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Support Personnel in Special Education in Turkey and the United States: Practical Challenges and a Proposal for the Conceptual Shift from Facilitator to Special Education Assistant

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Abstract

Special Education Assistants serve as support personnel who assist individuals with special needs across diverse educational settings. Despite their crucial roles, there is no unified terminology either in Turkey or internationally; terms such as “facilitator,” “shadow teacher,” or “teacher assistant” are used inconsistently. In Turkey, the 2020 circular by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), which allows families to assign “facilitator personnel” in inclusive classrooms, has accelerated efforts to define and integrate this role. However, the term “facilitator” remains vague and lacks professional clarity. In contrast, the United States has a long-established and institutionalized Special Education Assistant system, with hundreds of thousands of assistants employed as of recent reports, outnumbering special education teachers. Drawing from this experience, the U.S. model and the competencies defined by the Council for Exceptional Children offer valuable insights for Turkey’s evolving framework. This study, based on a review of national and international literature, explores the challenges and opportunities in formalizing the role of Special Education Assistants in Turkey. It also highlights that associate degree programs such as Child Development, Disability Care and Rehabilitation, and The Shadow Teaching Program for the Disabled annually produce a substantial number of graduates. Despite this educational capacity, official employment in special education settings remains limited due to the lack of standardized roles, qualifications, and legal definitions. To bridge the gap between research and practice, the study proposes adopting the term “Special Education Assistant” as a professionally grounded and inclusive alternative. It emphasizes the need for clearly defined responsibilities, structured training programs, integration into formal staffing structures, and continuous professional development. The study also underscores the importance of collaboration among multiple stakeholders—including families, teachers, school administrators, and policymakers—in supporting students with special needs across educational environments. In conclusion, this study proposes a collaborative approach among policymakers, educators, and academic institutions to align Turkey’s Special Education Assistant practices with international standards and to ensure inclusive and equitable support for all students with special needs.

Keywords: Special Education Assistants, Paraeducator, Facilitator, Roles of Special Education Assistants

Introduction

Due to the increasing number of students requiring special education services, the assignment of support personnel for the education of individuals with special needs, particularly in school settings, has come to the forefront. While it is known that support personnel have been present in the field of special education since the 1960s, in the early years they not only supported instruction but also carried out clerical tasks and addressed students’

self-care needs ([Özaydın, 2020](#)). The literature includes various titles referring to support personnel in special education, such as instructional assistant, special education assistant, paraprofessional, support staff, classroom assistant, and teacher assistant ([Friend, 2021](#); [Jones et al., 2012](#)). In some countries, the concept of a shadow teacher is also used ([Hamid et al., 2020](#); [Nasir et al., 2018](#); [Triaulia et al., 2024](#)). In Turkey, the most frequently used titles for Special Education Assistants include teacher assistant, shadow teacher, instructional assistant ([Özaydın, 2020](#)), Facilitator Personnel and supportive personnel. There are still questions in Turkey regarding the exact roles and responsibilities of Special Education Assistants in the field of special education. It can be stated that a common ground regarding the terminology for these professionals has not yet been reached, not only in Turkey but also in the international literature. Terms such as “shadow sister” or “Facilitator” are somewhat confusing and not particularly suitable for educational settings, while labels like “assistant teacher” often fail to clearly define the role, especially since the individuals performing this role are usually not certified teachers and their duties within the classroom remain ambiguous. The United States, as one of the countries where support personnel are most actively employed in special education, uses a wide variety of titles for these professionals. A list of these terms is presented in Table 1 ([Friend, 2021](#)).

Table 1 Titles used for Special Education Assistants in the United States ([Friend, 2021](#))

Paraeducator
Paraeducator
Paraprofessional
Parapro
Classroom aide
Personal aide
One-to-one aide
Instructional assistant
Teacher assistant
Teaching assistant
Classroom assistant
Therapy assistant
Behavior technician

Considering that Special Education Assistants (SEAs) generally support the special education needs of students with disabilities under the direction of the teacher, the term Special Education Assistant (SEA) will be used throughout this study. Although widely used terms such as “paraeducator” are common in the United States, this article will adopt the term Special Education Assistant to ensure clarity of roles and consistency in language, particularly considering the relative novelty of this position in Turkey and the need for a term that can also be used in Turkish (özel eğitim yardımcısı).

