EXPERIENCES OF GIFTED CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER, THEIR PARENTS, AND TEACHERS IN TURKIYE WITH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to determine the experiences of gifted children with autism spectrum disorder, their parents, and teachers with the COVID-19 pandemic and holistically reveal the reflections of the restrictions in this process and the transition to distance education on the lives and especially the education of gifted children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The study was designed with a phenomenological research design, one of the qualitative research methods. The study participants were gifted children with ASD, aged between 6-14 and continuing their education through inclusion, their parents and teachers. The research data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed in detail by interpretive phenomenological analysis. As a result of the data analysis, two themes, "The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on life" and "Distance education and its impacts in the COVID-19 process", and 12 categories were reached. Recommendations were presented in line with the study findings and the literature.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder, superior intelligence, gifted child with ASD, distance education, COVID-19 Pandemic, twice-exceptional.

INTRODUCTION

The restrictions experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to distance education affected students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as well as all students. Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are individuals who experience difficulties in social interaction and communication, have limited interest and repetitive behavior patterns, and have difficulties in adapting to uncertainties and new

situations due to their routines (American Psychiatric Association, [APA], 2013). Difficulties adapting to routine changes and new situations can sometimes bring about behavioral problems such as sleep and nutritional problems, harming oneself and people around, meltdown and high anxiety levels (Amorim et al., 2020). These listed features can cause such individuals and their parents to be heavily impacted by changes in their lives. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the home and school lives of students with ASD since it has restricted daily and social life and includes uncontrolled uncertainties; students with ASD have been among the groups most affected by the pandemic due to these changes (Hume et al., 2020). The status of being affected has undoubtedly differed according to students' level of being affected by ASD, their level of intelligence, and the region of residence. Thus, Stenhoff, Pennington, and Tapp (2020) stressed that students with ASD living in rural areas received limited education due to the inadequacies they experienced in accessing technology during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, since gifted children with ASD continue their education in inclusive settings in Turkiye, students with this diagnosis have had the opportunity to benefit from services offered only within the scope of general education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The education to be provided to gifted children with ASD, in other words, twice-exceptional students, is expected to be of quality that meets their needs related to both ASD and superior intelligence (Rimm et al., 2018). While there are differences regarding the quality of education provided during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkiye, it is known that gifted children with ASD participate in the education provided online by their teachers, just like their typically developing peers. Thus, teachers have carried out educational activities with students who have had access to the internet through platforms such as EBA (Education Information Network) prepared by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) (a digital education platform where students and their parents log in with the usernames and passwords defined for them and there is educational content for students at all levels from preschool to high school) or Zoom. Furthermore, 1500 activity plans for mathematics, 1000 for life sciences, 500 for science, and 500 for social studies and religious culture for students with ASD have been made available to students, their parents, and teachers via EBA (Sani-Bozkurt et al., 2022). Apart from the educational opportunities directly provided to students with ASD, many discourses and conferences have been organized by various federations, foundations, and associations, and parents and teachers of students with ASD have been informed about what to do in this process (Gorgun & Balikci, 2021; Sani-Bozkurt et al., 2022; Yilmaz & Atli, 2020). A study examining the research conducted by institutions related to ASD on students with ASD and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkiye and worldwide showed that supporting contents regarding education, health, and public policies on the COVID-19 pandemic were frequently presented through webinars, visual representations, electronic text resources, and online communication platforms; studies specific to students with ASD having different characteristics were not conducted, while frequently informative studies and rarely practical studies were carried out (**Cetin & Ercan, 2021;** Sani-Bozkurt, 2021; Yakut, 2021). Hence, both the services offered in practice and the research findings made it necessary to determine how gifted children with ASD benefited from the distance education process during the COVID-19 pandemic, what kind of difficulties they experienced, what kind of precautions should be taken in case of similar situations in the future and examine the experiences of stakeholders in this process. On the other hand, restrictions and the distance education process caused students with ASD to spend a significant part of their time at home with their family members, which has brought about many changes in the daily lives of students and their families, from routines to family interaction (Dogan and **Gorgu, 2022;** Mumbardo-Adam et al., 2021).

While no study in the available literature has focused on the experiences of gifted children with ASD with the COVID-19 process from their own perspectives, some studies have focused on the views and experiences of parents and teachers of students with ASD. It is seen that these studies have aimed to reveal the current situation. In one of these studies, Mumbardo-Adam et al. (2021) researched how the quarantine practice affected the daily lives and routines of children and adolescents with ASD and their parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the study carried out with 47 parents of children with ASD aged 2-17, their views on the impacts of quarantine on their daily lives were obtained. The study findings revealed that children with ASD and their parents adapted better to quarantine than expected, children communicated better with their parents, and young people participated in their domestic routines more frequently. Parents indicated that they developed new strategies to manage the quarantine, such as structuring their days, using

visual aids for learning or leisure time, or benefiting from new technologies. Another study (Hornstra et al., 2022) examined the motivation, well-being, and satisfaction of typically developing students and students with special needs before and during the quarantine through their parents' experiences (n = 470). The study results demonstrated that gifted students with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder and ASD had higher academic motivation, well-being, and satisfaction during the quarantine than typically developing students. According to the findings of qualitative research conducted during the pandemic and aiming to describe how parents provided education to their children with ASD (Cahapay, 2020; Majoko and Dudu, 2020), families realized that each family member had an important place in education during the pandemic, they could create routines without difficulties in the transition from school to home with the support of other family members, and families started to prepare for a new social life, especially for the post-pandemic period, with cooperation among themselves and with other families.

