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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Examining the Problems Faced by Students with Special Needs in the Distance Education Process during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Nilüfer Yüksel · Ceren Çoban · Dila Nur Yazıcı

ABSTRACT

Background/purpose – In this study, we examined the problems faced by students with special needs in the distance education process in Turkey from the perspectives of their parents and teachers.

Materials/methods – We used case study in this research. Our study group consisted of seven parent-teacher pairs. We used a demographic information form and standardized interview forms. Our analysis technique was content analysis.

Results – From the standardized interviews, it was determined that the developmental problems observed by parents and teachers in children were in the areas of academic, socioemotional, and language development. In contrast, instructional problems were generally related to class participation.

Conclusion – As a result of the research, we have seen that children with special needs face problems in their academic, social skills, and language development. It was determined that inclusive students experienced difficulties in their usage of technology, participating in online classes, and maintaining their attention.

Keywords – COVID-19, child development, distance education, students with special needs, inclusion, primary school.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Inclusion and Inclusive Education in Turkey

Inclusive education, which is one of the approaches used in the education of students with special needs, has become widespread since the second half of the 21st century. It is defined as an important education plan that is developed to significantly increase the educational opportunities of individuals with special needs (Akman et al., 2018; Lindsay, 2007). Studies have shown that inclusive education increases the social skills of children with special needs (e.g., Guralnick et al., 1996), supports their language development (e.g., Green et al., 2014), improves their communication skills (e.g., Christensen-Sandfort & Whinnery, 2013), and also their friendship skills and support (e.g., Odom et al., 2006). In addition, it has been determined that children who show typical development within an inclusive education environment increase the level of acceptance of their special needs peers (e.g., Peck et al., 2004).

With the “Law on Children in Need of Special Education” enacted in 1983 in Turkey, important steps were taken in this first comprehensive law that was specifically aimed at individuals with special needs. The law was formed around the principle of educating children with special needs together with their peers. However, the term “inclusive” was not included in the law. In Turkey, the concept of inclusion started much later in law with “Decree Law No. 573 on Special Education,” which entered into force in 1997 for the first time (Akçamete, 2010). Within this decision, the following items regarding inclusive primary school education were encompassed:

- Inclusive education can be provided in preschool education, primary education, or special education schools where vocational and technical education programs are applied.
- It is compulsory to establish an individualized education program (IEP) development unit in schools where education is provided through integration.
- An IEP is to be prepared based on the programs followed by the students (Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı [Turkish Ministry of National Education], 2018).

Inclusion represents an interdisciplinary teamwork that requires parents to also be significantly involved in the process of their children’s education (Hocutt, 1996). It is the active interaction between parents and teachers that especially enables the program to be implemented effectively (Sucuoğlu, 1996). Ecological Systems Theory, as developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), places the student at the center and emphasizes the importance of those people within the child’s microsystem and the relationships between them. This has become even more important during the COVID-19 pandemic process, and the educational processes during this time in Turkey are described in the following subsection.

1.2. Education Process in Turkey During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Education Informatics Network (known as “EBA”), is the central platform used in Turkey to conduct distance education activities for K-12 education during the pandemic, although it has been in operation since the 2011-2012 academic year. In parallel with EBA, the same educational content was also shared on public television via TRT (Turkey’s national television network) for students unable to access the Internet at home (Daşcı Sönmez & Cemaloğlu, 2021). The distance education process in Turkey during the pandemic was as follows:

- On March 16, 2020, the spring-summer semester, which was originally planned to include 3 weeks of distance education, was completed in full from that point onwards via distance education.
- The new academic year for 2020-2021 restarted with face-to-face education for preschool and first-grade classes on September 21, whilst fourth-graders restarted on October 11.
- All schools then went on the scheduled 1-week mid-semester break on November 13, but on November 23 the decision was taken to close all schools once again due to a worsening of the pandemic, and distance education for all grades resumed. This process was extended until November 30 for preschool education. This process continued until the end of the fall semester in mid-January 2021.
- At the start of the new spring-summer semester, village schools and kindergartens restarted face-to-face education on February 15, followed by primary school and eighth and 12th grades (both critical exam years for entry to high school and university, respectively) on March 1. On April 12, online education restarted for all other grades.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

When the literature is examined, it can be seen that predominantly it was teachers' views that were reported on during the education and training process applied during the COVID-19 process (Asri et al., 2021; Jarino et al., 2021; Lapada et al., 2020; Parmigiani et al., 2021; Vu et al., 2020). Similarly, some studies reported on the parents' views (Asbury et al., 2021; Berasategi Sancho et al., 2021; Garbe et al., 2020; Parczewska, 2020; Yazcayir & Gurgur, 2021) and teachers' views in the case of inclusive education (Page et al., 2021). However, no studies have been found that considered the comparative views of both parents and teachers regarding problems faced by students with special needs during the distance education process applied during the pandemic. As previously mentioned, in this process, it is extremely important that parents and teachers cooperate and focus on the problems experienced (if any) by the child, and to apply all necessary interventions needed. For this reason, the purpose of the current study is to present an overview of the problems experienced by inclusive students in Turkish primary education through a comparison of the views of their parents and teachers. Therefore, answers to the following research questions were sought in the study:

According to parents and teachers;

- What are the developmental problems that inclusive education students experience in distance education?
- What are the instructional problems that inclusive education students experience in distance education?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This current research addresses the problems faced by students with special needs in Turkey during the distance education process applied during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study examines the parents' and teachers' perspectives, and was designed according to the case study design, which is one of the qualitative research methods. Case study is defined as "a qualitative approach in which the researcher collects detailed and in-depth information

about real life, a current limited system or multiple constrained systems in a certain period of time, and presents a situation description or themes of the situation” (Creswell, 2013, p. 97).

