves.

Regarding the IEP process, P08 said, "We prepared an IEP with the teacher," and P01 said, "I was only doing what needed to be rehearsed according to the plan they did. I was not included in the IEP team." Regarding not being a member of the team, P06 stated that she had negative feelings and said, "Frankly, I felt excluded." P12, on the other hand, said that she was responsible for preparing and implementing the IEP, saying, "The boy had no plan. I prepare a complete list of achievements and direct the education process accordingly. I go ahead lesson by lesson; I prepared my own plan." Other participants stated that there were no IEP teams at their schools and that their students did not have IEPs. Therefore, they emphasized that they did not have any roles or responsibilities regarding the IEP process. P05 shared his experiences regarding the topic, saying,

I have never asked the teacher about it because I was so afraid of being misunderstood. In order not to be misunderstood, I never asked a question like 'What is written in our student's IEP?' or 'Can we see it?' I mean I did not see an IEP file at school. He had already stated that he had no knowledge of preparing an IEP.

In this theme, it was found that paraeducators have the responsibility of supporting both social skills and interventions for problem behavior during both classroom instruction and free time, as well as supporting academic and self-care skills, providing assistance during activities, and ensuring children's safety. Additionally, it was identified that due to the employer being the family, they may also have responsibilities outside school hours at the request of the family. Furthermore, it was found that the roles and responsibilities related to the IEP team and IEP process varied. Thus, in some schools, there was no IEP team or plan for the child; in some cases, the responsibility for preparing the IEP lies with the paraeducator; in some cases, there is no role in the Individual Education Program (IEP) team, and in others, there is only the responsibility for implementing the IEP

### Needs

The findings related to the needs of paraeducators are presented in this theme. The categories and codes related to this theme, along with frequency information, are presented in Table 4.

The paraeducators pointed out that they had various needs regarding their roles and responsibilities. Among them was the need for intensive training and knowledge about special education, behavior management, and their roles and responsibilities.

P13 said, "First of all, I think paraeducators need to know about special education because they don't know have much knowledge," while P08 said, "Regarding this subject, for example, what kind of environment will I

encounter in the classroom? What will I do? What should be done? I would like to be informed about this.” The participants emphasized the need for education to be able to intervene in problem behaviors effectively. Regarding this, P05 stated, “Actually, I would like to receive information on how to start, what kind of strategies to follow when faced with different types of problem behaviors.” P08 expressed the most significant need for information and education:

You cannot move on to academic subjects before ending problem behavior. Inclusion is not possible either. In my opinion, everyone who works in this field needs to receive training in applied behavior analysis. This can be done through individual courses or within their own schools. I believe that it is essential to have knowledge in this field, and the next steps depend on individuals improving themselves in academic subjects.

One of the topics that some participants focused on was the need for practical education and guidance from professionals.

The participants generally stated that they wanted to be accepted and valued by both parents and school staff and that they were uncomfortable with being seen as caregivers. In relation to this, P03 said, “Unfortunately, parents expect us more to be a caregiver than to be a paraeducator or a facilitator at work,” and P06 said, “Like everyone else, even the teacher you work with at school thinks ‘your job is to take care of disabled children.’ Thus, we have to explain to everyone saying that we’re also a teacher, I AM NOT A CAREGIVER!”

In addition, P13 said, “I don't feel valued at all, ever! So they don't care about you (teachers). They act like you don't exist. You are not a teacher in their eyes anyway.”

Particularly, the participants emphasized that they needed the acceptance and cooperation of the teachers they worked with. Regarding this, P06 said,

It is possible to work with children in a certain order by collaborating with teachers, but because we are paraeducators, we are not included in any way whatsoever. Actually, one feels excluded like this. Also, one of the teachers I work with was very uncomfortable with the fact that the children saw me as a teacher. Now, for example, since they themselves do not stay in the classroom during breaks, and we are constantly interacting with the children and helping them, the children start to feel close to us. When they have a need, they come to you. One of the teachers was uncomfortable with this. For example, when a child came to me and said, ‘Can you help me, teacher?’ the teacher said something like, ‘M... cannot help you, you need to ask your class teacher.’

The participants drew attention to their needs in terms of employment, wages, and improvement of working conditions. In this regard, they emphasized the issue of insufficient and unbalanced wages. P01 said, “No matter how much you love your job, you spend too much time and get very low wages. That's why the wage does not satisfy us.”