Studies aiming to reveal the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic from teachers' perspectives examined how teachers evaluated the effectiveness of distance education and the problems experienced. In the study performed with 67 primary school teachers to research the effectiveness of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the data collected from teachers through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires revealed that teachers mentioned the importance of technological readiness for online learning to be effective and the cooperation of all stakeholders (teachers, parents, and school administrators) (Aliyyah et al., 2020). In the study carried out to determine the impacts of participation in online educational activities at home during the COVID-19 pandemic (Putri et al., 2020), opinions were obtained from 15 primary school teachers and two parents. Unlike other studies, the research concluded that limited communication and socialization among students caused more significant problems for students with ASD. The study also determined that children attending the first, second, and third grades of primary school, regardless of whether they had a diagnosis or not, experienced problems due to the lack of technology usage skills. It was observed that teachers showed limitations in their technology usage skills, spent a longer time in front of the screen to create e-content and provide feedback to students about their study, established more intensive communication for a longer time with parents, and indicated these listed points as problems. The study revealed the difficulties experienced in the online learning environment in this respect. Another remarkable finding of the study was that parents emphasized that they were not competent to teach at home and needed more support to help their children learn at home.

As a result, studies focusing on parents' and teachers' views (Aliyyah et al., 2020; Cahapay, 2020; Hornstra et al., 2022; Majoko and Dudu, 2020; Putri et al., 2020) demonstrated that parents of students with ASD made more efforts for the education of their children during the pandemic, their domestic interaction with their children with ASD increased, and they realized the importance of cooperation with all stakeholders involved in their children's education. The research revealed that the lack of skills in using technology adversely affected teachers' ability to provide effective education in online environments and students' access to quality education, and teachers thought that distance education restricted the interaction of students with ASD. It is observed that the above-mentioned studies asked the views of parents and teachers of students with ASD on distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic in general, without focusing on their individual differences, and the opinions and experiences of students with ASD, the direct beneficiaries of distance education, were not adequately mentioned. It is also seen that the studies did not sufficiently examine the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the daily lives of students with ASD, in addition to their educational lives, and there is a need for studies performed to this end. Based on the limitations listed in the present study, it is aimed to holistically reveal the reflections of the restrictions experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to distance education on the lives of gifted children with ASD, especially their education, by focusing on the experiences of students with ASD, their parents, and teachers.

METHOD

This study was designed with a phenomenological research design, one of the qualitative research methods. Phenomenological research is a research design focusing on the experiences of individuals and aiming to reveal an individual's experiences and perceptions regarding any phenomenon (Miller and Fredericks, 2003; Yildirim and Simsek, 2013). This study aimed to reveal the experiences of gifted children with ASD, their parents, and teachers with the COVID-19 pandemic process.

Participants

Criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods, was employed to determine this study's participants. Purposive sampling predicts the creation of the sample from people, events, objects, or situations with the qualities and criteria determined for the problem (Yildirim and Simsek, 2013), and in this method, the criterion is determined by researchers themselves (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). Four criteria were determined in this study:

1- The students to be interviewed should continue their education through inclusion depending on the ASD diagnosis.
2- The students to be interviewed should be gifted.
3- The parents to be interviewed should live in the same house as the students to be interviewed.
4- The teachers to be interviewed should be the teachers of the students to be interviewed.

While determining the participants, first, the parents of the students who were evaluated and followed up in the special education departments of the universities (Hacettepe and Anadolu Universities) where the researchers worked and who met the criteria were contacted. The parents were informed about the study's purpose and process. In the beginning, eight students and eight parents agreed to participate in the study. However, three students with normal intelligence levels and their parents were not included in the study since they did not meet the specified criteria. Later, these students' teachers were contacted, and the study's purpose was explained to them. Three of these five teachers agreed to join the research as volunteers, and the other two stated they could not participate due to time limitations. There are health committee reports showing that the student participants are diagnosed with ASD and educational evaluation reports indicating that they continue their education through inclusion. Additionally, all of the students are gifted individuals. The intelligence levels of Kayra, Ozgur, and Gokhan were determined using the Anatolian-Sak Intelligence Scale (ASIS). The intelligence level of Zafer was determined by the TONI-4 intelligence test, whereas the intelligence level of Burak was determined by the Wechsler Intelligence Scale (WISC-R). The study was conducted with five students aged between 6-14 years and meeting the determined criteria, their parents (n = 5), and the teachers of Ozgur, Zafer, and Burak (n = 3) who agreed to be interviewed. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of gifted children with ASD, their parents, and teachers. The students were given code names.

Table 1. Participants' Characteristics

Information on the Students				Information on the Parents				Information on the Teachers		
Name	Age	Grade	Intelligence Level	Parent	Age	Education Level	Occupation	Gender	Age	Branch
Kayra	9	4	133-Gifted	Father	47	Undergraduate	Teacher			
Ozgur	7	2	149-Gifted	Mother	32	Associate Degree	Draftsman Housewife	Female	41	Primary school teacher
Gokhan	6	1	151-Gifted	Mother	40	Undergraduate	Banker Housewife			
Zafer	14	9	122-Gifted	Mother	42	High School	Civil servant	Female	36	School counselor
Burak	13	7	Gifted	Mother	33	Primary School	Housewife	Male	29	School counselor

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews in this study. Thus, it was aimed to reveal the experiences of the interviewed individuals in more detail (Yildirim and Simsek, 2013). Since interviews were held with students, parents, and teachers within the scope of the study, the researchers created three separate semi-structured interview forms. To this end, first, the researchers reviewed the literature on the subject in detail, each researcher prepared questions suitable for the study's aim, and, thus, a question pool was created. Afterward, the researchers examined all questions and made the necessary arrangements. Then, to evaluate the suitability of the questions, the opinion of eight experts was obtained, and the questionnaire was finalized. The interview questions are included in Appendix-1.

