



## INVESTIGATING THE EXPERIENCES OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN TEACHING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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### Abstract:

This study aimed to determine the experiences of pre-service teachers in teaching students with special needs during the practicum. To achieve this goal, the study was designed as descriptive research within the framework of the qualitative research paradigm. The participants were 11 pre-service teachers who had students with special needs during their practicum process. Pre-service teachers were studying in different departments of the faculty of education. The students with special needs were in different disability groups such as visual impairment, physical disability, and autism spectrum disorders. To identify pre-service teachers' experiences in teaching students with special needs, semi-structured interviews were conducted in the fall semester of the 2021-2022 academic year. The data were analyzed through content analysis. Based on the findings, it can be stated that pre-service teachers needed to be supported regarding individuals with special needs and how to teach these individuals. Besides, although some of the pre-service teachers were supported by mentors, others were not.

**Keywords:** pre-service teachers, students with special needs, experience

### 1. Introduction

In Regulation for Special Education Services, the term special education refers to “*training programs developed to meet the educational and social needs of individuals who differ significantly from their peers in terms of individual and developmental characteristics and educational competencies, and the educational services offered by specially trained personnel in appropriate environments.*” (Regulation for Special Education Services [ÖEHY], 2021). This definition indicates that some individuals differ from their peers in terms of their physical,

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cognitive, and emotional characteristics. Accordingly, individuals with special needs cannot receive stimuli in the environment in normal ways. These differences create special needs in individuals. Some adaptations need to be made for individuals with special needs so that they could receive stimuli in the environment or express themselves (Ataman, 2013; Kargin, 2004). Thus, special education can be defined as the educational services provided for the individual in line with his/her special needs.

The term individuals with special needs includes not only people with certain disabilities, such as those with mental, hearing, visual, physical disabilities, and autism spectrum disorders, but also those with superior abilities. Educational services offered to these individuals can generally be carried out in two different regulations. The first regulation is that individuals with special needs receive education services only with other students with special needs or alone. In this regulation, individual(s) with special needs can benefit from education services in the day or boarding special education schools, in special education classes in the schools where individuals with typical development study, and at home or in the hospital. Besides, individuals with special needs can study with their peers with typical development in schools with inclusive practices (Kargin, 2004; ÖEHY, 2021).

According to a definition in the literature, inclusion is the use of education programs at school by meeting the special needs of all individuals (Kavale, 1979). In ÖEHY, on the other hand, inclusion is the full-time or part-time presence of an individual with special needs in the same environment as their peers, and it is explained as supporting them in line with their special needs (ÖEHY, 2021). Thus, those teaching individuals with special needs who benefit from mainstreaming must have information about the characteristics of individuals with special needs and special education. At this point, researchers have examined the existing situations and problems experienced by teachers serving in formal education, inclusion practices, individuals with special needs, and special education (Akalin, Demir, Sucuoğlu, Bakkaloğlu, & İşcen, 2014; Berkant & Atılgan, 2017). Research reports that preschool teachers (Akalin et al., 2014) and primary school teachers (Berkant & Atılgan, 2017) have a lack of knowledge and skills in terms of inclusion practices. According to Girgin (2021), teachers need more information regarding different special needs groups.

Inadequacies regarding inclusion practices and individuals with special needs are also common in pre-service education. İlgar (2017) acknowledges that pre-service teachers do not have knowledge about students with special needs as well as how to teach these students. Similarly, Gökyer (2012) indicates that pre-service teachers are not satisfied with the teaching of lecturers. Based on these studies, teachers have insufficient knowledge and skills regarding the inclusion practices, this problem exists in pre-service education, and pre-service teachers are not happy with the teaching of lecturers (Akalin et al., 2014; Berkant & Atılgan, 2017; İlgar, 2017; Girgin, 2021; Gökyer, 2012). Therefore, identifying the experiences of pre-service teachers in teaching students with special needs during the practicum is important to understand the disadvantages. Determining these

experiences is important in terms of revealing the current situation in teacher education.

The present study aims to fill this gap.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of pre-service teachers in teaching students with special needs during their practicum. Accordingly, the answer to the following question was sought: “What are the experiences of pre-service teachers in teaching students with special needs during practicum?” The answers were explained below.

