

Special Education School Administrators' Experiences Regarding Distance and Hybrid Education

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate the experiences of administrators working at special education schools about distance and hybrid education during the coronavirus (COVID-19). Employing the phenomenology design, this study was conducted with participants determined through criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods. The participants consist of 15 school administrators working in special education schools in Turkey. Data have been collected through semi-structured interviews, one of the qualitative data collection techniques. The results have indicated that coordination in special education schools is achieved through face-to-face communication among school administrators whilst it is established via digital platforms between teachers and students. It has also been determined that special education school administrators, teachers, and parents have various needs such as technological tools and internet support during the COVID-19 process. In addition, the results have revealed that the COVID-19 process has some benefits for school administrators such as affordability, experience in crisis management, opportunities to get to know the parents closely and to organize parent training programs, and effective participation of parents in their children's education. The study has concluded that distance education practices are not efficient in special education.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, school administrators, distance and hybrid education, students with special needs

Highlights

What is already known about this topic:

- Within the scope of the measures taken to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face education was temporarily suspended, and emergency distance education was started across all levels of education.
- The distance education for students with special needs differs from their peers with typical development.
- The administrators of special education schools have undertaken different duties and responsibilities in the distance education process compared to other school administrators.

What this paper contributes:

- This study provides some ideas and clues about the needs of special education school administrators and students with special needs during the distance education process.
- This study also provides some ideas and clues to education specialists and special education specialists on how to behave in an emergency remote teaching.

Implications for theory, practice and/or policy:

- Special education school administrators' views on distance education should be used to develop policies to be implemented in emergencies.
- As stated by the school administrators participating in this research, the needs of students with special needs during the distance education process should be met
- Crisis management trainings should be organized concerning extraordinary situations such as COVID-19, especially for the administrators of special education schools.



Introduction

The pandemic process started with the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak; subsequently, sudden and urgent changes have occurred in all areas of life. Depending on those changes, transformation has become mandatory in all areas of life as well as in education (Amka & Dalle, 2022; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Corcuera & Alvarez, 2021; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). In many countries including Turkey, as part of the measures taken to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, face-to-face education was temporarily suspended, and emergency remote teaching was conducted at all levels of education and in all types of schools (Parmigiani et al., 2021; Spyropoulou & Koutroukis, 2021; Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2020a). Allowing teachers and students to constantly communicate regardless of physical and temporal boundaries, distance education is seen as an alternative method to meet the educational needs of students during the COVID-19 process (Özer, 2020; Shamburg et al., 2022). Based on distance and internet-based education applied to minimize the losses in education during the COVID-19 process, there has arisen a risk of a further increase in educational inequality. The disadvantaged groups of students in this process include especially those with special needs, living in rural areas, and classified as poor (Hulme et al., 2021; Stracke et al., 2022).

Special Needs Students

The pandemic process has affected all school systems as well as the education services of students with special needs. Studies have also shown that the distance education process for students with special needs differs from the one provided for their peers with typical development (Bozkus-Genc & Sani-Bozkurt, 2022; Lee, 2020; Sider et al., 2021; Şenol & Can-Yaşar, 2020). Closure of schools and start of distance education; it has had a significant negative impact on children with special needs who need additional teaching support, have behavioral problems, and have difficulties in routines and use of technological devices (Sakarneh, 2021). It is known that students with special needs cannot focus on the computer and television screen depending on the degree and type of their disability and that their motivation towards distance education is low (Özer, 2020; Sakarneh, 2021; Shamburg et al., 2022). Besides, since the learning competency of students with special needs is more limited compared to typical students, they need more help primarily from their parents, then teachers and school administration in accessing and using both physical and other online technologies in this process (Glessner & Johnson, 2020; Sider et al., 2021; Şenol & Can-Yaşar, 2020). Considering all these, administrators working in special education schools have a great role and responsibility in supporting the adaptation of teachers and parents, who play an important role in the continuation of the education of students with special needs, and in organizing the process during the shift to emergency remote teaching (Hulme et al., 2021; Sakarneh, 2021; Sider et al. 2021).

School Leaders

In this period of sudden and urgent change in education, it is known that school administrators as *first responders* in organizing educational activities school administrators have focused on solving many problems. The focus of school administrators has been on minimizing the long-term educational and social negative effects of school closures on children (Jopling & Harness, 2021; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020; Varela & Fedynich, 2020), particularly on issues such as protective measures for health and equality in education (Sider, 2020). In order to achieve these, school administrators tend to solve many problems such as communication between stakeholders, information sharing, planning, lack of technologies and materials (Can & Nikolayidis, 2022; Pollock, 2020) and at the same time they have tried to maintain their leadership role (Hulme et al., 2021; Kunnath, 2020) along with dealing with the increase in bureaucratic load (Charalampous et al., 2021; Sider et al., 2021). Therefore, school administrators in general felt overwhelmed, struggled to respond to a myriad of needs with limited sources, and experienced negative psychological effects (Aytaç, 2020; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Spyropoulou & Koutrouki, 2021).

