Investigation of Special Education Teachers' Views on the Distance Education Process Conducted in the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to reveal the views of special education teachers about the distance education process carried out during the epidemic period. In the research, in which phenomenology, one of the qualitative research designs, was used, the data were collected with a structured interview form. The participants of the research are 13 special education teachers working in Uşak, Turkey. As a result of the content analysis, the themes of the problems faced by special education teachers in the distance education process, the opportunities that arise in the distance education process and the suggestions for the distance education process have emerged. The results are discussed with the relevant literature.

Keywords: Special education, Covid-19, distance education

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 disease, which was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020) and affected the whole world, caused the closure of schools in 194 countries and the negative effects of more than 1.5 billion students (UNESCO, 2020).

It can be said that individuals with special needs are at the forefront of the groups negatively affected by the new situation that emerged because of the pandemic and the measures it brought (Asbury et al., 2020; Education Cannot Wait, 2020). With the closure of schools (Wang et al., 2020), which are very important for their lives, where individuals with special needs gain academic skills, communicate with their teachers and friends, receive psychological guidance, and start quarantine practices, the education process is urgent distance education applications. (Bozkurt, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). For example, in the People's Republic of China, lectures for students with special needs were broadcast on public television (Tlili et al., 2021), teaching materials were sent to students with special needs without computers and internet in a region in the United States of America, and their families sought information on how to use these materials (Tremmel et al., 2020). In Turkey, lesson videos for students with special needs have

been uploaded to EBA (Educational Informatics Network), the online education portal of the Ministry of National Education for students with special needs, and "I am Special, I am at Home" application has been prepared (Özer, 2020).

Social isolation and the closure of schools forced experts working in the field of special education, like all teachers, to distance education and to apply teaching methods on digital platforms (Zhou et al., 2020). Unlike general education teachers, the problems faced by special education teachers who practice intensive teaching for smaller groups or individuals also differ in the distance education process. When the researches are examined, the families with special needs children during the pandemic process (Averett, 2021; Erdem et al., 2021; Günlü & Çakmak, 2021; Gürbüz, 2022; Lotfi et al., 2021; Şenol & Can Yaşar, 2020) ; Yazçayır & Gürgür, 2021; Yüksel et al., 2021), student and teacher (Akbayrak et al., 2021; Mengi & Alpdoğan, 2020; Raghul et al., 2021; Schuck er al., 2021; Şenol & Can Yaşar, 2020; Ünay et al., 2021; Yakut, 2021; Yüksel et al., 2021). The distance education process brought with it by the epidemic has created new problems in the context of special education services. These problems bring about a situation that needs to be examined with new research (Mengi & Alpdoğan, 2020). However, it is important to reveal the problems encountered in the distance education process carried out during the pandemic period, to develop solutions for these problems, and to identify the opportunities that arise in the process, with new research to increase the quality of distance education applications in the field of special education in the next period. In this context, the aim of this research is to examine the views of special education teachers about the distance education process. Within the scope of the research, answers to the following questions were sought:

1-What are the difficulties experienced by special education teachers in the distance education process?

2-What are the opportunities that special education teachers have in the distance education process?

3-What are the suggestions of special education teachers for a successful distance education process?

2. Method

This research, which examines the views of special education teachers on the distance education process, was designed with phenomenology, one of the qualitative research designs. Phenomenology is based on the notion of a world experiencing a phenomenon, or shared concepts of experiences with phenomena. The group has a heterogeneous structure between 3-4 people and 10-15 people (Creswell, 2007).

2.1. Research Tools

Research data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers. Interviews were held over the weekend via Google Meet. Average call duration is 19 minutes.

2.2. Participants

The participants of the research are 13 special education teachers working in Uşak, Turkey. Demographic data of the teachers participating in the research are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Teachers Participating in the Study

Code	Gender	Seniority	Diagnosis of Student
T1	Female	10	Autism spectrum disorder
T2	Female	5	Mild-Moderate Intellectual Disability
T3	Female	3	Mild Intellectual Disability
T4	Female	4	Moderate – Severe Intellectual Disability
T5	Female	3	Mild Intellectual Disability
T6	Female	4	Moderate – Severe Intellectual Disability
T7	Male	3	Mild Intellectual Disability
T8	Male	3	Mild Intellectual Disability – Learning Disability
T9	Female	15	Autism spectrum disorders
T10	Female	20	Gifted
T11	Male	8	Gifted
T12	Male	11	Learning disability
T13	Male	6	Learning Disability

2.3. Data Analysis

The data obtained from the interviews with the teachers participating in the research were first transferred to the written text in the computer environment. Then, content analysis was carried out, themes and codes were reached. Participant confirmation and detailed description strategies were used to ensure validity. To ensure reliability, the data obtained were coded by two different coders and the consensus among the coders was calculated (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As a result of the calculation, this rate was found to be 96%.