## 2. Method

The study aimed at delving into the experiences of pre-service teachers in teaching students with special needs during practicum. To achieve this goal, the study was designed as descriptive research within the framework of the qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative research aims to reveal perceptions and events holistically and realistically with data collection methods such as interview, observation, and document analysis, and includes in-depth data collection about the relevant environment. This paradigm seeks to examine and describe the existing situation within the context of the phenomenon (Cresswell, 2016; Mills & Gay, 2016; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). The research was carried out in a city in Central Anatolia. Therefore, the data were evaluated according to the conditions of the qualitative research as stated above.

### 2.1. Participants

The recruitment process of participants was explained in detail under the title of “Data Collection and Analysis”. Table 1 presents information about participants’ age, gender, and department, including the number of students with special needs and the types of special needs. The participants’ names were kept confidential. The special needs types of some students with special needs were not remembered or not known by pre-service teachers. These students were stated with X in the table.

**Table 1:** Demographic Information of Pre-Service Teachers

Code Number	Code Name	Age/Gender	Department	Special Need Type of Student(s)	Number of Students with Special Needs
1.	Ayşe	23/F	Psychological counseling and guidance	Intellectual disability, X, X	3
2.	Tuğba	25/F	Pre-school teaching	Autism spectrum disorder, mutism, physical disability	3
3.	Mercan	22/F	Primary school mathematics teaching	Low vision	1
4.	Levent	23/M	Psychological counseling and guidance	Autism spectrum disorder, X	2

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5.	Kumsal	22/F	Psychological counseling and guidance	Autism spectrum disorder	1
6.	Dolunay	24/F	Pre-school teaching	Giftedness	1
7.	Deniz	35/F	Pre-school teaching	Giftedness, physical disability	3
8.	Vehibe	24/F	Pre-school teaching	Giftedness, physical disability	3
9.	Tuğrul	23/M	Psychological counseling and guidance	Learning disability	1
10.	Ceren	22/F	Primary school teaching	Hearing impairment, learning disability	3
11.	Gülcan	21/F	Primary school teaching	Learning disability	3

**Note:** F = Female, M = Male, X = Nor know or remember

## 2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

“Semi-structured Interview Questions” were prepared by both authors. The questions were sent to two experts (academicians) in the field of special education and qualitative research methods. Based on their feedback, the questions were finalized. Table 2 presents semi-structured interview questions.

**Table 2:** Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What do special needs mean to you? What do you know about students with special needs?
2. What did you experience when you met your student with special needs for the first time?
3. When you met your student with special needs for the first time, what did you know about your student's needs?
4. What methods did you do to learn about the needs of your student with special needs? In which subjects did your mentor and faculty member support you?
5. What did your mentor do for your student with special needs? Can you give examples?
6. What were the activities you did for your student with special needs during the education process? How would you rate these activities in terms of ease and difficulty?
7. In which subject(s) did you have difficulties regarding your student with special needs during the education process? Can you give examples?
8. What do you think about the situation of your student with special needs in the classroom? How did this student get along with other students? How was this student's participation in the classes?
9. How was a routine day of your student with special needs as you observed?
10. Do you want to be a teacher in a classroom having students with special needs in the future? Why/why not?
11. Is there any other opinion you would like to add on the subject?

The data were collected during the fall semester of the 2021-2022 academic year. After preparing the semi-structured interview questions, legal permission was obtained from the scientific research and publication ethics committee of the university where the first

author works. To determine the participants, the authors visited the lecturers who were teaching “Teaching Practice” courses at the university where the first author works. The purpose of the research was explained to the lecturers, and they were requested to announce the research to the pre-service teachers. One week after the announcement, the lecturers were visited to obtain the name and telephone numbers of the volunteer pre-service teachers.

The authors telephoned participants to determine the appropriate time for interviews. Interviews were held on the agreed days and times. Then, the pre-service teachers were interviewed. Interviews were conducted in the first author’s office between 10.12.2021 and 23.12.2021.

The interviews were transcribed by the second author. The first author ensured the reliability of the transcripts. In other words, the first author checked the transcripts and listened to the audio recordings to correct the incorrect or missing spellings.