Special Education during the Pandemic Period in Turkey

The pandemic period in Turkey started after the announcement by the Ministry of Health on March 11, 2020, that the first case was seen. Immediately after this, the MoNE announced that as of 12 March 2020, education was suspended in all education levels and types of schools until 30 March 2020 (MoNE, 2020a). However, this period was extended depending on the course of the pandemic. Then, as of March 23, 2020, the distance education process started by the broadcast on the national television channel TRT EBA TV (MoNE, 2020b). These broadcasts were designed for students with typical development at primary, secondary and high school levels in general education schools. As of April 17, 2020, television content for students with special needs in general education schools, albeit limited, started to be broadcast via EBA TV. A comprehensive application for students with special needs was launched on April 24, 2020 under the name *I'm in Special Education*. On the other hand, it was announced that education could start as of June 15, 2020 in outside-school support education institutions (MoNE, 2020c). Another development was about the continuation of the education of students with special needs through the use of partial face-to-face and distance education opportunities in the new academic year that would start on September 21, 2020. However, this decision only covered the first-grade level in special education kindergartens and special education primary schools, and it was stated that distance education would be continued at other education levels (MoNE, 2020d). A short time later, as of October 12, 2020, the second phase of the transition to face-to-face education started. In this context, face-to-face education has started in all special education schools as well as primary schools, village schools and for the 8th and 12th grade students (Anadolu Agency [AA], 2020). However, this was not carried out in the old normal way, but in a face-to-face setting. Accordingly, it was decided to start face-to-face education two days a week in special education primary schools, special education secondary schools and high school level special education vocational and business schools. Following this decision, on October 26, 2020, face-to-face education started five days a week in special education schools and special education classes providing education at all levels and grades (MoNE, 2020e). However, due to the increasing cases soon, it was announced that as of November 20, 2020, face-to-face education would be suspended again until January 4, 2021, including schools where students with special education needs attended (MoNE 2020f). Due to the course of the pandemic, distance education was extended to January 22, 2021, including the semester break, and it was later announced that the beginning of face-to-face education would be February 15, 2021 (MoNE, 2020g). On February 15, 2021, only village schools and kindergartens started face-to-face education. Education levels other than these started the term with distance education (MoNE, 2021a). As of March 2, 2021, full-time face-to-face education commenced in all special education, pre-school and village schools across the country (MoNE, 2021b). It was announced that soon, due to the increased contamination during the epidemic process, a full closure period would be passed on 30 April-17 May 2021 in Turkey (Ministry of Interior, 2021). Then, as of May 17, 2021, face-to-face education would start in all public and private pre-school education schools, special education schools and classes, and special education and rehabilitation centers, provided that necessary precautions were taken (MoNE, 2021c). A short time later, the end of the semester was reached. However, once again it was announced that education would continue for all students within a program called "I'm in Remedial Training" to be held between July 5 and August 31, 2021 with the aim to support the holistic development of students with special education needs (MoNE, 2021d). The new academic year started in a face-to-face setting in all special education schools and institutions on September 6, 2021 (MoNE, 2021e). In the next period, a determined attitude was displayed in order to carry out face-to-face education activities. There were no school closures, but only class closures, depending on the framework determined in the number of cases.

Literature

One of the major challenges schools have encountered lately is the provision of appropriate educational opportunities for students with special needs (DiPaola et al., 2004) because these students need more adaptation and arrangement within the instructional setting than those with typical development (Hurwitz et al., 2022; Taddei et al., 2021). In this sense, these students' incompetency-based needs are coupled with other emerging needs due to distance education practice during COVID-19 (Sani-Bozkurt et al., 2021; Shamburg et al., 2022). Relevant body of literature concludes that students with special needs in both general and special education schools have suffered disadvantages and difficulties because of the sudden and urgent transition to distance education practice (Hurwitz et al., 2022). There is a general consensus in the literature that educators and parents should communicate and collaborate when determining the educational needs of students with special needs during the Pandemic (Tso et al., 2022; Yazçayır & Gürgür, 2021; Ünay et al., 2021). Besides, there are certain roles and responsibilities to be fulfilled by school administrators, as well as educators and parents, with respect to the identification of such needs and providing necessary support to meet these needs (Can & Nikolayidis, 2022; Garner & Forbes, 2013; Hargreaves & Fink, 2005). Sider (2020) report that the administrators of special education schools have collaborated with both teachers and other staff in order to provide support materials for students with special needs during the pandemic crisis. Rasmitadila et al. (2020) underlie that school administrators have played an assistive role during the emergency remote teaching practice in terms of motivating teachers, helping teachers to prepare, coordinating school equipment, funding, and infrastructure. Varela and Fedynich's (2020) conclusions indicate that school administrators were vigilant to serve the best for the needs of teachers, staff, and parents during the emergency remote teaching of COVID-19, yet the prevalence of inequalities among students and inadequate sources prevented them to be active. Netolicky (2020) suggests that the ability to shift rapidly should be accompanied with a considerate, problem-oriented, and well-designed planning process, that school leaders should move swiftly and cautiously, and that the consequences of the precautions should carefully be reviewed at such times.

In this regard, it is believed that the increasing responsibilities of school administrators in emergency distance and hybrid education processes during the COVID-19 period may differ depending on the target audience in special education schools. Accordingly, the COVID-19 education process can be much more effective and sufficient by determining the problems experienced in special education schools in line with the school administrators' opinions and by applying necessary precautions to prevent those problems. In addition, it is predicted that in-depth analysis of special education school administrators' experiences in providing support for students with special needs so that they can benefit from distance education most efficiently and effectively and in directing teachers and parents correctly will provide a vast and comprehensive perspective for the literature, practitioners and the process. The aim of the current study is to investigate the views of school administrators at special education schools during the COVID-19 period. The problem statement of the research is "What are the experiences of special education school administrators about the COVID-19 pandemic education process?" Accordingly, answers have been sought for the following sub-questions regarding this problem statement:

- 1) What are the experiences of special education school administrators regarding the coordination in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic education process?
- 2) What are the experiences of special education school administrators regarding the needs that have arisen during the COVID-19 pandemic education process?
- 3) What are the experiences of special education school administrators regarding the outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic education process to special education?