As shown in Table 1, the term “Facilitator,” which has been used by the Ministry of National Education to describe the role of supporting students with special education needs, does not appear in the international literature. Moreover, the full version of the term as used in official Turkish documents (kolaylaştırıcı kişi, which can be translated as Facilitator Personnel) also carries a certain degree of ambiguity. While the intention is to define a supportive role, the use of the word “kişi” (person) in Turkish or “personnel” in English does not clearly designate a professional identity. Instead, it suggests a general presence, rather than a structured and recognized role within educational systems. For these reasons, the term Special Education Assistant is preferred in this study, as it better reflects the instructional and supportive nature of the position and aligns more closely with established international terminology.

In recent years, the topic of SEAs has frequently come to the forefront in Turkey, and new studies are being conducted on this subject. This study is a literature review that examines recent research conducted in Turkey on SEAs, along with current issues of debate.

Methodology

This study examines the evolving role, terminology, and training practices associated with SEAs. Rather than presenting a direct comparison between countries, the study approaches the more established structures and research in the United States as a foundation for informing and supporting the development of this relatively new and still-emerging area in Turkey. The literature spans works published from earlier periods to recent years. Studies

ranging from qualitative research to experimental designs and systematic reviews representing a range within the hierarchy of scientific evidence were included to ensure a broad yet meaningful synthesis. Academic studies, government documents, and institutional reports were reviewed and integrated based on their potential to contribute meaningfully to the topic. Rather than a rigid inclusion/exclusion framework, a more interpretive approach was taken, where relevant sources were brought together and synthesized to provide a comprehensive and purposeful understanding. Various academic databases and platforms (e.g., Google Scholar, ERIC, Turkey's National Thesis Center) were utilized in the process. These searches focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral dissertations, and official policy documents, using keywords such as special education assistant, paraeducator, facilitator personnel, and shadow teacher. The reviewed sources were then analyzed to identify key policy directions and context-specific recommendations. Comparative insights between the United States and Turkey were examined, as well as findings uniquely relevant to the Turkish context. The institutional frameworks established by organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) regarding the roles and competencies of SEAs were examined as possible reference models relevant to the Turkish context.

Special Education Assistants in the United States

In the United States, the number of Special Education Assistants (SEAs) working in the field of special education approached half a million in 2012 (Bitterman et al., 2013) and has continued to increase rapidly (Stockall, 2014). Approximately 490,000 SEAs are employed specifically to support students with special needs between the ages of 3 and 21 (Sobeck et al., 2021). According to the latest data, while there are around 350,000 special educators employed in the United States, the number of SEAs working in the field of special education has surpassed the number of special education teachers (Friend, 2021).

Studies emphasize the importance of the relationships SEAs build with families and teachers (Chopra & French, 2004), and underline the need to establish certain standards to meet their educational

needs (Frantz et al., 2022). According to a systematic review, although SEAs have a positive impact on student outcomes, the research highlights the necessity of providing effective supervision and training for these professionals (Walker et al., 2021).

In the past, qualifications for SEA employment in the U.S. included a high school diploma, vocational training, or a specific number of college credits. Today, however, requirements include completing at least a two-year higher education program and successfully passing formal or semi-formal assessments that meet recognized quality standards in various skill areas (e.g., reading readiness, mathematics, instructional support), such as the ParaPro Assessment offered by ETS (Friend, 2021).

Founded in 1922, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is an international professional organization dedicated to improving the educational success of individuals with disabilities and/or giftedness. CEC plays a leading role in promoting high-quality education in the field of special education, providing professional development, and establishing professional standards. In addition to its efforts to develop standards related to evidence-based practices and policies that guide the work of special education professionals (including teachers, SEAs, and researchers), CEC also publishes key scientific journals in the field, such as *Exceptional Children* and *Teaching Exceptional Children*, which contain up-to-date research in special education.