Content analysis was used for data analysis. Regarding content analysis, researchers reach codes by reading data and then reach sub-themes and themes through codes. Then, sub-themes and themes were created through the codes. Besides, direct quotations were included in the content analysis to reflect the views of the participants in the analysis (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Both authors created themes, sub-themes, and codes independently. Then, the authors discussed their analyzes and agreed on the themes, sub-themes, and codes (see Table 3).

### **2.3. Research Ethics**

The basic ethical rules in scientific research are voluntary basis, consent, respect for confidentiality, respect for privacy, beneficence/do not harm, and avoiding deception (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Accordingly, the following rules were considered during the research process: (a) The research process was presented clearly and understandably, and the necessary permissions were obtained from the relevant institutions and organizations, both written and verbally, (b) a consent form was read and signed by each participant, (c) participants were told that they could withdraw from the research at any stage of the research, and (d) all individuals and institutions were given code names.

### **3. Results**

The study investigated the experiences of pre-service teachers in teaching students with special needs during their practicum. Data were collected in the fall semester of the 2021-2022 academic year, as explained under the title of “Data Collection and Analysis”. Semi-structured interviews lasted 2 hours, 46 minutes and 12 seconds. The longest interview was with Tuğba (21 minutes and 31 seconds). The shortest interview was with Tuğrul (9 minutes and 33 seconds). The average interview time was calculated as 15 minutes and 11 seconds. The transcripts included 50 pages.

The themes, sub-themes, and codes were presented in Table 3. There were two themes: a) pre-service teachers' knowledge and thoughts about individuals with special

needs, and b) experiences of the practicum. These themes consisted of seven sub-themes and 24 codes.

**Table 3:** Themes, Sub-themes, and Codes

1. Pre-service teachers' knowledge and thoughts about individuals with special needs
1.1. Current knowledge and thoughts of pre-service teachers about individuals with special needs
1.1.1. Needing special support
1.1.2. Having deficiencies
1.1.3. Needing someone else
1.2. Knowledge and thoughts of pre-service teachers about individuals with special needs at the beginning of the practicum process
1.2.1. Individuals who need to be prepared for an Individualized Education Program (IEP)
1.2.2. Individuals should be supported socially
1.2.3. Lack of knowledge
1.2.4. Having deficiencies
1.3. Pre-service teachers' obtaining information about individuals with special needs
1.3.1. Searching on the internet
1.3.2. Getting information from the mentor
1.3.3. Getting information from his/her friend
1.3.4. Following the courses in the faculty
1.3.5. Not getting information
1.4. Pre-service teachers' thoughts on working with individuals with special needs in the future
1.4.1. Negative
1.4.2. Positive
1.4.3. Indecisive
2. Experiences of practicum
2.1. Issues that pre-service teachers have difficulties/problems with
2.1.1. Classroom management
2.1.2. Communicating with students with special needs
2.1.3. Lesson planning
2.1.4. Making adaptations
2.1.5. Getting information from the mentor
2.2. Activities that pre-service teachers easily perform
2.2.1. Communicating with students with special needs
2.3. Experiences of students with special needs
2.3.1. Having difficulty in friendships
2.3.2. Establishing friendships
2.3.3. Failure to attend classes
2.3.4. Attending classes

Regarding pre-service teachers' knowledge and thoughts about individuals with special needs, students needed special support, had deficiencies, and needed someone else. For example, Ayşe, one of the participants, emphasized that individuals needed special support: *"For me, when an individual needs support in his/her daily life or education life, this support should be provided."* Tuğrul underlined the deficiencies of individuals with special needs and said, *"It may be a bit like a definition, but we can say that individuals differ significantly from their peers. For example, they learn more slowly, they fall behind in the class."*

Deniz stated that those individuals needed someone else: *"Special need is the inability to be self-sufficient. Briefly, it is the state of necessarily needing someone."*

The pre-service teachers were asked about their knowledge and thoughts about the individuals with special needs when they met students for the first-time during practicum. Ayşe said that those students should be provided with IEP and should be developed socially: *"I have known that we should do something for them, that we should prepare some programs like IEP for them, that we should develop them socially."* Mercan, one of the participants, said that she was aware of their disabilities. Other participants stated that they did not have any information about individuals with special needs until they met them. For example, Vehibe said, *"We were asked to make observations at the first meeting. I didn't know that there were such children."*

To get information about individuals with special needs, pre-service teachers acknowledged that they met the mentor, participated in the courses in the faculty, got information from their friends, and searched the internet. Some said that they did not get any information. For example, Ceren got information from the mentor: *"We learned how to behave thanks to our mentor."* Mercan followed the courses: *"I have only learned something owing to courses I joined here."* Ayşe searched on the internet to get information about individuals with special needs, and Vehibe consulted her friends on this issue. However, Deniz and Tuğrul did not do anything to gain information about individuals with special needs.