What are the experiences of special education school administrators regarding the place of distance education in special education during and after the COVID-19 pandemic education process?

Methodology

Research Model

This study has been designed in line with the phenomenology design – one of the qualitative research methods driven with the purpose of understanding individuals' experiences regarding a phenomenon (van Manen, 1997). In this research, the phenomenology design has been employed to examine and describe the experiences of special education school administrators regarding education during the COVID-19 pandemic period in Turkey. Data have been collected through semi-structured interview technique, one of the qualitative data collection techniques (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 2006).

Data Collecting Tools

The interview questions were developed by the researchers after reviewing the literature. The questions were examined by a special education specialist and a school administrator, and then were finalized following a pilot study. Two of the interview questions were expanded with explanatory questions. One of the interview questions, "How did you conduct transitioning to emergency remote teaching and the hybrid education practice in cooperation with other school administrators during Covid-19 period?" was extended with teachers, students, parents, and other staff in a separate question for each. The interviews were carried out by the researchers themselves and were audio-recorded, the duration of interviews ranged from 18 minutes to 29 minutes. Following is the list of interview questions in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview questions

Interview Questions	
1)	How did you conduct transitioning to emergency remote teaching and hybrid education practice during the Covid-19 period?
a)	How did you conduct transitioning to emergency remote teaching and hybrid education practice in cooperation with school administrators during the Covid-19 period?
b)	How did you conduct transitioning to emergency remote teaching and hybrid education practice in cooperation with teachers during the Covid-19 period?
c)	How did you conduct transitioning to emergency remote teaching and hybrid education practice in cooperation with students during the Covid-19 period?
d)	How did you conduct transitioning to emergency remote teaching and hybrid education practice in cooperation with parents during the Covid-19 period?
e)	How did you conduct transitioning to emergency remote teaching and hybrid education practice in cooperation with other staff members during the Covid-19 period?
2)	About what did you feel the most pressing need for support when transitioning to emergency remote teaching and during hybrid education practice within Covid-19 period?
3)	What are the topics that demanded support during the transition to emergency remote teaching and hybrid education practice within the Covid-19 period?
a)	What are the topics that teachers demanded support during the transition to emergency remote teaching and hybrid education practice within the Covid-19 period?
b)	What are the topics that students demanded support during the transition to emergency remote teaching and hybrid education practice within the Covid-19 period?
c)	What are the topics that parents demanded support during the transition to emergency remote teaching and hybrid education practice within the Covid-19 period?
d)	What are the topics that other staff members demanded support during the transition to emergency remote teaching and hybrid education practice within the Covid-19 period?
4)	What are the advantages and disadvantages of transitioning to emergency remote teaching and hybrid education practice for the administrators of special education schools during the Covid-19 period?
5)	What do you think about the place of distance education in special education?

Participants

Selected through criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods, the participants consist of administrators working at special education schools in Turkey during the COVID-19 period. (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). There are two criteria when determining the number of participants in qualitative research. The first is the necessity for the participants to reflect the research universe in terms

of age, gender, and work experience; and the second is data saturation, that is, when the same piece of information is repeated during an interview, the interviews can be discontinued. On the other hand, in the phenomenological interview method applied to participants who have experienced a similar phenomenon, accommodating few participants allows in-depth data collection (Seidman, 2006). Considering the phenomenological design and data saturation, in this sense, 15 school administrators at special education schools constitute the research participants of this study.

In accordance with research ethics, the names of the school administrators are not revealed. For this reason, code names such as SA-1, SA-2 ... were given to each school administrator. Demographic information regarding school administrators is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic information regarding the participants

Participants	Position	Age	Gender	Teaching Branch	Education	Province where She/He work in Turkey	Experience of the Administrators as a Teacher (Year)	Experience as an Administrator(Year)	Experience as an Administrator at the Present School(Year)
SA-1	Principal	42	Male	Philosophy	Bachelor	Bursa	18	10	2
				Information	Master		13	3	3
SA-2	Vice-principal	38	Male	Technologies		Bursa			
SA-3	Vice-principal	46	Male	Philosophy	Bachelor	Bursa	25	11	4
SA-4	Vice-principal	46	Female	Primary School	Bachelor	Bursa	24	8	3
SA-5	Principal	43	Female	Preschool	Master	Bursa	11	5	2
SA-6	Vice-principal	34	Male	Special Education	Bachelor	Bursa	12	2	2
SA-7	Principal	43	Male	Guidance and Psychological Counseling	Master	Bolu	21	7	7
SA-8	Vice-principal	50	Male	Special Education	Master	Bolu	28	16	1
SA-9	Vice-principal	49	Male	Visual Arts	Bachelor	Bolu	24	5	3
SA-10	Vice-principal	41	Male	Gym	Master	Bolu	20	13	3
SA-11	Vice-principal	42	Male	Visual Arts	Master	Sakarya	16	3	4
SA-12	Principal	50	Male	Guidance and Psychological Counseling	Master	Sakarya	25	12	6
SA-13	Vice-principal	42	Female	Mathematics	Master	Sakarya	21	2	2

SA-14	Principal	46	Male	Guidance and Psychological Counseling	Bachelor	Sakarya	21	8	5
SA-15	Vice-principal	45	Male	Special Education	Bachelor	Sakarya	23	13	8

As can be seen in Table 2, the average age of the participants is 44, and the age range is between 34 and 50. The majority of the administrators are males, and there are three female administrators. Only three of the administrators have special education background, and the others come from different disciplines. More than half of the school administrators have a Master's degree, and the other seven hold a Bachelor's degree. The participants are school administrators located in the provinces of Bursa, Bolu, and Sakarya in Turkey. Work experience of the administrators as a teacher range from 11 to 28 years and as an administrator from 2 to 16 years. Moreover, their work experience as an administrator at the present school varies between 1 and 7 years.