The first interviews were conducted online by two researchers between June 15 and June 30, 2020. Before the interviews, the participants were informed about the aim and content of the study, it was stated that they could ask questions again in case of an incomprehensible question, and explanations were made that their identities would be kept confidential. Furthermore, permission was requested to take audio or video recordings for analyses to be conducted in a healthier way. Consent was obtained from the participants that they were informed and willing to participate in the study under the stated conditions. Moreover, parental consent was acquired for the student participants. The interviews lasted 10-30 minutes. The second interviews were held by the same two researchers between January 25 and February 5, 2021. By conducting two interviews at different times, it was aimed to reveal differences, if any, in the experiences of the student participants and their parents from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to the subsequent period. The father of Kayra and the mothers of Gokhan, Ozgur, Burak, and Zafer were included in the second interview. A total of 18 interviews were conducted. Since the first and subsequent interviews did not differ significantly, the data obtained from both interviews were analyzed holistically.

The research data were analyzed by interpretive phenomenological analysis, which aims to explain a certain situation inductively under unpredictable conditions (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Before the data analysis, the interview records taken with the participants' permission were converted into text by two researchers, and the texts were confirmed by two different researchers. All data were transcribed into a Word document and made ready for analysis. Afterward, the data were analyzed in detail by conducting an interpretive phenomenological analysis. To this end, first, the study authors searched for what the experiences regarding the phenomenon were in the texts and how they were realized (Creswell, 2007) and coded the interview transcripts independently. The authors checked the codes and themes of the other group in pairs. After the coding and themes, the authors agreed on codes and themes by holding four online conferences. The two main themes and 12 categories are detailed in the results.

The Scale

Validity and reliability aim to increase credibility in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Guler, Halicioglu, Tasgin, 2015; Yildirim and Simsek, 2016). Credibility, consistency, transferability, and confirmability are among the validity and reliability strategies used in research (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). To this end, the listed strategies were used in the study. The interviews were conducted at different times, and it was aimed to reveal whether the data collected were periodic or not. Researcher diversity was ensured in the study; the data were collected and analyzed by more than one researcher. The listed points contributed to ensuring the credibility of the study. Moreover, it was aimed to ensure transferability in the study by describing in detail the data collection process and analysis, including direct quotations in the results, and using the purposive sampling method to determine the participants. During the study process, the researchers approached the whole process critically and carried out external audits. To provide consistency in the study, interview transcripts, codes, and themes were checked by the researchers, and online conferences were organized until a consensus was reached. Additionally, ethical principles of honesty, objectivity, confidentiality, respect, and openness (Aydin, 2016) were taken into account in the study. The research was conducted by obtaining approval from the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of a university. Voluntary consent for the study was obtained from each participant, the participants were coded, and their confidentiality was taken as a basis. No intervention affecting the participants' views was performed during the study, and the results were reported with the participants' consent.

FINDINGS

This section contains the results obtained as a result of the data analysis. Two themes and 12 categories were reached as a result of the study. Table 2 presents the themes and categories reached.

Table 2. Themes and Categories

Theme	Categories	
1. The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Life	1.1.	The meaning of COVID-19 and first reactions
	1.2.	Difficulties of the COVID-19 process
	1.3.	Things changed by the COVID-19 process
	1.4.	Reflections of the COVID-19 process on family communication and interaction
	1.5.	Coping strategies in the COVID-19 process
2. Distance Education and Its Impacts in the COVID-19 Process	2.1.	Applications in distance education
	2.2.	Reactions to applications in distance education
	2.3.	Positive aspects of distance education
	2.4.	Inadequate aspects of distance education
	2.5.	Difficulties in distance education
	2.6.	Coping strategies with difficulties in distance education
	2.7.	Expectations and recommendations for the improvement of the distance education process

Theme 1. The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Life

The participants shared their experiences regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives in the categories of "The meaning of COVID-19 and first reactions, difficulties of the COVID-19 process, things changed by the COVID-19 process, reflections of the COVID-19 process and family communication and interaction, and coping strategies in the COVID-19 process." The student participants, their parents, and teachers expressed the most experience in the category of "Difficulties of the COVID-19 process."

The Meaning of COVID-19 and First Reactions

This category includes the views of the parent participants on how they explained COVID-19 to their children and the views of the student participants on how they made sense of COVID-19. All parent participants indicated that they told their children what the virus was, its dangers, what kind of effects it could have, what to do in this process, and why they had to stay at home. One of the parent participants explained COVID-19 to his child as follows, "*We said there was a disease. There was already a lot of broadcast about it on TV, especially on EBA. He watched the presentation in between, and we also talked about it. We said, if we paid attention, we would not become infected. Our child never went outside until he was allowed (Kayra's father).*"

All student participants also expressed their views and experiences with regard to taking precautions against COVID-19 and adapting to this situation. While one student participant explained what precautions he took against COVID-19 in the following way, "*I didn't go outside too much to protect myself from the pandemic (Kayra).*", another student participant expressed this almost without skipping any item, "*Okay, let me explain it this way. First, you should wash your hands. Second, you should spend the first 14 days at home if you have returned from abroad. You should not accept visitors and isolate yourself. During isolation, you should not enter the person's room without a mask. You should not touch your hands, eyes, nose, and mouth (**Ozgur**).*" Furthermore, one of the student participants was observed to have a very high awareness of COVID-19. This student participant gave clues that he was aware of the conspiracy theories on the subject by saying, "*People think of it as a biological weapon, an act of human revenge, or a natural phenomenon. Coronavirus is a cousin of the flu. It causes diseases such as pneumonia, shortness of breath, and kidney failure. I think the cause of the pandemic is nature's cleaning itself (Kayra).*" and also declared that he had his own opinion by saying, "*I think.*"

Difficulties of the COVID-19 Process

This category addressed the problems that the student, parent, and teacher participants experienced, such as limited social interaction and communication during the pandemic, the disruption of daily routines, and the restriction of going outside. All parent participants stated that their children had problems due to the inability to go outside during this process. One parent expressed the problems they experienced as follows, *"… children wanted to go outside all the time, there are numerous side effects of not being able to take them out (Kayra's father)."* Additionally, two parent participants mentioned the difficulties related to sleep and eating (meal) patterns that emerged with the disruption of their children's routines and the retardation observed in development. For example, one parent participant expressed the problems in the sleep and eating pattern by saying, *"I said, his routine was disrupted. Gokhan used to sleep at 21:30 before. He has difficulty falling asleep, especially due to the influence of TV. His sleep and eating patterns have been disrupted. He is hungry all the time."* and expressed the retardation observed in development in the following way, *"His speech has regressed because he no longer makes an effort to be understood. There were letters he had learned. He started to swallow them slowly. Or the words he used to pronounce correctly started to disappear a little (Gokhan's mother)."*