In summary, in this theme, it was determined that these paraeducators needed training regarding special education and behavior management; a shift in perspective toward being recognized and valued as caregivers; collaboration with teachers; supervisory support and a guiding handbook; job security and social protection; and the improvement of wages and working conditions.

### Suggestions

This theme presents the solutions proposed by the participants regarding the issues they addressed. The categories and codes related to this theme, along with frequency information, are provided in Table 5.

In the interviews, participants frequently made suggestions regarding working conditions. Accordingly, they suggested that employment should be carried out by an official institution. In this regard, P04 said, “It should definitely be formal. The government should know what I am doing. Everything must be on paper, recorded,” and P15 said, “I want to be valued and have it formalized because it exists.” In addition, the participants suggested that they should have legal rights. Regarding suggestions, P03 stated, “...it would be more appropriate to talk about our rights, responsibilities, or the more formal and legal processes of this job.”

In addition, the participants suggested that they should have legal rights. Participants also provided various suggestions for enhancing the quality of the services provided. In this context, they suggested that the definition of paraeducator should be made and roles and responsibilities should be clarified. P02 explained his suggestion as follows: “There is no clear definition of paraeducator; first of all, I think that this definition should be made, and it should be clear who the institutions and individuals are dealing with, and every institution should be informed.” In addition, some participants suggested that school staff, teachers, and families should be informed about their roles and responsibilities. In this regard, P10 expressed his thoughts with the following words:

For instance, counseling, but not only for me. There should be informative sessions for parents and teachers who request our services at the school. For instance, what they can do, what they should do, but it should be in line with the knowledge of the student's class teacher and parent. When I went to the class, the teacher didn't know why I was there. So, as soon as there was a little noise, she thought that I came to get the student out of the class. But I knew that it was not the case for a paraeducator. Similarly, other students' parents in the class should know their responsibilities, and the school management and administration should also know their responsibilities toward them.

Mentioning the ambiguity and irregularity in the existing information about paraeducators' roles and responsibilities, P09 said, “It would be much better if this were done in a more systematic way. I mean no matter how much your colleagues talk about it to you or no

matter how good a model they become, it doesn't work." Some participants suggested that their roles and responsibilities should change from focusing on a single student to becoming facilitators who support and assist teachers in dealing with all students. In this regard, they recommended that their roles be redefined to better encompass the needs of all students. P03 said, "I think the job of the paraprofessional should be facilitated for all students, not for a single student."

The participants emphasized the importance of receiving education, particularly in special education. In this regard, P03 suggested, "Various trainings can be provided, such as in-service trainings or creating small units within special education departments. I believe that trainings on what needs to be done and what shouldn't be done should be provided, and the focus should be on individuals' development." P08 expressed his recommendation:

I'm not saying that only people from special education should do this, but I'm saying that this should be the priority. After that, people from other fields can also join. However, I think that our colleagues from other fields should first do shadow teaching by taking a course offered by the MoNE. Then, they should start working. Of course, I can't say how much this is possible in Turkey's conditions. This is just my personal opinion.

Another suggestion was to expect certain qualifications from the individuals who will perform this task and to have a limitation on the field. In this regard, P03 stated, "I think it is necessary to limit the people who can perform this profession. For example, I don't think that high school graduates or graduates from any department in a university should be able to do it. Firstly, I think a limitation on the field should be introduced.

Additionally, the participants recommended the evaluation and monitoring mechanism of paraeducators during both preservice and inservice periods. P14 said, "The state should intervene in this matter. It should be like Public Personnel Selection Examination. I don't know if there should be an exam or something." P02 added, "They need an inspector. There is no inspector related to this. I think if any institution related to this inspects it, it will be more efficient, goal-oriented, and clear."

In summary, the paraeducators made recommendations toward improving working conditions, including official employment, job security, and legal rights by a formal institution; providing education to improve quality and inform stakeholders; limiting the field by looking at competence and qualifications; having evaluation and monitoring mechanisms; defining the paraeducator role and responsibilities clearly; and supporting all students.