3. Findings

As a result of the analysis of the data obtained from the research, 3 main themes were reached, titled "problems encountered in the distance education process, opportunities that arise in the distance education process and suggestions for the distance education process". Detailed information on these themes is provided below.

Problems Encountered in the Distance Education Process

The codes that emerged depending on the theme of the problems encountered in the distance education process and their distribution are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Problems Faced by Special Education Teachers in the Distance Education Process

Theme	Code	f
Problems Encountered in the Distance Education Process	Attention problems	2
	Unwillingness	5
	Increase in problem behaviors	7
	Internet Access problems	6
	Computer access problems	11
	Insufficient interaction	4
	Adaptation issues	5
	Routine disruption	3
	Socioeconomic reasons	8
	Parent reluctance	4

When Table 2 is examined, it is stated that the most common problem encountered by the teachers participating in the research in the distance education process is access to the computer (f=11). Other problems with the highest frequency were determined as socioeconomic reasons (f=8) and an increase in problem behaviors (f=7).

One of the teachers who participated in the research regarding the computer access code, T2: "Our most fundamental problem in this process was definitely that my student did not have a computer. We had a hard time on the phone screen", T3: "Because there was no computer in the family, he could not attend the classes. No matter how much we prepare for distance education, unfortunately, all of them are wasted without the equipment" and T10 expressed the problems they had with accessing computers and the internet with the explanations: "It was difficult for the students to attend the classes because they did not have access to the internet".

Depending on the socioeconomic reasons code, T11: "Since the financial situation of my student's family is not good, there is no internet at home. Since their phones were old, the student could not connect from there either. He was able to come to classes by asking his neighbors and relatives whenever he had the chance" and T5: "A parent had to leave his child at home with his grandmother because he was also working during the pandemic period. They gave an example of the difficulties experienced due to socio-economic reasons, with the explanation of "He could not attend the classes because he could not be interested".

Another problem mentioned is the increase in problem behaviors. On the subject T9: "It was not possible to communicate with the students in front of the screen. The children cried all the time and caused behavioral problems", T1: "I could not concentrate the attention of the students

in front of the screen enough" and they exemplified their experiences with problem behavior and attention problems.

Depending on the parent reluctance code, T7: "I tried to reach the family, but I had parents who did not attend the lesson despite their promises.", T12: "Even though I tried to increase the participation in the lesson, a parent prevented the student from attending the lessons with excuses such as we do not have internet, guests will come." They expressed their problems about the subject in their statements.

Opportunities in the Distance Education Process

The codes and frequency distribution that emerged depending on the theme of opportunities emerging during the distance education process are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Opportunities in the Distance Education Process

Theme	Code	f
Opportunities in the Distance Education Process	I don't think there is an opportunity.	4
	Digital skill increases in teachers	7
	Digital skill increases in students	3
	Digital skill increases in parents	5
	Elimination of the spatial barrier	10

The code with the highest frequency among the codes that emerged due to the theme of opportunities emerging during the distance education process is the elimination of the code space barrier (f=10). This code is followed by digital skill increase in teachers (f=7) and digital skill increase in parents (f=5), respectively.

Depending on the code of teachers' removal of the space barrier, T11: "I think the greatest opportunity that distance education has created was to bring the school to the students' feet. I can say that being able to continue education even from a distance has really been a life saver for this period" and T6: "Continuing education even from a distance, rather than not being able to do any lessons because of the pandemic, was very good considering the benefit of children. In this way, we had the opportunity to meet with their families and inform them." They emphasized that distance education saves the education process from the limitation of space.

Depending on the codes of digital skill increase in teachers and digital skill increase in parents T7: "I couldn't do this much on the computer before. Now I can prepare beautiful events by using different sites", T12: "I can teach effective lessons by using Web 2.0 tools better. This is clearly the contribution of the pandemic to me", T4: "… even a parent said that thanks to this distance education, we became computer experts" and T8: "Parents were asking what they

could not do on the computer, and now they learned how to use the computer" and expressed the opportunities in the distance education process. they have brought.

It is noteworthy that there are teachers who think that distance education does not create opportunities within the scope of this theme. T1: "I do not think that distance education will be beneficial in special education", T2: "I think there is no benefit in distance education, face-to-face education should continue as much as possible" and they emphasized that the distance education process does not reveal any opportunities.