Data Analysis

In this research, the data collected through face-to-face interviews were digitally recorded as short notes and audio recordings to be analyzed in line with the inductive approach. Then, the audio recordings were transcribed in the digital environment and coded independently by the researchers. Based on the emerging codes, themes and sub-themes were formulated, and a consensus was established on both the themes and sub-themes (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Moustakas, 1994).

Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, validity and reliability refer to credibility. In this regard, a series of precautions are practiced to increase the credibility of qualitative research findings (Creswell, 2007; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). This research employed in depth data collection process, detailed descriptions, and direct quotations to increase the credibility. In addition, coding of the research data and formulating relevant themes were completed through collaboration among different researchers. In this regard, first of all, the reliability was calculated through the percentage of agreement formula – 'Reliability = agreement / (agreement + disagreement) x 100' proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) – and the percentage of agreement over the codes was calculated as 100%. Consensus was secured about all codes and themes. Accordingly, research desired level of reliability is achieved in qualitative studies when the agreement between expert and researcher evaluations is 90% or more (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Besides, detailed descriptions were included through direct quotations from the views of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Moreover, relevant checks and controls about the analyses and findings were completed by external audits.

The validity of the current research was supported through various means such as data collection by different researchers, use of criterion sampling – a purposive sampling technique – and detailed description of the participants' characteristics (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Necessary permissions and approvals were obtained from the participants in accordance with research ethics. At the same time, they were informed that they had the right to opt out of the study at any time (Creswell, 2007; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Furthermore, the participants were assigned code names in line with the law on the protection of personal data. Approval of the Ethics Committee was acquired from Bursa Uludağ University Ethics Committee by Decision No:36 dated 02.07.2021.

Research Procedures

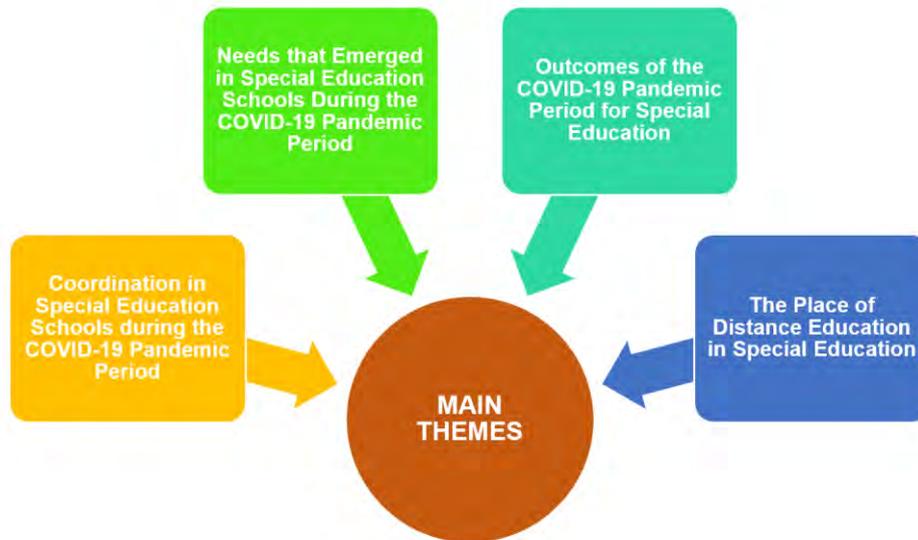
Semi-structured interview questions related to the research aim were formulated under the light of research review. The questions were finalized following expert opinions and a pilot study (see Table 1).

Afterwards, appointments were made with the school administrators, and the interviews were held between July 26 and August 17, 2021.

Findings and Discussions

The analysis of research data collected from special education administrators through semi-structured interviews in order to examine their views about the education during the COVID-19 period revealed four main themes (see Figure1). Depending on these themes, many sub-themes were identified (see Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5).

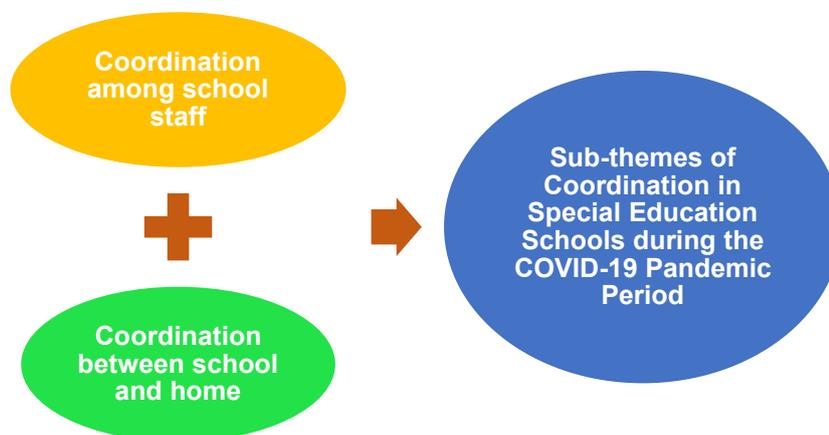
Figure1. Main themes of the research



Coordination in Special Education Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic Period

As a result of the data analysis, the main theme "coordination in special education schools during the COVID-19 pandemic period" emerged. Depending on this theme, two sub-themes were identified (see Figure 2). The findings of each sub-theme are explained under the following headings.