## Discussion, Conclusion, and Implications

In this study, findings related to preservice processes, roles and responsibilities, needs, and suggestions of paraeducators are revealed. Accordingly, it was found that paraeducators didn't receive any training in the

preservice period and that they were not informed about their roles and responsibilities. It was also revealed that access to the information was provided in an unsystematic way, and resulted only from personal efforts. Similar to this finding, it was frequently stated in the literature that paraeducators were rarely given vocational training before service (Douglas et al., 2019; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Reddy et al., 2020) or not given any at all (Downing et al., 2000; Zobell & Hwang, 2020). However, it is often emphasized in the literature that teacher assistants should receive preservice and inservice training when it comes to the qualifications they should possess (Giangreco et al., 2010; Hilton & Gerlach, 1997; Kerry & Kerry, 2003; Mason et al., 2021).

When the education status of the participants in this study is examined, it is seen that individuals who have received education in various fields work as paraeducators. This finding is important in terms of emphasizing the necessity of preservice and inservice training. The fact that paraeducators without a specific educational background often implement educational content without the support of a classroom teacher is also a topic discussed in the literature (Downing et al., 2000; Mason et al., 2021; Webster & Blatchford, 2013).

In addition, although it was often emphasized that preservice roles of paraeducators should be determined by developing job descriptions (Giangreco, 2003; Pickett, 1986), it was stated that paraeducators were not provided with sufficient information about the roles and responsibilities expected of them (Zobell & Hwang, 2020). Researchers have shown that when a guide for paraeducators is prepared by school management and teachers, it has a positive effect on student learning (Downing et al., 2000; Webster & Blatchford, 2013).

Another important finding in the preservice process was that the recruitment processes were informal. However, regarding the employment of staff other than teachers at schools affiliated to the MoNE (2013), it is obligatory for school principals to determine the duties of these staff members within the framework of the relevant legislation and to notify them in writing. This situation can be explained with the fact that paraeducators have not yet been defined as professional staff members in Turkey (Demirdağlı & Kizir, 2023; Özaydın, 2020) and that there is no legal regulation regarding their personal rights. In addition, the findings show that no competence was expected of paraeducators.

This finding is supported by the literature stating that having a certain qualification and experience or training in special education was generally not considered in the recruitment processes of teacher assistants (Stewart, 2019). The lack of a standardized job description for paraeducators in Turkey can be seen as a significant obstacle in clearly defining their roles and responsibilities. According to the current research findings, the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators throughout their time at school are determined by families. The roles and responsibilities they undertake in

school should also be determined by the school administration (Mason et al., 2021; Patterson et al., 2006). This study's findings indicate a lack of legal job descriptions for paraeducators and a lack of follow-up by school administrations regarding these duties.

The second theme, the paraeducators' experience and views regarding their roles and responsibilities, was evaluated in the context of the duties they undertook during lessons, during leisure/breaktime, and during out-of-school time. Based on the findings, it could be stated that paraeducators were not regarded as members of the education teams and that they were excluded from the IEP preparation process. In previous research, many paraeducators stated that they were not considered part of the team (Fisher & Pleasants, 2012; Patterson, 2006; Pickett et al., 2003; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). In addition, it was revealed that paraeducators are not in a position to assist the classroom teacher. They were solely responsible for the learning of students with SEN during lessons. However, with the presence of paraeducators in the classrooms, individuals with SEN were expected to have more access to educational opportunities in the classroom (Wang et al., 2015). Similarly, they made instructional decisions independently (Patterson, 2006). Paraeducators' one-on-one interactions with students with SEN are sometimes seen as a hindering factor toward their social interaction with other children, and can lead to discrimination (Angelides et al., 2009; Downing et al., 2000; Webster & Blatchford, 2013). This situation has the potential to result in the opposite effect of what is expected from the utilization of paraeducators in effective inclusive practices.

In addition to teaching activities, paraeducators also took part in addressing students' needs such as behavior problems, self-care skills, and safety. Previous research also shows that paraeducators play an important role in behavior management (Bronstein et al., 2021; Douglas et al., 2019; Reddy et al., 2020). This study's participants stated that they did not take breaks during school hours and that they were not even given opportunities to meet their basic needs. Similarly, Fisher and Pleasants (2012) reported that paraeducators were responsible for a large number of duties regarding students with SEN, which caused them to allocate their whole school time to such students. Moreover, some of the paraeducators participating in the current study also worked outside their schools. It appears that the lack of a standard definition of paraeducators' roles and responsibilities, as well as the diversity of work environments in which they operate, has led to ambiguity in boundaries, similar to the diversity of roles they undertake.