As a platform for collaboration and knowledge sharing among experts in special education, CEC also organizes workshops, conferences, training programs, and other activities to support professional development. CEC has defined Core Competencies for SEAs, emphasizing that they should possess specific knowledge and skills to appropriately support students with special needs from preschool through 12th grade (K–12). SEAs may serve not only in general (inclusive) and special education settings but also in non-classroom environments such as cafeterias and playgrounds. In addition, CEC has stated that under the supervision of licensed professionals, SEAs may be responsible for managing a class composed of students with special needs or carrying out a structured series of tasks for a single student.

Given their numbers, SEAs are a vital component of the U.S. special education system. CEC refers to them as paraeducators and has proposed a training program specifically for them. The primary objectives of this training program are presented in Table 2. The core competencies expected from Special Education Assistants, as outlined by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), are categorized under seven main areas and a total of 87 sub-objectives, as presented in Table 2. These competencies go beyond instructional support to encompass collaboration, ethical practice, and the provision of individualized services in diverse learning environments.

Table 2 Core Competencies for Special Education Assistants Presented by CEC

Core Areas	Sub-Objectives
Professional Learning and Ethical Practice	16
Student Development and Individual Differences	15
Special Education Services and Supports in the Learning Environment	21
Assessment	5
Instructional Supports and Strategies	12
Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Supports	13
Collaboration with Team Members	5

Special Education Assistants in Turkey

In Turkey, various associate degree programs offered at public and foundation universities, such as child development, disability care and rehabilitation, and shadow teaching for individuals with disabilities, are designed to meet the demand for support personnel in the field of special education. It is known that some graduates from these programs are employed in special education and rehabilitation centers or are assigned to mainstream public schools attended by students with special needs, with their salaries covered by families. It is important to note, however, that special education and rehabilitation centers in Turkey are not full-time formal educational institutions. Rather, they serve as support service providers that offer a limited number of instructional hours per week, typically funded by the state. Their role is supplementary and does

not replace the education provided in mainstream or special education schools. In relation to this issue, the General Directorate of Special Education and Guidance Services of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) issued an official letter titled “Facilitator Personnel” (dated 04.01.2020, numbered 230243), informing schools that support personnel could be assigned as “facilitator personnel” within classrooms, based on family requests.

Since 2003, there have been efforts in Turkey to involve graduates of child development and education programs in supporting inclusive education practices as Special Education Assistants (SEAs). However, for various reasons, these graduates have not been officially employed in public institutions ([Özaydın, 2020](#)). Research in the field shows that three distinct associate degree programs are particularly relevant to SEA roles and that students in these programs receive training aligned with such responsibilities. Based on the 2024 data from the Student Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM, the national body responsible for administering university entrance exams in Turkey), the number of students placed in these associate degree programs and the number of universities offering them are presented using the initial placement table published by ÖSYM, excluding additional placement periods. Among these programs, the associate degree in shadow teaching for individuals with disabilities had the lowest number of placements, with only 33 students enrolled across two different foundation universities.

The Disability Care and Rehabilitation associate degree program is offered by a total of 27 universities, including two foundation universities. In the 2024 placement cycle, the program filled all its available seats, including 1,700 in open education (non-campus-based programs) and 150 in distance education (online instruction-based programs), with a total of 3,166 students placed. The Child Development program, which has the highest number of available seats, is offered by 80 different public universities. Some universities admit students into multiple Child Development associate degree programs under different vocational schools of health services. Including open and distance education programs, a total of 23,275 students were placed. When the 2,365 students placed in 35

foundation universities are added, the total number of students placed in Child Development programs exceeds 25,000. In addition, a total of approximately 330 students were placed in the Child Protection and Care Services associate degree program, which is offered exclusively by seven public universities. Although both programs share similar coursework and allow vertical transfer to the same undergraduate programs via the Vertical Transfer Examination (DGS), the fact that they are listed under different titles in the placement guide is also noteworthy.