Figure 2. Sub-themes of coordination in special education schools during the COVID-19 pandemic period



Coordination among School Staff

In order to ensure coordination during the transition to emergency remote teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all the school administrators stated that they communicated face-to-face among themselves while they utilized applications such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Meet, Telegram, etc. to communicate with the teachers. Opinions on this subject were expressed as follows:

“When the pandemic started, we acted a little faster than the other schools and immediately held a meeting to see what we could do. At that time, we also held a Zoom meeting with the teachers.” SA-10

“We held meetings with administrators on certain days of the week. We talked with our teachers remotely using various communication channels. We held meetings via Zoom. We communicated through messaging systems.” SA-3

Coordination between School and Home

As in the sub-theme of coordination among school staff, all school administrators pointed out that coordination between the stakeholders and students in special education schools during the COVID-19 pandemic period is ensured through parents. It is understood from the participants' statements that along with the school administration's liaison with the parents, each teacher played an active role in establishing coordination especially by communicating with the parents of their own classes. Relevant opinions are given below:

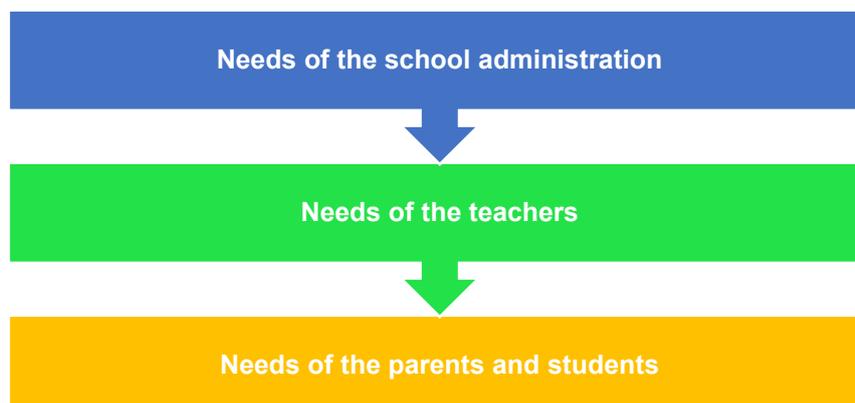
“Our school has a general information system. We can contact each parent individually, but since our teachers will continue with individualized plans, we asked them to contact the parents and plan activities five days a week” SA-6

“After we created the database as the administration, so did the teachers with their own classes. That's how they started with WhatsApp” SA-2

Needs that Emerged in Special Education Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic Period

In this study, three sub-themes were determined depending on the main theme of "needs emerging in special education schools during the COVID-19 pandemic period", which manifested as a result of the analysis of the interviews conducted with special education school administrators (see Figure 3). Explanations for these sub-themes are provided under the following headings.

Figure 3. Sub-themes of needs that emerged in special education schools during the COVID-19 pandemic period



Needs of the School Administration

In this study, most of the school administrators at special education schools reported that they needed to be well informed in order to plan and carry out the process in a healthy way due to the sudden developing situations and uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The opinions on this matter were stated as follows:

*“Decisions were made very quickly according to the new situation. We were expected to adapt to the situation. The imposed decisions may not be suitable for different types of schools, age groups, and disability types. We may have to make our own decisions on an array of topics ranging from school management to the syllabi and to how teachers would deliver their lessons.”*SA-1

“As an administrator, I needed support with planning. I needed support for example to prepare the schedule for courses. In addition, the decisions made by the Ministry during the remote-hybrid-face-to-face transitioning processes were sudden. We were informed quite late about these decisions. For example, I clearly remember that on a Friday evening after school while we were having distance classes, we had a directive saying that on Monday we would switch to the hybrid model. We will be moving to a different modality on Monday, and how am I supposed to plan accordingly?” SA-10

*“We needed more information during the COVID period. Training could have been provided.”*SA-5

In addition to planning and adapting to sudden cases, four school administrators emphasized that the need for materials that could be used in special education during the distance education process was quite dramatic. SA-8 referred to this issue by saying *“As a teacher, I needed support on what materials to use and how to use them for students in distance education.”*

Besides, two school administrators stated that they needed support from teachers and parents the most in this process. SA-13 referred to this as:

“We needed more parent support because online education is not something that can be done without parent support for children with special needs... Although parent support was a priority, teacher support was also very important.”

Needs of the Teachers

As a result of the data analysis, in addition to the needs of the special education school administrators, important findings were identified regarding the needs of teachers. For instance, two school administrators noted that the teachers needed technological devices as their children were also in distance education at home. Accordingly, SA-10 said, *“There were teachers taking the school's computer home as they had two children. They used the computers, thus the teacher's demanded computers from the school.”* Apart from that, in line with SA-3's statement, two school administrators stated that the teachers needed the support of the school administration for the participation of students with special needs in distance education courses: *“Teachers have requested support from us to ensure students' participation in courses.”*

In addition to their need for technological equipment and support for students' participation in distance education, four school administrators reported that the teachers needed a hygienic environment during the hybrid education process. The views on this matter are as follows:

“PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) materials such as masks, gloves, cologne, and disinfectant were requested from us.” SA-13

“Even if the children were sick, they were sent to school. That’s why the teachers demanded that we had a tighter control.” SA-6

Apart from the need for a hygienic environment, technological equipment, and support to increase student participation in distance education within special education schools, teachers also reported another need for digital materials. In line with this, SA-8 said;

“...Whether the materials to be used were suitable for distance education or not was a huge handicap. Our teachers requested materials from us, or they prepared some materials on their own.”