In the third theme, the needs of paraeducators were examined. The findings show that paraeducators mostly needed training. In this respect, these research findings support the needs determined in the literature (Carter et al., 2009; French, 1998; Passaro et al., 1994). Again, parallel to the literature, the need for support for supervision was emphasized (French, 1998; Zobell & Hwang, 2020). They also needed to learn about their

roles and responsibilities. One participant in the current study argued that there should be a guidebook. Downing and others (2000) also recommended establishing guidelines for paraeducators.

Another area of need that this study's paraeducators considered was acceptance and appreciation. These paraeducators reported that they were often seen as caregivers by both classroom teachers and parents and that they were uncomfortable with these situations. In addition, as also recommended by previous researchers, the value created by paraeducators should be appreciated, and they should be offered the opportunity to be a part of education teams (Blalock, 1991; Giangreco, 2003; Pickett, 1999). The last finding that emerged in the theme of needs was the issues of employment, wages, and improvement of working conditions. This issue was also mentioned as an important problem in various studies (Blalock, 1991; Douglas et al., 2019; French & Pickett, 1997). Angelides and others (2009) stated that the wages of paraeducators were 25% of the wages of classroom teachers. Moreover, many paraeducators were not paid on holidays, and about half of them did not have health insurance or job security (Riggs & Mueller, 2001). There seems to be uncertainty not only in job descriptions but also in employment conditions. It is observed that there are no standard wages and employment conditions for paraeducators in Turkey. This situation can be explained by the gaps in legal regulations. According to the current research findings, the employment of paraeducators in Turkey was provided by families, and the wages were covered by families as well. Özyaydın (2020) and Author and Author (in review) reported similar findings. It is clear that the principle of equal opportunity in education will be disrupted when parents undertake the employment of teacher assistants. In addition, parents often do not have the expertise to assess the competencies of paraeducators. Regarding this, the necessary legal arrangements could be made for the healthy functioning of the process, and paraeducator employment should be provided in formal ways.

According to the findings related to the fourth theme, paraeducators generally made suggestions in relation to improving their working conditions. This was mentioned by other researchers as well (e.g., Blalock, 1991; Douglas et al., 2019; Giangreco, 2003). The researchers also pointed out that the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators should be based on a certain standard and that their duty should be to help the classroom teacher, not to deal with a single student (Angelides et al., 2009). The concept of paraeducator refers to assistants who allow experts to use their technical knowledge and skills more effectively (Pickett, 1986; Pickett et al., 2003; Webster & Blatchford, 2013). Stewart (2019) also emphasized the same issue and stated that having certain qualifications and experience or training in special education was generally not considered in the recruitment processes. Lastly, the current paraeducators suggested that their roles and responsibilities should be

defined concretely and that both parents and school staff should be informed about these roles and responsibilities. According to the related literature regarding employment problems, the biggest emphasis was on the necessity of clearly stating paraeducators' job descriptions (Douglas et al., 2019; Mason et al., 2021; Pickett, 1999; Riggs & Mueller, 2001).

Inclusive education in Turkey is clearly defined according to the MoNE Special Education Services Regulation (2018). The regulation aims to ensure that students with SEN have equal opportunities without discrimination and receive education in general education classrooms. The regulation uses the terms mainstreaming and inclusion under the same title. While these terms have similar meanings, mainstreaming refers to the complete placement of students with SEN in general education classrooms, while full inclusion involves their integration into general education classrooms and receiving all necessary educational support within those classrooms (Francisco et al., 2020; Sakız & Woods, 2015). The concept of inclusive education emphasizes that all students should be included in an equal and inclusive educational environment without discrimination.

As in many countries, important steps have been taken in Turkey to create inclusive education environments. The Special Education Services Regulation (2018) includes legal provisions that require the establishment and organization of support special education classes in schools, as well as adaptations for students benefiting from mainstreaming. In addition, inservice trainings and various projects are conducted to equip classroom teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills (Sakız & Woods, 2015). Worldwide, different countries use various strategies to promote inclusive education. It is important to note that different countries may have different practices and implementations based on their own education systems and needs. Moreover, it is seen that paraeducators play a significant role in ensuring effective education delivery by classroom teachers. They are considered to have a key role in providing necessary support (Pickett et al., 2003). Therefore, it is important for paraeducators to be systematically integrated into schools to promote inclusive practices (Pickett et al., 2003).