Regarding whether they would work in an institution with a person with special needs in the future, Levent and Tuğrul expressed negative opinions. Levent said, *"I can't say I want this because I don't feel competent right now."* Ayşe, Tuğba, Mercan, Kumsal, Vehibe and Ceren expressed positive opinions. For example, Ceren emphasized, *"I would like to work with those students so that they feel that I am close to them."* Dolunay, Deniz and Gülcan were indecisive on this issue. For instance, Gülcan voiced, *"I don't know, I am not sure right now."*

For the difficulties/problems they had while teaching students with special needs, Ayşe, Tuğba, Dolunay, Deniz, Vehibe, and Ceren stated underlined difficulties regarding classroom management. For example, Ayşe expressed the difficulties regarding classroom management as follows: *"I am a little worried about classroom management. If I must do an activity, I am worried about how I will do it."* Tuğba and Mercan had difficulties in communicating with students with special needs. Tuğba explained this situation with the following words: *"This is difficult for me, for example, how will I communicate with him? How will my first communication be? I was indecisive at first. This was the first thing I struggled with. What will your communication be like?"* Tuğba, Levent, and Kumsal emphasized the difficulties in lesson planning. For example, Levent said, *"I thought I would have difficulties in doing an activity or a training program that we could do developmentally."* Mercan, Levent, Deniz, and Vehibe reported difficulties and problems in receiving support from the mentor. Levent said, *"The school counselor was quite uninterested. We didn't like that behavior. We went to the mentor with a more serious attitude to talk about that situation. As you know, this was a disadvantage for students at the school."* Mercan and Gülcan had difficulties in making

adaptations according to the needs of the students while working with individuals with special needs. For example, Gülcan said, *“I think it’s difficult because you know they are different from other peers, you need to teach them more simply.”*

Participants were also asked to mention the subjects they found easier while working with students with special needs. Ayşe, Levent, Deniz, Vehibe, Ceren, and Gülcan focused on communication. For example, to emphasize the ease of communicating with students with special needs in her class, Deniz said, *“We couldn’t communicate easily before, but now they listen to me when I say something.”*

Participants also mentioned the experiences of students with special needs in their classrooms. According to Ayşe, Tuğba, Mercan, Dolunay, Deniz, and Vehibe, those students had difficulties in friendship relations. Mercan’s explanation about her student with special needs was as follows: *“He is lost. He has no communication with any of his friends, His friends have a break. However, he sits in line, just stands, or goes with his sister to take care of his special needs if his sister comes. Otherwise, he has nothing to do with class. It could be me or another teacher, he doesn’t have a dialogue with anyone, nor with his friends. He has a dialogue with family members, only family members.”* Unlikely, according to Levent, Deniz, Ceren, Tuğrul and Gülcan, students with special needs were able to establish friendships with other students. For example, Tuğrul stated, *“In school, more attention is paid to students with special needs rather than other students.”* On the other hand, Ayşe, Levent, and Gülcan stated that those students did not attend the classes. For example, Ayşe said, *“I think there was no participation. I mean, we did activities such as classroom guidance activity or guidance promotion activity. In such activities, for instance, one of the students was doing things on his own, he was moving, he was talking to his friends, but there was no such thing as speaking or participating in the lesson.”* Finally, Kumsal, Dolunay, and Deniz stated that students with special needs attended the classes. Deniz voiced, *“She participates in the lessons very actively. For example, she is among those who raise their hand first. There is no problem in attending classes.”*