An examination of the ÖSYM placement guide reveals that graduates of these associate degree programs are eligible to transfer to various undergraduate programs through the Vertical Transfer Examination (DGS), which is a national centralized exam in Turkey that enables associate degree graduates to continue their studies in relevant bachelor's degree programs. Specifically, graduates of the Shadow Teaching for Individuals with Disabilities associate degree program may apply to undergraduate programs in Child Development and Special Education Teaching. According to the same data, graduates of the Child Development program may transfer to four different undergraduate programs: Preschool Education, Special Education Teaching, Health Management, and Social Work. Graduates of the Disability Care and Rehabilitation associate degree program are eligible to transfer to a total of seven fields: Emergency and Disaster Management, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation, Health Management, Social Work, Nursing, and Special Education Teaching.

Considering that, as of 2024, public universities in Turkey no longer admit students to evening education programs and that the Child Development and Disability Care and Rehabilitation programs have long accepted students through regular, evening, and open education tracks, it can be stated that tens of thousands of students have graduated from these programs over the years. However, in contrast to the United States, where employment policies often rely on certification systems, in Turkey these policies are predominantly based on formal graduation credentials. As a result, despite the existence of three associate degree programs and thousands of graduates, the employment of Special

Education Assistants (SEAs) within the field of special education remains very limited in practice.

International Research on SEAs

Since the 1990s, a considerable number of studies have been conducted on the role of Special Education Assistants (SEAs) in the international literature ([Downing et al., 2000](#); [French & Lou Pickett, 1997](#); [Gerlach & French, 1999](#); [Jones & Bender, 1993](#); [Katsiyannis et al., 2000](#); [Malmgren & Causton-Theoharis, 2006](#); [Salzberg & Morgan, 1995](#); [Suter & Giangreco, 2009](#)). In one recent study, a researcher provided training to a special education teacher, who in turn guided three different SEAs in implementing time-delay instruction with students who had multiple disabilities. The SEAs were reported to have successfully applied the strategy, demonstrating that they are capable of delivering evidence-based practices ([Walker et al., 2020](#)). Numerous other studies similarly support the ability of SEAs to implement evidence-based practices ([Brock & Carter, 2015](#); [Da Fonte & Capizzi, 2015](#); [Sam et al., 2023](#)).

When SEAs are properly trained, their support in facilitating communication opportunities has led to significant improvements in both the frequency and variety of communication exhibited by students with intellectual disabilities ([Anderson et al., 2024](#)). In addition to supporting students with special needs, SEAs work closely with teachers, and the collaboration between SEAs and teachers is considered vital ([Freeman et al., 2020](#); [Kline, 2021](#); [Yates et al., 2024](#)). A study examining mentorship relationships between novice special education teachers and SEAs found that, while the newly appointed teachers initially felt unsupported by their assigned mentors or coaches, they identified SEAs as their primary source of assistance. The findings suggest that a reciprocal mentorship relationship may develop between teachers and SEAs ([Evashkovsky & Osipova, 2023](#)).

In another study, teachers reported not having received adequate training in supervising SEAs, while SEAs themselves stated that despite their important roles in supporting students with special needs, they had not received sufficient role-specific training. Most of their learning, according to the

participants, occurred on the job ([Frantz et al., 2022](#)). Therefore, teachers' capacity to supervise and collaborate effectively with SEAs emerges as a critical issue. SEAs who support students in behavior management should also receive training in this area, and their professional development should be consistently supported ([Douglas & Uitto, 2021](#)). In a systematic review, [Borosh et al. \(2023\)](#) analyzed 11 single-subject research studies of moderate to high methodological quality and reported that SEAs were able to learn various instructional strategies, including the delivery of prompts, the use of fixed time-delay procedures, and the implementation of discrete trial training, through training provided by special education teachers.