In addition, the need for empathizing with the teachers as they experienced health problems during the COVID-19 period was noted by SA-5 as *“The teachers who had profound difficulties through this process and struggled to restore their health asked us to show some understanding.”*

Needs of the Parents and Students

In this study, various findings related to the needs of students and parents were identified as a result of the analysis of the interviews conducted with the special education school administrators. Accordingly, six school administrators stated that students and parents needed technological devices and internet access within this process. SA-7 clearly expressed his opinion on this issue as follows:

“We received phone, internet, and tablet requests. Apart from one student with special needs, the parent has two more children, and there is only one computer at home. The parent sacrifices the child with special needs by saying “One of my children has special needs. At least, I want my typical child to attend his classes properly.”

In addition to the parents’ and students’ needs for technological devices and internet access, it was understood from the statements of most of the participants that psychosocial needs emerged the most due to the fact that the students could not go to school. Statements on this issue are as follows:

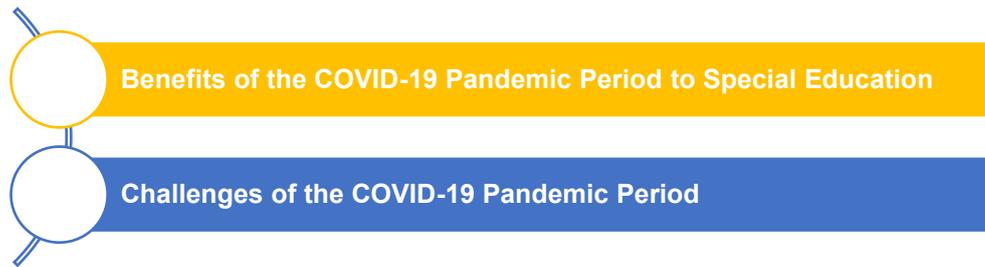
“Our students’ future concerns, lack of workshop trainings, vocational expectations, and inability to continue their internships are all their school-related needs. A school is a place where they rest and relax. It is also stressful for parents to have their children at home.”SA-3

“We have parents saying that there are children eager to take their backpacks, hold their mother’s hand, and go to school.”SA-5

Outcomes of the COVID-19 Pandemic Period for Special Education

In the current study aiming to determine the views of special education school administrators about education during the COVID-19 period, the main theme of *“Outcomes of the COVID-19 Pandemic Period for Special Education”* has emerged. Determined in line with the main theme, the two sub-themes (see Figure 4) are explained in detail under the following headings.

Figure 4. Sub-themes of outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic period for special education



Benefits of the COVID-19 Pandemic Period to Special Education

The participants of the study stated that the transition to emergency remote teaching and hybrid education during the COVID-19 pandemic period had some positive outcomes for school administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Six of the participants reported that there were some benefits of this process such as getting to know the parents of the students with special needs, active participation of the parents, and being able to provide training for the parents, which were established through intense communication among the school administration, teachers, and parents. Below are the statements of the participants regarding such benefits:

"We were visiting parents. But during this period, I realized that we were not completely aware of our parents' financial situation and family life. During the COVID period, we have seen more closely whether the child has Internet access, in what kind of a home s/he receives education, and how the family relations are. We have clearly seen the financial impossibilities." SA-13

"A bond was built among the teachers, school administration, and parents. Participation of the parents in special education had advantages in terms of being able to see the professional perspective. In general, we are not sufficient in terms of training the parents who have been with their child for 15-20 years. With COVID, parents developed some skills. Their perspective has changed, their awareness has increased. In this process, they have educated themselves on different issues related to their child." SA-14

"We have trained the parents very well in this process by saying things like "do these, do like this, act like this ". In fact, it was something like parent-training, which was an advantage" SA-7

In addition to getting to know the parents closely, active parent participation, and parent training, one participant stated that the benefits of this process to school administrators is gaining great experience in crisis management by the following statement:

"It was something like crisis management for me. Because I had a chance to experience it, like how to act in such a situation. It was actually an advantage for me in terms of how to keep the same synergy intact and integrate it across the entire team."SA-5

SA-12, on the other hand, stated that one benefit of this process was economy in time and expenses thanks to educational technologies, as in: *"In terms of time, labor and money, information transfer is provided in return for technological budget..."*

Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic Period

Apart from the benefits, data analysis revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic period created many challenges as well. The major ones were the workload, risk, and complexity it brought to school administrators. The opinions on these issues are as follows:

*"It brought us workload, we put our own health at risk. It was disadvantageous in terms of health; the workload was high; we were in constant communication via WhatsApp; the circulars and regulations of the ministry were too much. It was a very complex and fluctuating process."*SA-7

*"Instantly changing decisions and trying to keep up with the new situation increased our workload. In my 10-year experience as a manager, there has never been a time when I tried to adapt myself to instant decisions that changed so often in the short term."*SA-1

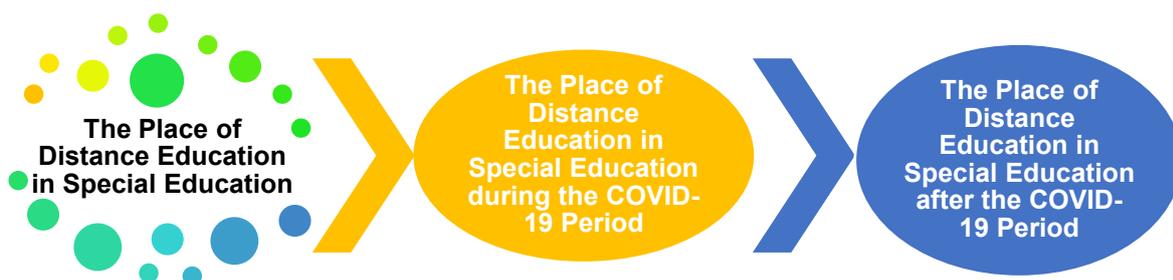
"Our major concerns were bureaucratic correspondence, constant statistics such as the number of incoming and outgoing students, the healthy commute of the students, preventing any risks on the way, and not infecting others. Thus, we were also supposed to protect our staff. All of these resulted in increased workload." SA-3