### Conclusion

The findings obtained in the present study support previous studies. The findings reveal that the roles and responsibilities of people working as paraeducators in Turkey have not been determined in accordance with the standards. These findings indicate that some adjustments should be made in the working conditions of paraeducators. It is seen that paraeducators are employed by families; that schools do not have official staff; that paraeducators undertake various duties; and that they have unfavorable working conditions. Moreover, these research findings demonstrate that there are no criteria for people working as

paraeducators; that they do not receive any training before or during their service; and that they are not supported by classroom teachers.

### Suggestions

The most important result obtained in this study was that paraeducators do not have a standard job description and that their roles and responsibilities are complex. To eliminate these problems, legislation that covers the employment conditions of paraeducators and job descriptions in schools should be initiated by the MoNE. In addition, school principals should help with the official employment of paraeducators in schools within the framework of current legal regulations. When they work with paraeducators, classroom teachers should define both their own roles and responsibilities and those of paraeducators in a concrete way during the preservice process and provide supervision support during the inservice process.

A large number of studies are needed to accurately and fairly determine the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators in Turkey. Future research using interview questions with more and different participants should be prepared based on the findings of this study.

### Limitations

This study was conducted with 15 paraeducators. Although attention was paid to the fact that the participants had different education levels and were from different fields, the generalization of the findings might be an important limitation due to the low number of study participants. In addition, the data collection process included only semi-structured interviews, and the interviews were conducted via phone. However, the telephone interviews were as effective as face-to-face interviews, providing comfort for the participants and efficiency to the researcher in terms of time, transportation, and cost (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). This study's data were collected based on semi-structured interviews. No observational data were included in this research, which is a limitation of this study. The findings are limited to participants' views. Collecting data through observation could also contribute to the analysis of the subject.

### Geniřletilmiş Özet

#### Giriř

Özel gereksinimli (ÖG) çocukların, eğitimlerine tam zamanlı kaynařtırma yoluyla devam etmelerinin yaygınlařmasıyla birlikte, sınıflarda daha fazla personele ihtiyaç duyulmuřtur (Angelides, 2009; Patterson, 2006). Sınıf ii destekler arasında en yaygın hizmetlerden (Douglas vd., 2019) biri de öđretmen yardımcıları olarak da tanımlanabilen öđretmen yardımcıları olarak ifade edilmektedir (Pickett, 1986). Bununla birlikte öđretmen yardımcılığı hizmetlerine iliřkin standartların oluřmadığı görülmektedir (Carter vd., 2009; Douglas vd., 2019).

Öğretmen yardımcılarının rol ve sorumluluklarının somut bir şekilde tanımlanmamış olması, bu hizmetten beklenen sonuçların alınmasında olumsuz bir etkiye neden olabilmektedir (Fisher vd., 2012).

Eğitimde öğretmen yardımcılarının yer alması Türkiye için yeni tartışılmaya başlanmış bir konudur. Türkiye’de kaynaştırma sınıflarında özellikle son yıllarda öğretmen yardımcılarına daha sık rastlanıyor olsa da bu konuda araştırma sayısı sınırlıdır (Özaydın, 2020).

Bu araştırmaya öğretmen yardımcılarının rol ve sorumluluklarının tanımlanmasına katkı sağlayacağı düşüncesiyle gerek duyulmuştur. Araştırmada şu sorulara yanıt aranmıştır:

1. Öğretmen yardımcılarının hizmet öncesi sürece ilişkin deneyim ve görüşleri nelerdir?
2. Öğretmen yardımcılarının çalışma şartları nelerdir?
3. Öğretmen yardımcılarının rol ve sorumluluklarına dair deneyim ve görüşleri nelerdir?
4. Öğretmen yardımcılarının gereksinimleri nelerdir?
5. Öğretmen yardımcılarının tüm hizmet sürecine yönelik önerileri nelerdir?

### Yöntem

Bu araştırmada, nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden biri olan fenomenoloji deseni kullanılmıştır. Katılımcılar kartopu örnekleme tekniđi ile belirlenmiştir. Araştırmada Türkiye'nin farklı şehirlerinde yaşayan 15 öğretmen yardımcısı yer almıştır. Veriler, araştırmacılar tarafından geliştirilen ve uzman görüşü alınan görüşme formu ile toplanmıştır. Görüşme formu toplam 13 açık uçlu sorudan oluşmaktadır. Araştırma verileri içerik analizi ile analiz edilmiştir. Araştırmacılar arasında 34 kod, 12 kategori, 4 tema olması konusunda fikir birliğine varılmıştır. Katılımcı teyidine başvurularak (n=5) araştırmanın inandırıcılığının sağlanması yoluna gidilmiştir. Gözlemciler arası teyit edilebilirlik, % 87,5 olmuştur.