In conclusion, the body of research indicates that SEAs have diverse professional development needs. These include competencies related to academic instruction, self-care skills, and behavior management, as well as the ability to collaborate effectively with teachers. Collaboration is a recurrent theme in many studies. In a series of focus group interviews involving a total of 64 special education teachers and SEAs, participants emphasized not only collaboration and communication within general education settings, but also the importance of setting shared goals for student success. The SEA's role as a bridge between teachers and other staff was seen by some as an advantage and by others as a disadvantage. Moreover, participants highlighted the need to address topics such as defining SEA responsibilities, adapting instructional materials, and conducting assessments within a broader framework ([Gilson & Biggs, 2023](#)).

Recent Research on SEAs in Turkey

In addition to international studies, there has been a growing body of research on Special Education Assistants (SEAs) in Turkey in recent years. Given the relatively recent emergence of the topic in the national context, most of these studies have employed qualitative research designs (n=4). Chronologically, studies conducted in Turkey include those by [Özaydın \(2020\)](#), [Demirdağlı and Kizir \(2023\)](#), [Parlak \(2023\)](#), [Demirdağlı and Kizir \(2024a\)](#), [İncekara and Ulaş \(2024\)](#), and [Demirdağlı and Kizir \(2024b\)](#). In Görgün's study, preschool

teachers reported that SEAs provided support in self-care, nutrition, classroom hygiene, and academic tasks. However, they emphasized the need for improvements in employment, permanent staffing, and social security, and suggested that SEAs should develop communication skills in order to collaborate effectively with teachers.

In a mixed-methods study, [Özaydın \(2020\)](#) collected data from three groups—parents, teachers, and SEAs—on the roles of SEAs who support children with special needs in general education settings through inclusive education measures. The findings indicated that SEAs assist both teachers and students by supporting peer interaction, managing challenging behaviors, and facilitating student participation in lessons. While all participants generally agreed on the roles of SEAs, they also emphasized the importance of the Child Development associate degree program in preparing individuals for this role. Özaydın also recommended that graduates of such programs be reassigned according to the school level of the students with special needs, and that official SEA positions be defined and appointments made to schools accordingly. In another literature review, [Demirdağlı and Kizir \(2023\)](#) highlighted that the lack of a clearly defined role for SEAs is a significant limitation. They pointed out the inadequacy of both pre-service and in-service theoretical and practical training, and recommended clarification of job descriptions as well as the development of professional growth opportunities.

In a study by [Parlak \(2023\)](#), the use of naturalistic teaching methods by SEAs, referred to as shadow teachers, was examined in relation to the communication skills of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Participants included SEAs who were graduates of Child Development or Disability Care and Rehabilitation associate degree programs, as well as 3–6-year-old children with ASD attending inclusive preschool settings. Using a single-subject, quasi-experimental design, the study found that SEAs successfully implemented the teaching strategies and contributed to lasting improvements in the children's communication skills. Moreover, social validity data supported the positive impact of the intervention and emphasized its potential for broader implementation.

In a separate study that emphasized that SEAs should not be viewed as caregivers, the opinions of 15 SEAs were collected and analyzed under four themes: (a) pre-service experiences, (b) roles and responsibilities, (c) needs, and (d) suggestions ([Demirdağlı & Kizir, 2024a](#)). Under the first theme, participants reported not receiving adequate training and having limited knowledge of their roles and responsibilities. Many also indicated that they were hired directly by families and did not have official status within schools. Regarding roles and responsibilities, SEAs stated that they worked one-on-one with students during school hours, while some also took on responsibilities outside school. Under the theme of needs, SEAs expressed their desire for formal training, access to information, and supervision support. They emphasized that they did not want to be perceived as caregivers and instead wished to be valued by school staff and families. They also pointed to the need for improvements in employment status, wages, and working conditions. The suggestions voiced under the final theme aligned closely with the issues raised in the previous sections.