Besides the challenges of this process for school administrators such as workload, risk and complexity, three participants noted that the process negatively affected the development of the students with special needs. Accordingly, SA-11 said that *"I see it as the biggest blow to education. The previous achievements of the students are also gone. The kids are back to square one."* Additionally, three other participants stated that this process prevented the students with special needs from socializing, which was in line with what SA-7 reported: *"There was no socialization either"*. Addedly, SA-5 stated that the COVID-19 pandemic period increased the burden on the parents of students with special needs: *"...the burden on the parents was three or five times higher."*

The Place of Distance Education in Special Education

The last main theme that emerged as a result of the analysis of the data obtained from the interviews with special education school administrators to determine their views on the COVID-19 pandemic period was named as *"The Place of Distance Education in Special Education"*. Based on this main theme, two sub-themes emerged (see Figure 5); which are explained under the following headings.

Figure 5. Sub-themes of the place of distance education in special education



The Place of Distance Education in Special Education during the COVID-19 Period

All of the participants reported that the sudden transition to distance education was not efficient for the students with special needs. It has been stated that factors such as low attention span, inability to use the technological devices independently, and difficulty focusing, all of which can be bound to the incompetence of the students, are the reasons causing this process to be inefficient. Below are the opinions of the participants:

“There are 3-5 students in the class. Practice is very important in special education, contact with the student is very important; therefore, our students and parents had difficulties as they have perception problems. Students have moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. The process, which the Ministry told us to carry out in the same way as other normal schools, was not efficient.” SA-9

“Our students need an adult when they attend the courses, both in terms of acquiring the learning outcomes and logging into the applications because they had moderate and severe intellectual disabilities. They do not have the adequate skills to turn on the TV or the phone on their own. Our students were not able to attend the classes when their parents were either busy or not at home.” SA-10

The Place of Distance Education in Special Education after the COVID-19 Period

As a result of the analysis of the data obtained from the interviews with special education school administrators, it was determined that the views of the participants differ in three ways concerning the place of distance education in special education after the COVID-19 period. Within this context, five participants clearly stated that distance education should be included in special education in the aftermath of COVID-19. Accordingly, SA-14 noted that *“From now on, distance education should be a part of conventional education. It should have a place in special education; for example, in parent training or homework assignments.”*

The other three participants, on the other hand, stated that face-to-face education is their priority, and that distance education should be included in special education only in case of force majeure. Below is a detailed explanation by one of the participants:

“If the pandemic is over, why should we do it remotely when we can do it face-to-face, but let's say other conditions come up... this process taught us that education can be done remotely, so we can also benefit from distance education when necessary. Maybe short holidays for a day or two can be utilized for online make-up classes when we fall behind the schedule.” SA-10

Contrary to these views, almost half the participants (7 school administrators) reported that distance education should not have a place in special education. In line with this, SA-8 said;

“Distance education should not have a place in special education as children have difficulty learning, and quickly forget what they have learned. Sometimes they get distracted very quickly, thus it's not easy to keep them in front of a screen.”

Conclusion, Discussion and Suggestions

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in this study to examine the views of special education school administrators regarding distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The analysis of the data obtained from the interviews yielded significant findings. The study showed that the stakeholders in the schools were caught unprepared due to the urgent transition to distance education. It can be said that ensuring coordination in the most effective way, within this unprecedented time, was the main priority for the distance education process to be carried out efficiently. Accordingly, it was identified that coordination was ensured face-to-face among the school administrators while applications such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Meet, Telegram, etc. were used to communicate with the teachers in special education schools. Besides, it was concluded that communication with students was achieved by using digital tools with the help of parents. In line with this finding, the literature indicates that communication among students in special education schools is established through cooperation between teachers and

parents on digital platforms (Can & Nikolayidis 2022; Glessner & Johnson, 2020; Parmigiani et al., 2021; Sider 2020; Sharma et al., 2022; Stracke et al., 2022; Şenol & Can-Yaşar, 2020). It can be concluded that the development of smart phones and the diversification of digital platforms have accelerated and facilitated communication among stakeholders in the education process. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) stated that in this process, it is necessary to focus on cooperation and collaboration between stakeholders in order to be efficient and effective in education.