Two student participants also stated that they experienced problems due to being unable to go outside, similar to their parents. One student participant drew attention to a problem he experienced due to the inability to go outside by saying, *"I miss going out with my friends."* In parallel with the views of both students and parents, one of the teacher participants mentioned the possible problems in the process by saying, *"He is probably very bored at home because being at home all the time is very difficult even for us adults, but it must be even more difficult for children. There has probably been a regression in education and academic issues (Zafer's teacher)."*

Things Changed by the COVID-19 Process

This category addressed the changes experienced by the student, parent, and teacher participants in the COVID-19 process. All parent participants mentioned that they experienced positive and negative changes in their children's lives and their own lives during the pandemic. Four parent participants who mentioned positive changes stated that their children's interaction with family members and people in their immediate surroundings and their independent learning efforts increased. One of these parent participants emphasized an increase in her child's interaction with others by saying, *"Burak used to play by himself. Since other children were aware of his condition, they knew he would not be able to play and communicate like the others. But I told them, Burak understands everything, he is like this because you don't play with him and don't talk to him. … When I used to tell him to go out, he used to say, "No, mom, I won't go, the kids don't like me, they don't want me." But it changed a bit in this process and his friends started to play with him (Burak's mother)."* The other parent participant said that his child was trying to learn something with his own effort in this process and stated his experiences as follows, *"He made different designs, by the way. He worked in Word. He worked in Excel. He strived to do something by himself (Kayra's father)."* Three student participants said they experienced new things in this process and mentioned the positive changes caused by the process. One of the students said that he experienced new things in this process, *"I enjoyed preparing other foods, meals, and desserts (**Ozgur**)".*

Two teacher participants expressed that they understood the importance of technology and family education better during the COVID-19 pandemic and, thus, emphasized the positive changes in their lives. One of the teachers mentioned the positive changes caused by the process by saying, *"It is understanding the importance of technology (Burak's teacher)."* Another teacher emphasized that she understood the importance of educating parents as follows, *"I understood the importance of educating parents on the intervention methods regarding the problem behaviors of students with ASD (Zafer's teacher)."* One of the teacher participants stated that the rapid transition to distance education and using television for this purpose was an important and positive step by saying, *"Frankly speaking, the ministry immediately adapted to distance education with EBA. Lessons started to be taught with distance education. They provided it on TV for families with internet problems. In this sense, they carried out distance education well on the basis of the MoNE(**Ozgur's** teacher)."*

On the other hand, all the student and teacher participants and three parent participants mentioned the negative changes the pandemic created in their lives. Whereas one parent participant expressed the negative changes in his child's life as follows, *"He wanted to watch too much TV because he wanted to spend time and*

couldn't find much to do. He wanted a tablet computer a lot. He wanted a computer very much (Kayra's father)." Another parent participant indicated this by saying, *"Burak used to be a child going to the grocery store every day, but he can't do this now. We also said that this disease caused death. He knows what death is, so he was very impressed by it. He says, I don't want to die (Burak's mother)."* Another parent participant described the negative changes in her life by emphasizing an increase in her workload in the following way, *"I have to cook all the time. Things such as housework, etc. started to be much more intense. I started to get up earlier. Just in this way, I could get my work done (Zafer's mother)."*

The student participants mentioned the negative changes brought about by the process, like their parents, and expressed their longing for school and friends. One of the student participants said that his homework load was very high due to online education by saying, *"Of course, my homework has increased to fill the free time (Kayra)."* and indicated his longing for school by stating, *"It makes you feel a longing for school (Kayra)."* Another student participant expressed his negative experiences with the following sentences, *"It was nice at first, but then I started to feel lonely. I distanced myself from my friends a little. I gained more weight. I spent more time on the internet (Zafer)."*

All of the teacher participants mentioned the negative changes in the education and training process and the indirect impacts of these changes on students. For example, one teacher participant mentioned the negative changes in the education and training process by saying, *"These social skills could not be developed because children did not enter environments such as school settings, parks, etc. (Burak's teacher)."* and indicated the indirect impacts of these changes on children's social communication and interaction skills.

Reflections of the COVID-19 Process on Family Communication and Interaction

This category addressed the views and experiences of the student and parent participants regarding the differences created by the COVID-19 process in family communication and interaction. The statements discussed in this category were also mentioned as positive changes in the category of things changed by the process. However, since communication and interaction difficulties are among the main symptom areas in ASD, it was decided to mention these findings under a separate category. One of the parent participants sharing her experiences in this category emphasized the increased interaction with the sibling during the quarantine by stating, *"The dialogue between them is very good. I took out all their toys. They play together. They are in constant dialogue while playing games on the phone. The thing I became most grateful for in this process was the communication with his sibling (**Ozgur's** mother)."* The student participant also shared his experiences in this process in a way supporting his parent's views, *"I played games with my sibling. He also loved me a lot (**Ozgur**)."* Moreover, two student participants expressed they were very happy to spend time with their parents during the pandemic in the following way, *"I went on a picnic with my father, and we had dinner there. I loved staying at home (Burak).", "I became very happy. We are happy because there is my mother and father. We are happy because they are at home (**Ozgur**)."* Two parent participants also emphasized that their communication increased as the time they spent with their children increased. The words of one of the parent participants are the statement explaining this in the best way, *"Seven hours a day. If we think the road takes the remaining one hour, then I used not to take care of Gokhan for eight hours a day. We took care of each other and became friends with each other. We learned to be friends with each other. We started to spend eight hours more together (Gokhan's mother)."*