In another study, [Demirdağlı and Kizir \(2024b\)](#) collected the views of 14 families regarding Special Education Assistants (SEAs). The researchers identified five main themes: (a) pre-service experiences, (b) employment process, (c) roles and responsibilities within the school, (d) roles and responsibilities outside the school, and (e) expectations, needs, and suggestions. Under the first theme, pre-service experiences, parents reported that there were no clear standards in the hiring process of SEAs and that there was uncertainty about whether SEAs were adequately prepared to meet the needs of their children. In the theme of employment process, the lack of clearly defined roles and responsibilities led to varying opinions regarding workload and whether SEAs should work independently or strictly under the teacher's direction. With respect to in-school roles and responsibilities, some SEAs were perceived as contributing to students' academic and social development, while others were seen as taking on more passive roles. Similar discrepancies were observed in out-of-school roles and responsibilities; while some SEAs provided support beyond school hours, others limited their involvement strictly to in-

school settings. Lastly, parents emphasized the need to support SEAs through training and professional development and to establish clear standards for the position. The researchers concluded that these uncertainties could be addressed through improvements in training, financial support mechanisms, and legal regulations ([Demirdağlı & Kizir, 2024b](#)).

In a separate study conducted by [İncekara and Ulaş \(2024\)](#) involving 15 special education teachers, positive views emphasized that SEAs can contribute to the motivation and skill development of students with special needs, help reduce behavioral problems, and should be employed more widely. On the other hand, negative views were primarily related to the attitudes of schools toward SEAs and the inconsistencies observed in practice.

Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendations

When all of these studies are examined collectively, it becomes evident that there are numerous issues that need to be addressed regarding Special Education Assistants (SEAs). First and foremost, it is necessary to deliberate whether specific educational qualifications should be required for individuals who will serve as SEAs. [İncekara and Ulaş \(2024\)](#), based on data from the Council of Higher Education (Yükseköğretim Kurulu – YÖK), have recommended the Shadow Teaching Program for the Disabled associate degree. However, [Özaydın \(2020\)](#) pointed out that the Child Development associate degree program was also established to serve this purpose. If the Disability Care and Rehabilitation program, which was introduced in the 2010s with similar objectives, is also taken into account, it becomes clear that graduates of three different associate degree programs may be eligible to work as SEAs.

In addition, although Prof. Dr. Yekta Saraç, former President of the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), announced that a new Support Program for Individuals with Disabilities (associate degree) would be established ([Anadolu Agency, 2019](#)), no such program is admitting students as of 2024, according to the most recent data from YÖK and the Student Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM). Considering the above data, nearly 30,000 students

were placed in the three existing associate degree programs in 2024 alone. This indicates that there is no urgent need to establish new programs specifically for the training of SEAs. Instead, the focus should be on restructuring and improving the existing ones. While existing studies highlight the growing need for SEAs in the field of special education, uncertainties regarding their employment and the varying relevance of different associate degree programs to this role remain noteworthy. For instance, a study conducted in Turkey referred to SEAs as shadow educators and reported that an associate degree program was launched under the Vocational School of Health Services at Istanbul University-Cerrahpaşa to serve this purpose ([Kurtkapan, 2023](#)). Currently, SEA training is offered through three associate degree programs, each hosted by Vocational Schools of Health Services but affiliated with different academic departments (e.g., Child and Youth Services, Therapy and Rehabilitation, Social Services and Counseling). This structural diversity, combined with varied instructional staff and curricula, contributes to inconsistencies in the preparation of SEAs.

Contrary to popular belief, the institutions where students with special needs receive the most intensive education are not private special education and rehabilitation centers but public schools. From special education kindergartens to upper secondary levels (such as Level III Special Education Practice Schools and Vocational Special Education Schools), students with special needs continue their education in special education classrooms under the instruction of teachers who hold undergraduate degrees in special education. Therefore, if a conceptual framework for SEAs is to be developed, it must be fully integrated into the field of special education. While courses in health, child development, physiotherapy, and psychology remain valuable, the core curriculum of SEA preparation programs should be rooted primarily in special education.