### Bulgular

Bulgular, (i) hizmet öncesi süreç, (ii) rol ve sorumluluklara ilişkin deneyim ve görüşler (iii) gereksinimler ve (iv) öneriler olmak üzere dört temada sunulmuştur.

#### Hizmet Öncesi Süreç

Bu tema öğretmen yardımcılarının istihdam süreçleri ile rol ve sorumluluklarına ilişkin bilgi durumlarını içermektedir. Katılımcılar, aile tarafından işe alındıklarını, ve okulda resmi olarak kayıtlı olmadıklarını ifade etmişlerdir. Öğretmen yardımcıları, hizmet öncesi süreçte rol ve sorumluluklarına ilişkin bilgi sahibi olmadıklarını veya sınırlı bilgileri olduğunu ifade etmişlerdir.

#### Rol ve Sorumluluklara İlişkin Deneyim ve Görüşler

Bu tema öğretmen yardımcılarının, üstlendikleri rol ve sorumluluklarına dair deneyim ve görüşlerini içermektedir. Katılımcılar, rol ve sorumluluklarının ÖĞ öğrenci ile birebir ilgilenmek olduğunu ve bir gölge gibi öğrenciyi takip ettiklerini ifade etmişlerdir. Katılımcıların üstlendikleri sorumluluklar, tüm okul zamanını

kapsamaktadır. Öğretmen yardımcılarının bazılarının okul dışı zamanlarda da sorumlulukları olduğu belirlenmiştir.

### Gereksinimler

Öğretmen yardımcıları, bilgi edinme, eğitim alma ve süpervizyon desteđi almaya gereksinimleri olduğunu dile getirmişlerdir. Ayrıca hem ebevenler hem de okul çalışanları tarafından kabul ve değer görmek istediklerini ve bakıcı olarak görülmekten rahatsızlık duyduklarını belirtmişlerdir. Katılımcılar istihdam, ücret ve çalışma koşullarının iyileştirilmesi konularındaki gereksinimlerine dikkat çekmişlerdir.

### Öneriler

Katılımcılar, gereksinimlerine paralel önerilerde bulunmuşlardır. Buna göre rol ve sorumluluklara dair net tanımlamalar yapılması, hizmet öncesi sürecin resmî bir kurum tarafından yürütülmesi, işe alımda yeterli veya alan sınırlaması gibi kriterler olması, çalıştıkları kurumun yasal çalışanı olmaları, özlük haklara ve güvencelere sahip olmaları gerektiđi önerilerinde bulunmuşlardır. Bir katılımcı öğretmen yardımcılarının rol ve sorumluluklarına ilişkin sınıf öğretmeni, veli ve diđer okul çalışanlarının da bilgilendirmesi gerektiđi yorumunu yapmıştır:

### Tartışma, Sonuç ve Öneriler

Araştırma bulgularına göre, hizmet öncesi süreçte öğretmen yardımcılarına bir eğitim verilmediđi, rol ve sorumluluklarına ilişkin bilgilendirme yapılmadığı görülmektedir. Alanyazında bu bulguya benzer şekilde, öğretmen yardımcılarına hizmet öncesinde nadiren mesleki bir eğitim verildiđi (Coogly vd., 2022; Douglas vd., 2019; Fisher ve Pleasants, 2012; Reddy vd., 2020) ya da hiç verilmediđi sıkça ifade edilmektedir (Downing vd., 2000; Özaydın, 2020; Patterson, 2006; Riggs ve Mueller, 2001; Zobell ve Hwang, 2020). Hizmet öncesi süreçte önemli bir diđer bulgu işe alım süreçlerinin gayriresmî bir şekilde olmasıdır. Oysaki MEB’e bađlı okullarda öğretmen dışındaki diđer personelin istihdamında işe alınacak personelin görevlerinin, ilgili mevzuat çerçevesinde okul müdürü tarafından belirlenmesi ve ilgililere yazılı olarak tebliđ edilmesi zorunludur (MEB, 2013). Söz konusu durum, henüz Türkiye’de öğretmen yardımcılarının bir meslek elemanı olarak tanımlanmaması (Özaydın, 2020) ve özlük haklarına ilişkin bir yasal düzenleme yapılmaması ile açıklanabilir.