Coping Strategies in the COVID-19 Process

In this category, the student participants usually mentioned the methods of protecting themselves, whereas the parent participants made explanations about the coping strategies their children used to protect themselves and they used to arrange their domestic life and meet their children's needs. For example, a parent participant expressed the experiences regarding the efforts her child made to protect himself from the virus as follows, *"He never goes out without a mask (Burak's mother)."* In addition to wearing a mask, one of the student participants stated that he tried to protect himself by staying at home, *"I protected myself by staying at home. I don't wear gloves, but I wear a mask when going out (Zafer)."*

Three parent participants mentioned their experiences in coping with having to stay at home continuously. While one of the parent participants expressed her experiences by stating, *"We made changes to the program to increase the quality of the time we spent at home. We bought supporting books. We normally buy them, but this time we bought them not for fun. We bought them to follow the school and create a school environment (Gokhan's mother)"*, another parent participant stated the following, *"We rearranged his room. We tried to expand the area for play in line with his needs. We expanded the hours for using TV and tablet computer. We tried to spend more time when there were things he wanted to do with us. We encouraged him a bit to make his own choices. In other words, instead of telling him, "Come, let's do this," we fulfilled his wishes. Sometimes, we even did not fulfill them intentionally. He is already aware that he can't have everything he wants, but sometimes we didn't consciously fulfill his wishes because we thought we should make him feel this (Kayra's father)."* However, one of the parent participants expressing her view on the coping strategies stated she realized her child was overloaded while trying to cope with the process in the following way, *"We make the program. After all, children are not together. They don't wait their turn, we study fast, naturally; otherwise, time does not pass at home. Maybe, it was too much for him. Maybe, we exaggerated. Maybe, I went too far (Gokhan's mother)."* and questioned the effectiveness of the strategy she used.

Theme 2. Distance Education and Its Impacts in the COVID-19 Process

The participants shared their experiences regarding distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic in the categories of "applications in distance education, reactions to applications in distance education, positive aspects of distance education, inadequate aspects of distance education, difficulties in distance education, coping strategies with difficulties in distance education, and expectations and recommendations for the improvement of the distance education process." The student participants, their parents, and teachers emphasized the category "inadequate aspects of distance education" the most.

Applications in Distance Education

This category included the opinions and experiences of the student, parent, and teacher participants in which they mentioned the activities in the distance education process. Three parent participants stated what they did to support the development of their children in the distance education process in this category. One of the parent participants said, *"We provided the homework control regarding the lesson subjects, identified his deficiencies and supported him, and separated the books he had read and had not read. We encouraged him to read the books he had not read. Those he enjoyed because he has the feature of reading again and again. We encouraged him in this respect. We already provided physical support with his education as implementers (Kayra's father)."* Another parent participant expressed her views regarding the activities they carried out to support her child in the distance education process as follows, *"Our biggest advantage in this process is that he attended the first grade because I also provided support to him. Maybe if he had attended the 10th and 11th grades, he would have done it alone. We continued our lessons. We continued doing his homework and bought sourcebooks. We bought story books (**Ozgur's** mother)."*

Three student participants indicated that they participated in the educational activities carried out during the distance education process. One of the student participants expressed his experiences on this issue in the following way, *"There are live lessons. I am doing homework. I follow the lessons on EBA TV from time to time (Kayra)."*, while another student participant expressed his experiences by saying, *"I watch them on TV, I open TRT EBA and follow the lessons (**Ozgur**)."* Another student participant stated the things done in the process as follows, *"There is EBA. There is nothing else than EBA (Zafer)."*

Two teacher participants mentioned what they did to support the academic development of students with ASD during the distance education process. One of the teacher participants expressed what they did to support their students in the following way, *"We lectured every day, taught lessons, sent videos and activities, and received feedback (**Ozgur's** teacher)."*, while another teacher participant explained this by stating, *"I sent the information published by the ministry during the distance education process to the families and tried to talk to the families every 2-3 days in general. I could not teach live lessons, etc. There were also phone applications, and I tried to support the family with them. I informed the families about listening to academicians via Zoom."* On

the contrary, one of the teacher participants emphasized that she did not make an additional application or individualized education program for gifted children with ASD in this process. The views of the teacher participant on the subject were as follows: *"Frankly speaking, I didn't do a separate study with **Ozgur** in my class. His parents had asked for several sources before. I sent supplementary resources to them. (**Ozgur's** teacher)."*

Reactions to Applications in Distance Education

This category included the views of the student, parent, and teacher participants in which they shared their negative experiences with distance education. Four parent participants showed reactions to the applications in the distance education process and stated that they had negative experiences. A parent participant expressed her negative views on distance education applications in the following way, *"It didn't benefit us at all. In fact, Burak was very enthusiastic about all, for EBA TV and other applications. But then he saw it was always the same thing, and he got bored… (Burak's mother)."* Another parent participant expressed her reaction to distance education applications by saying, *"EBA was the best thing to do in this process, but that doesn't work either (**Ozgur's** mother)."*

Four student participants emphasized that they were not satisfied with the applications in the distance education process and shared that they had negative experiences with distance education. For example, a student participant expressed the negativities he experienced as follows, *"Well, it's good, but I don't want to get up, enter EBA or ZOOM on the phone and listen to lessons. As a negative aspect, coronavirus has forced us into an environment (Zafer)."*

Similar to the parents and student participants, the teacher participants also mentioned their negative experiences with this process. One of the teacher participants emphasized that the applications in the distance education process were not inclusive for all students by stating, *"Live lessons are also not for all children (Burak's teacher)."* and shared his negative experiences with distance education.