Suggestions for Distance Education Process

The codes and frequency distribution that emerged depending on the theme of recommendations for the distance education process are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Suggestions for Distance Education Process

Theme	Code	f
	Family Education	4
	Material support	7
	Access to computer	9
Suggestions for Distance Education Process	Interactive content	6
	Teacher training	2
	Sanction	3
	Adaptation during the lesson	1

Within the scope of the suggestions for the distance education process, the codes with the highest frequency among the suggestions made by the teachers were determined as access to the computer (f=9), internet infrastructure (f=7) and interactive content (f=6).

Examples of statements made by teachers within the scope of this theme are presented below:

T12: "If you ask what your indispensable suggestion is, I will say computer. I don't know whether they give tax deductions to computers or schools distribute them, but children must have a computer for distance education, I saw that."

T5: "Supporting sanctions should be applied to the active participation of the students in the lessons"

T2: "Material support should be provided for families to support them at home."

T8: "Preparing more interactive content such as interactive books and course contents for special education will make our job easier."

T10: "I think families should be informed about internet and computer use"

3. Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, which aims to reveal the views of special education teachers on the distance education process carried out during the pandemic period, data were collected through an interview form prepared using semi-structured interview technique with 13 teachers.

The data obtained in the research were analyzed with content analysis and the themes of problems experienced in the distance education process, opportunities in the distance education process, suggestions for the distance education process were revealed. When the problems that arise in the distance education process are examined, it has been determined that the teachers mostly voiced the problem of accessing the computer. The existence of these deficiencies in distance education (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Rita Petretto et al., 2020), which is based on the availability of technological devices and having an internet connection, directly affects the education process negatively. It has been determined that approximately 830 million students in the world do not have a computer and more than 40% of them do not have access to the internet (UN Education Agency, 2020). According to OECD (2020) data, Turkey is behind European countries in terms of internet access and computer ownership. These findings show parallelism with the results obtained in the study. Karip (2020) also emphasized that the difficulties experienced in accessing information and communication technologies may increase the learning gaps in students with special needs.

Teachers also showed socioeconomic reasons among the problems they experienced in the distance education process. They emphasized that students with low socioeconomic status during the epidemic had difficulties in participating in distance education. When studies with families during the epidemic period are examined in the literature, there are studies supporting this finding (Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020; Gürbüz, 2022; Trevino et al., 2021). In the study of Trevino et al. (2021), it was concluded that the socioeconomic level of the parents and the technological equipment they have at home are the predictors of the educational activities done at home during the pandemic period. In their study, Greenway, and Eaton-Thomas (2020) collected data from 238 parents through questionnaires in their study, which aimed to reveal the resources and support received by parents with special needs children from their schools and/or local government, and their level of satisfaction with these resources. According to the results of the study, they reported that they could not spare enough time for their children's education because parents had to work from home during the epidemic.

Another finding obtained from the research is that teachers think that their digital skills improve during the distance education process. In the study conducted by Sarı and Nayır (2020), research results that overlap with this finding were obtained. In the study, in which the reports prepared by OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank were examined, the increase in the technology skills of teachers is among the educational opportunities that emerged during the Covid 19 process. Kırmızıgül (2020) also emphasized that due to the changes that took place after the epidemic, teachers' teaching process and practices caused inevitable changes, and the effort to keep up with the new era increased the technological knowledge and skills of teachers. Teachers stated that distance education eliminates the necessity of being in the same place

during the education process. It is stated in the literature that one of the most important advantages of distance education is its independence from place (DeNeui & Dodge, 2006).

The last theme that emerged in the research is the suggestions for the distance education process. When the answers of the teachers are examined, it is seen that the most expressed suggestion is access to the computer. When the literature is examined, there are research results in parallel with this finding (Erdem et al., 2021; Ünay et al, 2021). A similar result was reached in the study of Ünay et al. (2021), in which they aimed to examine the perspectives of special education teachers regarding distance education during the epidemic process. Equipment is among the suggestions made by special education teachers for a more efficient and willing use of distance education. Other suggestions expressed by teachers are material support and interactive content. Teachers emphasized that for the distance education process to be carried out more effectively, parents should be provided with material support and the interactive content should be enriched by increasing the number. Sani-Bozkurt et al. (2021) emphasized that there is not enough interactive content for students with special needs in Turkey.

In the light of the results obtained from the research, the following suggestions can be made:

• The reflections of the distance education process can be examined with new research, in particular the types of disability.

• Interactive content can be prepared for students with special needs.

• Trainings can be organized for parents and teachers to increase their digital skills.

• Cooperation can be made with institutions to deliver hardware and internet infrastructure to families with low socioeconomic status.

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