#### **4. Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendation**

This study examined the experiences of 11 pre-service teachers in teaching students with special needs during practicum. The participants were interviewed regarding their current knowledge of students with special needs as well as their knowledge about the students at the beginning of the practicum process. Most of the students (n=8) stated that at the beginning of the implementation process, they did not have information about those students. In addition, pre-service teachers stated that they had difficulties in a) classroom management (n=5), b) communicating with students (n=2), c) lesson planning (n=3), and d) making adaptations (n=2). This finding coincides with the results of İlgar (2017). Besides, research indicates that pre-service teachers do not have knowledge about students with special needs and how to teach those students (Cankaya & Korkmaz, 2012; İlgar, 2017). Therefore, it can be stated that students with special needs and pre-service teachers need support in teaching these students. This situation also confirms Akalın et



al. (2014). Similarly, Berkant and Atılğan (2017) argue that primary school teachers have inadequacies in teaching individuals with special needs and that teachers need support. Primary school teachers also report the inadequacy of pre-service and in-service training (Bakkaloğlu et al., 2018; Batu et al., 2018; Berkant & Atılğan, 2017). From this point of view, the findings of this study confirm the literature, indicating that the pre-service teachers do not have knowledge about individuals with special needs and about how to teach these individuals.

Regarding how they obtained information about individuals with special needs, pre-service teachers a) got information from the mentor (n=6), searched on the internet (n=2), followed the courses in the faculty (n=2), got information from their friends (n=1). Also, some pre-service teachers (n=4) had difficulties in getting support from the mentor. When these two findings are compared, it can be said that mentors carry out different practices in terms of supporting pre-service teachers about individuals with special needs (Akcan & İlgar, 2016; Kaya, Balay, & Adıgüzel, 2014). Similarly, Berkant, and Atılğan (2017) report that primary school teachers need support for individuals with special needs and on how to teach these individuals. Given that some pre-service teachers are not supported by mentors regarding how to teach individuals with special needs, the present study shares similar findings.

For the difficulties pre-service teachers experienced while teaching to individuals with special needs, they listed the following issues: classroom management (n=6), communicating with students with special needs (n=2), lesson planning (n=3), making adaptations (n=2), and getting support from the mentor (n=4). These findings support studies arguing that teachers and pre-service teachers need support, during pre- and in-service processes, about how to teach individuals with special needs (Akalin, 2015; Akalin et al., 2014; Atmaca & Uzuner, 2020; Berkant & Atılhan, 2017; İlgar, 2017). Besides, pre-service teachers mentioned activities they easily did while working with individuals with special needs. They (n=6) stated that they had an easier time communicating with individuals with special needs. In addition, others (n=5) stated that they did not experience any convenience. Thus, it can be interpreted that pre-service teachers have difficulties in teaching individuals with special needs.

Pre-service teachers were asked to talk about the situations of individuals with special needs in their classrooms. Some pre-service teachers stated that individuals with special needs could establish friendships (n=5) and attend classes (n=3). However, some argued that individuals with special needs had difficulties in friendships (n=6) and could not attend lessons (n=3). Therefore, it can be stated that the inclusive education applied to some of the individuals with special needs is unsuccessful. These findings confirm various studies in the literature (Girgin, 2021; Girli & Atasoy, 2012; Kabasakal et al., 2008). The final question was about whether pre-service teachers would like to teach in a classroom having students with special needs in the future. Some of the pre-service teachers (n=6) were optimistic while some (n=3) were indecisive. Besides, two teachers gave negative opinions on this issue. When the pre-service teachers (who expressed negative opinions or who were indecisive) were asked to mention the reasons, they stated

that they were inadequate in teaching to individuals with special needs. This may be because of the need for information, which is often emphasized in the literature. It can be interpreted that pre-service teachers who do not trust their knowledge regarding special education and who think that they lack sufficient experience and knowledge are reluctant to work in this field (Atmaca & Uzuner, 2020; Batu et al., 2018). It can be said that pre-service teachers should be supported in terms of theory and practice in working with individuals with special needs.

In a nutshell, some of the pre-service teachers felt inadequate in teaching individuals with special needs. Another striking finding of the research is that mentors did not support individuals with special needs and that pre-service teachers were not supported in this regard. On the other hand, according to Öztürk, Şahin and Vuran (2022) pre-service teachers' perceptions of competence increase as they gain experience (Öztürk et al., 2022). Therefore, further research may focus on meeting the special education needs of pre-service teachers and primary school teachers who teach individuals with special needs. Another suggestion might be to ensure that individuals with special needs benefit from mainstreaming practices more positively by disseminating the developed education programs throughout the country.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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