Positive Aspects of Distance Education

The student, parent, and teacher participants mentioned not only the negative aspects but also the positive aspects of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This category involved the participants' positive experiences. Although two parent participants found the distance education process insufficient, they said they were pleased with the continuation of the process. A parent participant expressed his views on this subject as follows, *"Well, reestablishing bilateral relations with the teacher and classmates made him very happy. Doing something together made him very happy. Distance education was beneficial for him not to interrupt his education (Kayra's father)."*

A student participant stated he liked to study in the home environment very much and reported his positive view on distance education in the following way, *"I think it is nice to study at home because I always watch EBA TV at home. I receive my education from there. I liked EBA TV. That's why home is better for me. It is better to be at home (Burak)."*

Two teacher participants indicated that they found technological developments in the distance education process positive. A teacher participant expressed the positive aspects of distance education in the following way, *"Although the phone applications prepared by the MoNE do not appeal to all students with special needs, I think they are useful in some skills such as concept teaching (Burak's teacher)."* Another teacher participant stated that the applications prepared for students with ASD in the distance education process were beneficial by saying, *"Students having tablet computers and smartphones can benefit from these applications. There are also entertaining activities for individuals with ASD (**Ozgur's** teacher)."*

Inadequate Aspects of Distance Education

All participants mentioned the inadequacies they encountered in the education of students with ASD during the distance education process in this category. A parent participant indicated that they experienced the lack of teacher authority in the distance education process, which prevented the education from reaching its goal and expressed this as follows, *"Now, the kindergarten is very crowded. Therefore, we would not prefer Zoom.*

When there is no authority in special education and it is not one-on-one, there is not much benefit to us because he does not feel the teacher's authority and sanction (Gokhan's mother)." Another parent participant emphasized the inadequacy of the content of educational programs prepared for distance education by saying, *"… My son got bored because they were constantly showing things like far-close, small-big. He already knows them and says to me, "Mom, there is nothing for me here." At first, he thought that they would show something, and he would study and write by looking at it (Burak's mother)."* The student participants stated that they benefited from a limited number of programs in this process in the following way, *"There is EBA. There is nothing else than EBA (Zafer)", "I did not benefit from any other education other than EBA (Burak)."*

The experiences of the teacher participants in the distance education process also revealed the inadequate aspects of the process. For example, a teacher participant indicated that the distance education provided was inadequate for students with ASD as follows, *"Unfortunately, the distance education provided does not include all students. I think it is inadequate, especially for students with special needs… The program is created as if all students were equal and under the same conditions. Unfortunately, I think this is wrong because not students are equal. (Zafer's teacher)."* Likewise, another teacher participant indicated his views by saying, *"The fact that the ministry does not organize live lessons can also be regarded as a mistake. The live lessons broadcast on TRT were also not intended for all students (Burak's teacher)."* Two teacher participants also emphasized the inadequacies caused by the limited technological opportunities of parents in the distance education process. One of these teacher participants mentioned the inadequacies caused by limited technological opportunities with the following sentences, *"Interruptions in the Internet caused students with ASD to repeatedly turn their attention to the lesson and prevented their understanding of what was told (**Ozgur's** teacher)."* Another teacher participant indicated the inadequacies caused by the inability to use effective strategies and not including the family in the process as follows, *"Not being able to provide immediate feedback to individuals with ASD, not being able to present reinforcement, not being able to maintain the student's motivation, not being able to perform an appropriate intervention with the child, and the difficulty of guiding families remotely. Moreover, it is a problem that the family factor, which is important even in face-to-face education for children with ASD, is not included in education during the pandemic (Burak's teacher)."*

Difficulties in Distance Education

In this category, the difficulties faced by the participants in the distance education process were mentioned. All of the parent participants said that they experienced technological difficulties in the distance education process. A parent participant expressed the technological difficulties in the following words, *"We don't have a computer. Thus, we usually try to handle educational activities from a tablet computer or phone. However, some games and lessons are not supported by the phone or tablet computer. Some seem to be supported, but then a code error arises, for example. Sometimes you can't drag with your finger. I mean, we couldn't use some things (Gokhan's mother)."* Four student participants mentioned the difficulties they experienced in the distance education process. One of these student participants expressed the technological difficulties he experienced in the following way, *"I am facing problems on the page (Kayra)."* Like all of the parent participants, all of the teacher participants drew attention to the difficulties experienced in distance education due to the characteristics of children with ASD; one of the teacher participants emphasized these difficulties with the following words, *"Since the main problem of children is social inadequacy, there were also problems in TV lessons. Therefore, children could not benefit from the process a lot (Burak's teacher)."*

Coping Strategies with Difficulties in Distance Education

Two parent participants said that they tried to cope with problems by making changes to the study environment of their children in the distance education process. A parent participant explained the arrangement of the environment they made for their child as follows, *"We provided the necessary environment in line with Kayra's needs. For example, the desk was too narrow for him, and there was not enough study environment. We changed it immediately to a more spacious, large, and organized one. The internet was not enough. He needed a printer in his room, so we installed it. When his teacher was sending the homework through WhatsApp, we were sending it to him via e-mail or to his WhatsApp account. He was getting the prints and doing his homework. After he was finishing his homework, we were checking it (Kayra's father)."* Another parent participant stated that they

coped with the difficulties in the distance education process by receiving support from the child's teacher in the following way, *"The teacher prepared a weekly program. He shared the activities supporting the weekly programs with us every day. For example, there were numbers, red color, and square in the program on Monday. On Monday, he sent us a picture game related to the square, an activity, game and coloring related to the red color, and a game, activity, etc. related to numbers. He shared these with the WhatsApp group. Apart from that, there we no live lessons for preschool (Gokhan's mother)."*

All student participants stated that they coped with the difficulties they had during the distance education process by receiving support from their parents. For example, a student participant said he received support from his parent by stating, *"My mother helps me a lot. I have homework, teachers give homework. I do my homework with my mother. Nobody else helps me (Burak)."*

All teacher participants indicated that they tried different ways to cope with the difficulties they encountered in the process of supporting their students in distance education. One of the teacher participants expressed what she did to cope with the difficulties encountered using the following words, *"I couldn't teach live lessons because the internet usage status in my class was insufficient. I usually sent videos with my own lectures or lectures of other teachers. I sent video lectures and worked on them (**Ozgur's** teacher)."* She stated that she not only offered support to her students to cope with the difficulties they encountered in this process but also tried to overcome the difficulties she encountered in this process.