In addition to the findings concerning the coordination of special education schools during the COVID-19 process, the study indicated that many of the stakeholders in special education schools have various needs. Accordingly, it has been concluded that most of the school administrators need guidance in terms of planning and informing procedures based on the uncertainty in the course of the process due to sudden changes. Similarly, the literature shows that one of the problems school administrators experience the most in distance education is the organization of the process (Hulme et al., 2021; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Pollock, 2020; Sakarneh, 2021; Spyropoulou & Koutroukis, 2021). Moreover, the study also concluded that the school administrators need teacher and parent support in the execution of the teaching process. In the same vein, Turan (2020) pointed out that most of the school administrators need teacher and parent support during the COVID-19 process. Additionally, it was found that teachers needed technological tools, digital materials, and support from school administration to ensure student participation. In line with this finding, it is reported in the literature that special education teachers are in need of technological support, material support and administration support (Pollock, 2020; Şenol & Can-Yaşar, 2020; Ünay et al., 2021). Similarly, parents were also determined to have the need for technological tools and internet support. Many studies in the literature, as well, revealed that parents need technological tools and internet access, teaching material support and training (Aytaç, 2020; Parmigiani et al., 2021; Şenol & Can-Yaşar, 2020; Yazçayır & Gürgür, 2021). Considering that students with special needs are one of the disadvantaged groups in this process and have different characteristics than their normally developing peers (Lee, 2020; Sider et al., 2021), it can be said that this process is more difficult for the families of these students. In support of this inference, this study concluded that the workload of the parents increased in this process. A closer look at the literature shows that the responsibilities of the parents have increased with the pandemic process. (Bozkus-Genc & Sani-Bozkurt, 2022; Sani-Bozkurt et al., 2022; Stankovic et al., 2020; Şenol & Can-Yaşar, 2020; Yazçayır & Gürgür, 2021). Another finding of this research indicates that the parents of students with special needs demand psychosocial support from the school administration due to the increasing workload during the pandemic process. In accord with this finding, the literature shows that the demands of the parents, in this period, were mostly for educational and psychological support (Stankovic et al., 2020; Yazçayır & Gürgür, 2021). Due to the increasing needs of students with special needs and their families during the lockdown, the Ministry of National Education followed a dynamic process to overcome this process with the least possible loss for all the students as well as those with special needs. Although distance education became the main delivery mode across all educational levels during the pandemic process, the hybrid model was maintained as much as possible for the students with special needs (AA, 2020). The current study revealed that the teachers, with the shift to hybrid education process, had high levels of anxiety and a need for a hygienic school environment as well as an understanding towards health issues in such a period with many losses due to the lack of vaccine and medicine preventing the spread of the epidemic in the whole world.

In addition to the needs emerged during the COVID-19 process, this study also found that this process had both positive and negative returns to special education. Accordingly, it was determined that the use of digital technologies is economical in terms of time and effort, which is one of the positive outcomes of this process. Furthermore, it was also concluded that the COVID-19 process provided the school administrators with some positive returns such as the opportunity to get to know the parents closely, active participation of the parents in their children's education, and the organization of parent training programs. Establishing an effective communication between school and parents is considered to be one of the most influential factors in the success of special education (Yazçayır & Gürgür, 2021). In the light of these findings, it can be said that the thorny COVID-19 process has positive outcomes in terms of

increasing awareness about the importance of parent participation and parent training in special education.

In addition to the positive outcomes of the COVID-19 process on special education, this study has also identified some negative outcomes. Accordingly, it was determined that the pandemic period had negative outcomes for school administrators such as excessive workload, risk, and confusion. Similarly, it has been revealed in the literature that they feel exhausted due to increased workload and stress (Charalampous et al., 2021; Hulme et al., 2021; Jopling & Harness, 2021; Karakose et al., 2022; Pressley & Ha, 2022; Sider et al., 2021). On the other hand, they improved themselves in crisis management and gained experience to overcome difficulties (Sider, 2020; Spyropoulou & Koutroukis 2021). Another negative outcome of the pandemic period was the fact that it created a learning gap for the students, which in return negatively affected the development of the students. This finding accords with the literature which shows that the developmental levels of special education students were negatively affected during the pandemic period (Amka & Dalle, 2022; Lee, 2020; Stankovic et al., 2020; Şenol & Can-Yaşar, 2020; Yazçayır & Gürgür, 2021).

This study also provides significant findings regarding the place of distance education in special education. It was concluded that distance education is not efficient in special education as students experience a lack of attention, cannot use the technology on their own, and have difficulty focusing during the activities carried out in the process of transitioning to emergency distance education. This finding mirrors those of the previous studies indicating that students cannot adapt to distance education and are reluctant to attend online courses (Aytaç, 2020; Charalampous et al., 2021; Hurwitz et al., 2022; Parmigiani et al., 2021; Sakarneh, 2021; Şenol & Can-Yaşar, 2020; Taddei et al., 2021; Yazçayır & Gürgür, 2021). On the other hand, different views emerged in the research about the future use of distance education in special education schools. While some of the participants stated that distance education should be used in practices such as parent training and homework, others emphasized that distance education should not be included except for compulsory cases in the education of students with special needs. The current literature regarding the future use of distance education in special education suggests that it can be used in parent training (Yazçayır & Gürgür, 2021; Ünay et al., 2021). Considering the findings of the current research and other studies in the literature, it can be inferred that distance education should not be used except for compulsory cases since some of the students with special needs require intense physical support and have difficulty focusing in front of the screen, but on the other hand, it can be used for communication with parents and parent training.

Considering the findings of this study, it can be said that distance education –thanks to its fast and economic nature – can be included in special education in future practices to provide communication among schools-families-teachers and to organize parent training. The study also points out that special education school administrators need guidance in terms of planning and informing procedures suitable for special education during the COVID-19 period. School administrators can be provided with in-service training on leadership and crisis management in the case of emergencies. Besides, considering the increase in the workload of families and the demands for psychosocial support during the COVID-19 process, it can be suggested that the intensity of psychological counseling and guidance services for both families and students should be increased and its framework should be reconsidered. The study concluded that all stakeholders need technological tools and internet support during the COVID-19 process. Accordingly, all the stakeholders should be supported to reach and use educational technologies effectively, and government and education policies should be revised for the use of these technologies. Additionally, this study examined the views of special education school administrators on distance and hybrid education conducted during the COVID-19 period. Future studies might investigate the opinions of school administrators along with other stakeholders or studies employing different methods can be conducted. Besides, future studies that focus on students with different types of disabilities during the COVID-19 period can be carried out.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors do not declare any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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