İkinci tema olan öğretmen yardımcılarının rol ve sorumluluklarına ilişkin deneyim ve görüşleri değerlendirildiğinde öğretmen yardımcılarının eğitim ekibinin bir üyesi olarak yer almadıkları söylenebilir. Önceki araştırmalarda da pek çok öğretmen yardımcısı, eğitim ekibinin bir parçası olarak kabul edilmediklerini belirtmişlerdir (French ve Pickett, 1997; Fisher ve Pleasants, 2012; Patterson, 2006; Pickett vd., 2003; Riggs ve Mueller, 2001). Ayrıca öğretmen yardımcılarının ders sırasında ÖĞ öğrencinin öğrenmesinden tek başlarına sorumlu oldukları belirlenmiştir. Oysa öğretmen yardımcılarının sınıflarda bulunması ile ÖĞ bireylerin sınıf içinde eğitim olanaklarına daha fazla erişmeleri beklenmektedir (Wang vd., 2015). Bu bulgu, daha önce

Downing ve diđerlerinin (2000) de belirttiđi gibi öğretmen yardımcılarının ve sınıf öğretmeninin rol ve sorumluluklarının tanımlanmasının önemini bir kez daha ortaya koymaktadır.

Üçüncü temada öğretmen yardımcılarının gereksinimleri incelenmiştir. Bulgular öğretmen yardımcılarının eğitim ve süpervizyon desteđi almaya gereksinimleri olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu yönüyle araştırma bulguları, alanyazında ortaya konan gereksinimleri desteklemektedir (Carter vd., 2009; French, 1998; Passaro vd., 1994; Zobell ve Hwang, 2020).

Öğretmen yardımcılarının gereksinim belirttiđi bir başka konu ise kabul ve değer görme olmuştur. Öğretmen yardımcılarının yarattığı değer takdir edilmesi başka araştırmacılar tarafından da önerilmektedir (Blalock, 1991; Giangreco, 2003; Pickett, 1999). Gereksinim temasında ortaya çıkan son bulgu istihdam, ücret ve çalışma koşullarının iyileştirilmesi konuları olmuştur. Bu konu çeşitli araştırmalarda önemli bir sorun olarak belirtilmiştir (Blalock, 1991; Douglas vd., 2019; French ve Pickett, 1997).

Araştırma bulgularına göre Türkiye’de öğretmen yardımcılarının istihdamı aile tarafından sağlanmakta ve ücretler aile tarafından karşılanmaktadır. Bu bulgu Özaydın (2020) tarafından da ortaya konmuştur. Öğretmen yardımcılarının istihdamını ebeveynler üstlendiğinde eğitimde fırsat eşitliği ilkesinin bozulacağı açıkça görülebilir. Ayrıca ebeveynler, çođu zaman öğretmen yardımcılarının yeterliliklerini değerlendirebilecek uzmanlığa sahip değillerdir.

Dördüncü temada öğretmen yardımcılarını genellikle iş koşullarının iyileştirilmesine yönelik öneriler getirmişlerdir. Ayrıca öğretmen yardımcılarını işe alımlarda belirli kriterlerin olmasını önermişlerdir. Stewart (2019) da aynı konuyu vurgulayarak işe alım süreçlerinde özel eğitim konusunda belirli bir yeterliliğe, deneyime veya eğitime sahip olma şartlarının genellikle aranmadığını ifade etmiştir.

Araştırma bulgularından çıkan en önemli sonuç, öğretmen yardımcılarının standart bir meslek tanımının olmaması ve rol ve sorumluluklarının karmaşık olmasıdır. Öğretmen yardımcılarının aileler tarafından istihdam edildiđi, okulların resmi personeli olmadığı, çok çeşitli ve deđişken görevler üstlendikleri, olumsuz çalışma koşullarına sahip oldukları görülmektedir. Bu sorunların giderilmesi için MEB tarafından öğretmen yardımcılarının istihdam koşulları ve okullardaki görev tanımlarını içeren bir mevzuat yayınlanması önerilebilir. Öğretmen yardımcılarının rol ve sorumluluklarının sağlıklı bir şekilde belirlenebilmesi için çok sayıda araştırmaya gerek duyulmaktadır.

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