Expectations and Recommendations for the Improvement of the Distance Education Process

This category included the participants' expectations and recommendations for the improvement and development of distance education. All parent participants suggested one-to-one lessons for their children with ASD due to their experiences with distance education. A parent participant expressed his views on this subject as follows*, "It would be better if one-to-one course hours were increased, interactive applications were also increased with the help of tools, and the hours spent on the tablet computer were more in this direction (Kayra's father)."* All parent participants also emphasized that educational content should be prepared according to children's level. A parent participant made recommendations for the content in the following words*, "It must have been an education for our children. So it would be better if there were a level. Actually, our child knows a lot of things, but there are always the same things on EBA TV. I think they must arrange this. Of course, they cannot do such a thing for everyone, but it would still be better if a little more care were taken."*

Four student participants expressed their expectations and recommendations for improving distance education. For example, a student participant expressed his expectation that distance education and face-to-face education should be conducted together in the following way, *"It would be better if there were both of them. Why? Because when you're at school, you miss your home. I wish education were both at home and at school (Kayra)."*

Two teacher participants expressed their expectations and recommendations for improving the distance education process in the following sentences, *"The content should be made more entertaining and rich. Children's attention must be definitely drawn. Something must also be done for families because they are the biggest supporters in the process at the moment. Families' conditions must be determined, what they need or not must be clarified and they must be supported accordingly (Zafer's teacher).", "Live lessons could be via Zoom for students with ASD at a good level. Appointments could be made for students with special needs from counseling and research centers (CRCs). This can be made compulsory through the child's teacher, not through the CRC. Family guidance can also be made compulsory. Moreover, phone applications for individuals with ASD can be increased. Wireless internet and tablet computers can be provided to individuals with special needs. The content of lessons can be enriched (Burak's teacher)."*

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to determine the reflections of the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the distance education process on the daily lives of gifted students with ASD, especially their education. In line with this aim, the experiences of students, parents, and teachers were focused on. The study showed that the parent participants did not make a special effort to explain the pandemic process and rules to their children,

but the gifted student participants with ASD knew about COVID-19 causing the pandemic, they were aware of what they should do to protect themselves from the virus and they tried to do this, and they even produced ideas about the possible causes of the pandemic. Therefore, the study's findings are not consistent with the view that gifted students with ASD have difficulties adapting to a new situation (Andaria et al., 2009; Rutter and Schopler, 1987), which is thought to originate from the fact that the student participants in the study had developed cognitive profiles and reasoning skills. Hence, it is also emphasized in the literature that gifted students with ASD display normal or above-normal performance in cognitive skills and have high verbal intelligence scores (Ehlers and Gillberg, 1993; Reis et al., 2014).

In parallel to the research on the negative impacts of being away from school for a long time and having to stay at home continuously on children's physical and mental health (Brazendale et al., 2017; Brooks et al., 2020), the student, parent, and teacher participants in this study also stated that gifted students with ASD were bored at home in the process, their routines were disrupted, and regression was observed. Moreover, the research findings demonstrated that not only the student participants but also the parent participants' routines were disrupted, they were bored in this process and were worried about returning to the new order even if this process was over; the teacher participants were especially concerned about the possible regression in gifted students with ASD. However, despite the mentioned negativities, the fact that gifted children with ASD and their parents adapt better to quarantine than expected is among the findings of both this study and other studies (Cahapay, 2020; Hornstra et al., 2022; Majoko and Dudu, 2020; Mumbardo-Adam et al., 2021).

One of the important findings of the study is that the student, parent, and teacher participants experienced both positive and negative changes during the COVID-19 process. The study findings also showed that the parent participants increased their independent learning efforts during the pandemic and were satisfied with distance education applications, although they were insufficient; the student participants enjoyed being with their parents, receiving education at home, and trying new things in addition to their areas of interest. It is known that gifted students with ASD can spend quality time when opportunities related to their areas of interest are provided and can manage their lives when they are supported in their areas of strength (Neihart, 2008; Wu, Lo and Tsai, 2019). It is thought that this situation positively affected the development of gifted individuals with ASD during the quarantine period. Another positive impact of the pandemic process was the increase in the social communication and interaction of the student participants with their family members and close environment. Thus, studies on this subject (Mumbardo-Adam, Barnet-Lopez, and Balboni, 2021) have emphasized that parents spend more quality time with their children during the quarantine. Furthermore, it is stated in the literature that the behaviors of gifted students with ASD are shaped by the provision of quality educational opportunities and the relations of their environment with them (Magiaati and Howlin, 2019; Sakar et al., 2019). The increased desire for social interaction and communication with the acceptance of Burak, one of the participants, by his peers during the pandemic can be shown as an example of this situation. It is seen that the understanding that all stakeholders, especially parents and teachers, should work effectively in cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic and the distance education process initiated accordingly, is a positive change brought about by the process. This change supports the research findings focusing on the importance of family involvement during the pandemic (Aliyyah et al., 2020) and the literature focusing on the significance of cooperation between teachers, families, and other stakeholders in the education of gifted students with ASD in the structuring of teaching settings (Pereles et al., 2009). It was observed that, in addition to the said experiences, the student, parent, and teacher participants also had some negative experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the quarantine, the student participants tended to devices such as television, tablet computers, and computers more than before and distanced themselves from their peers; the responsibilities of the parent participants increased; the teacher participants had more difficulties providing qualified support to their students in the limitation areas required by ASD. Due to the limitations of gifted children with ASD in their skills of planning, organizing, and managing their environment (Omur, 2019), it is expected that they cannot manage time during the quarantine in a quality manner and spend more time in front of the television, tablet computer, or computer due to being at home continuously. The fact that the parent participants both continued to work from home and took on the responsibility of teaching at home, in addition to their parental responsibilities, may have caused them to be adversely affected by this process. The situation expressed by the teacher participants is very important in that it shows that social skill deficiencies, which are the main symptom area for gifted