A further dimension that strengthens the current discussion involves national policy documents. These documents increasingly shape the future of special education and the role of SEAs. The most recent 12th Development Plan outlines key priorities such as enhancing human and physical resources,

increasing the effectiveness of special education programs through employment-based strategies, and establishing comprehensive monitoring, evaluation, and supervision mechanisms. In the Second National Autism Action Plan (2023–2030), SEAs are addressed under the term “facilitator personnel.” Goal 6 of the plan, titled “Strengthening Special Education and Support Services,” mandates the provision of one SEA for every student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in formal education who requires support. The employment procedures and regulations for these roles are to be clarified within a two-year timeline. Additionally, Target 6.5.2 sets a three-year timeline for the establishment of associate degree programs for SEA training. The action plan further calls for the definition of occupational standards and qualifications for SEAs and the formal recognition of the profession, in line with labor market needs. The inclusion of SEAs in the National Autism Action Plan represents a noteworthy policy milestone. Nonetheless, the recommendation to establish entirely new associate degree programs instead of focusing on the revision and improvement of existing ones raises questions regarding feasibility, especially in terms of the current student numbers, applicability, and the efficient use of resources. Expanding new programs from the ground up is unlikely to be efficient in the short term. A more effective solution would be to update and streamline the current programs (Disability Care and Rehabilitation, Child Development, and Shadow Teaching for the Disabled), which already train thousands of students, many of whom partially fulfill SEA roles.

Another significant issue concerns the restriction of SEA support solely to students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The official circular issued by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) refers only to students with ASD, leaving out other groups of students with special needs. In response, the Turkish Down Syndrome Association submitted an application to the Ombudsman Institution of Turkey (Kamu Denetçiliği Kurumu). The Ombudsman subsequently issued a recommendation stating that the Facilitator Personnel practice should be extended to all children with special needs. This recommendation emphasized the principles of non-

discrimination and equality outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Article 10 of the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, and Law No. 5378 on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. When considered in light of both national and international legal frameworks, it is evident that SEAs should support a broader population of students beyond those diagnosed with ASD. This reinforces the importance of embedding special education coursework into the professional development of SEAs.

The use of inconsistent terminology to describe support personnel in special education contributes to conceptual confusion. Terms such as support personnel, facilitator personnel ([İncekara & Ulaş, 2024](#)), and teacher assistant ([Özaydın, 2020](#); [Demirdağlı & Kizir, 2024a](#)) appear across the literature. In this study, the term “Special Education Assistant” is proposed as a more comprehensive and professionally grounded alternative, aligning with the term “paraeducator” widely used in the United States. Given that special education is a holistic process that includes school-based and community-based support, the term Special Education Assistant offers a broader and more inclusive scope. Thus, resolving the inconsistency in terminology is an important step.

Before concluding, it is important to acknowledge a limitation of this study. While it offers a comprehensive synthesis of national and international literature, it primarily reflects a projection from the well-established practices in the United States onto the emerging landscape in Turkey. Given that the concept of Special Education Assistants is still relatively new in Turkey, this review should be considered a foundational step for conceptual and theoretical discussions. Future studies may benefit from adopting empirical research designs, including experimental studies and systematic reviews, to validate and expand upon the issues discussed here. Based on the reviewed literature and policy documents, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the structure and effectiveness of Special Education Assistants (SEAs) in Turkey:

- The minimum educational qualifications required for SEA recruitment should be clearly defined through national policy and guidelines.
- The roles and responsibilities of SEAs, both within school environments and in broader support contexts (e.g., home or community settings), should be explicitly outlined. Further research is needed to explore the expectations of families and teachers regarding SEA support.
- A systematic supervision and feedback mechanism should be developed to monitor SEA performance and support continuous improvement.
- Official SEA positions should be formally established within the national staffing structure to ensure standardized employment practices.
- Shared responsibilities between families and SEAs should be clarified. Specific protocols should be introduced regarding communication, information exchange, and SEA engagement in non-instructional duties.
- SEAs should receive adequate training in areas such as academic support, behavior management, and self-care skill instruction. Regular access to professional development opportunities, including workshops and seminars, should be ensured to maintain competency.

In addition, further comprehensive and empirical research is recommended to inform the ongoing development of SEA systems and to ensure a qualified, competent workforce capable of meeting the diverse needs of students with disabilities through evidence-based strategies.

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