students with ASD, were ignored in this process (Andanson et al., 2011; Andaria et al., 2009). Meanwhile, the literature demonstrates that it is critical to support the social skills of individuals with ASD, whether they are gifted or not (Andanson et al., 2011; Andaria et al., 2009; Landa, 2007). The literature also shows that these problems in face-to-face education are experienced more intensely in the online learning process (Putri et al., 2020) and reveals the need for distance education applications that will support gifted students with ASD in all areas required. Considering the status of being twice-exceptional, in which masking is frequently observed, it is inevitable that the distance education to be provided should be intended for the areas where gifted students with ASD both exhibit limitations and display superior performance (Sakar et al., 2020).

On the other hand, both students and their parents frequently emphasized that distance education applications did not provide sufficient support to gifted children with ASD during the pandemic. Although the teacher participants said they were satisfied with the increase in the active use of technology in education, they indicated that distance education applications did not cover all students and gifted students with ASD received insufficient education during the pandemic. This situation was associated with the fact that the education was not individualized by the participants, the content compatible with students' characteristics and the use of effective strategies were not included in the process, insufficient technological equipment was used, and technical problems were experienced in the use of distance education applications. In other words, the study findings revealed that the distance education process initiated during the pandemic caused inequality, and it was thought that MoNE-based applications did not sufficiently support the cognitive profiles of gifted children with ASD if students, parents, and teachers did not make additional efforts. It is seen that gifted children with ASD experience diagnostic confusion due to their ASD diagnosis and giftedness, their cognitive profiles are ignored, and their cognitive skills are not supported even in the face-to-face education process (Omur, 2019). In this regard, it is thought that the quality of the education provided should be increased, regardless of whether it is remote or face-to-face. A possible reason for the fact that gifted students do not benefit from quality education may be that teachers had difficulties using technology, they could not create an inclusive curriculum in the distance education process and did not offer differentiated education, as observed in different research findings (Aliyyah et al., 2020; Putri et al., 2020). In particular, differentiated instruction is a strategy that must be used in educating gifted students with ASD so that they can make the most of the education provided to them (Beghin, 2021). The lack of differentiation in content, process, and evaluation processes according to the needs, interests, and motivations of gifted students with ASD may have adversely affected their access to quality distance education (Levy, 2008; Tomlinson, 2001). Ozgur's teacher also stressed this situation and stated that she did not perform a separate study for Ozgur. This clearly shows that distance education applications should be rearranged according to the characteristics and needs of these students to support gifted children with ASD in a qualified way in the distance education process.

The study participants stated that they developed various strategies to cope with the changes caused by the pandemic in daily life and distance education. The student participants said they took measures to protect themselves from COVID-19 in daily life and received support from their parents to cope with the difficulties they encountered in the distance education process. Considering the cognitive profiles of gifted students with ASD, it is an expected situation that they develop effective coping strategies (Rimm et al., 2018). The parent participants stated that they coped with the difficulties created by the process by arranging the environment and program, supporting their children academically, and asking for help from their children's teachers when necessary. To cope with the process, parents were in close communication with their children and their children's teachers. Hence, it would not be wrong to say that parents played the biggest role in supporting the student participants during the pandemic and overcoming this process in a healthy way. The study showed that siblings, as well as parents, created positive effects on the lives of gifted students with ASD. This finding is compatible with the research emphasizing that every family member plays an active role in the education of children with special needs during the pandemic (Cahapay, 2020; Majoko and Dudu, 2020). All teacher participants in the study emphasized the necessity of enriching the educational content, diversifying the ways of providing education, and providing the infrastructure and opportunities for parents without sufficient infrastructure for distance education. The emphasis on the fact that parents encounter simple contents not suitable for students' cognitive profiles and the content should be arranged in this respect is consistent with the teachers' suggestion to enrich the contents prepared centrally. Both parents and teachers suggested that the applications for gifted students with ASD should be more intensive

and one-to-one, if necessary. Enriching the education of gifted students and individualizing the education of students with ASD are the most frequently recommended strategies in the literature (Kim, 2016; Tekin-Iftar and Degirmenci, 2018; Tomlinson, 2001). Hence, recommending all these strategies for gifted students with ASD in the study is in line with the literature and is an expected situation. Students experiencing both face-to-face and distance education suggested that education should be carried out as hybrid and mentioned the necessity of using technology in the subsequent process. They emphasized the place and importance of distance education. The suggestions of students with ASD, who like to engage in technology, regarding distance education were consistent with their characteristics.

As a result, it is considered that collecting data from both gifted children with ASD and their parents and teachers sharing their experiences is essential in terms of revealing holistic and multiple perspectives. However, it is the study's limitation that data were collected only from 13 participants through interviews and data could not be collected from the teachers of some students. Further studies can be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of distance education services provided to gifted children with ASD in this process, and it can be ensured that especially gifted children with ASD can access services related to their performance and characteristics in application settings. To this end, the content of the general education programs to be presented in the distance education process for gifted children with ASD can be provided using enrichment and acceleration strategies. Furthermore, as can be understood from the data acquired from this study, parents and teachers also faced various difficulties during the pandemic. Therefore, remote support lines or web-based parent and teacher training portals can be created, which parents and teachers can reach when necessary. While providing support to parents without sufficient technical infrastructure, professional development can be offered to teachers to acquire the skills of creating and presenting the content in distance education. The study is limited to gifted male students with ASD. Research can be done to investigate the experiences of gifted female students with ASD during the pandemic.

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