2.2. Study Group

In the study, maximum diversity sampling, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was employed in the identification and selection of the study group. The aim of this sampling method is to create a relatively small sample which reflects the diversity of individuals who may be a party to the problem being studied (Patton, 1987). The purpose of choosing maximum diversity sampling in the current study was to determine the difficulties faced by inclusive students in this process according to the opinions of the students’ teachers and parents as those with whom they interact the most.

For this purpose, seven teachers with special needs children attending their class and the children’s parents were interviewed. The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Information about Study Group

Special needs type	Child gender	Child age (yrs)	Parent gender	Parent age (yrs)	Parent education	Parent job	Monthly income (TL)*	Teacher gender	Teacher age (yrs)	Teacher seniority (yrs)	Teacher education	Class students	Special needs students	School type
ADHD LD	Male	9	Female	33	High school	Homemaker	4,000	Female	31	8	Bachelor’s	25	3	Primary
LD	Female	9	Female	38	Primary school	Homemaker	2,300	Female	29	7	Bachelor’s	18	1	Primary
ASD	Male	10	Female	38	High school	Homemaker	5,500	Male	50	25	Bachelor’s	16	1	Primary
ADHD LD	Male	10	Female	33	High school	Homemaker	5,000	Male	50	26	Bachelor’s	20	2	Primary
LD	Female	8	Female	38	Primary school	Homemaker	3,000	Female	38	15	Master’s	18	2	Primary
LD	Male	8	Female	39	Primary school	Homemaker	3,000	Female	37	14	Master’s	22	2	Primary
LD	Female	8	Female	40	Primary school	Homemaker	4,000	Female	49	27	Bachelor’s	27	3	Primary

Key: ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, LD: Learning Disability, ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder

2.3. Data Collection Tools

For the study’s data collection tools, a demographic information form was developed by the researchers. In addition, standardized interview questions were formed and finalized according to expert opinion. Brief information about the data collection tools is presented as follows.

2.3.1. Demographic Information Form

This form collected the age and gender of the child with special needs, as well as their type of special need. Additionally captured was the age, gender, and educational status of the parent. We also asked the teachers how many children were in their class, how many

had special needs, and their own age, gender, professional seniority, and their level of education. Also included were questions about the application tools used by the students with special needs and their teachers, the frequency of the child's participation during distance education lessons, and about any additional extracurricular activities.

2.3.2. Standardized Interview Questions

Parallel questions were prepared for both the parents and teachers regarding any problems they observed in their children/students during the pandemic.

2.4. Data Collection Process

The study's data were collected in December 2020 and January 2021. Two interviews were conducted, with the first interviews conducted in December 2020 with the parents and the second in January 2021 with the teachers. The interviews were conducted by the first and second authors of the study (second author, P.1-P.3 and T.1-T.3; first author, P.4-P.7 and T.4-T.7).

The first interviews were conducted with the parents of children with special needs regarding any developmental problems observed in the children, whilst the second interviews were conducted with the children's teachers. The data were collected online through individual interviews using Zoom according to the restrictions imposed due to the pandemic. During the data collection process, the participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded, and recording only commenced after having received the participant's approval. At the beginning of the interview, the participants were asked to read through the consent form which was sent to them via e-mail, and were asked to verbally express their willingness to voluntarily participate in the study.

2.5. Data Analysis

In this study, we aimed to determine the difficulties experienced by children with special needs during the pandemic period, from the perspectives of both the children's parents and teachers, and the collected data were analyzed according to the content analysis technique. Patton (2015) defined content analysis as "any qualitative data reduction and interpretation effort to determine basic coherences and meanings by taking voluminous qualitative material" (p. 586). The steps of our data analysis process are summarized as follows:

- Since we collected the data in two stages, it was also transcribed verbatim in two stages. Two separate folders were created under the titles, "Academic problems" and "Instructional problems." We completed the transcription of the academic problems within 1 month of collecting the data. Separate subfolders were then opened for each interviewed parent and teacher. The transcribed Microsoft Word files for each interview were named accordingly; as P.1, P.2..., P.7 for the parents, and T.1, T.2..., T.7 for the teachers. The same process was then followed for the instructional problems. This time we completed the transcription process in 3 weeks, and the same naming convention (P.1-P.7 and T.1.-T.7) was followed. This process was completed by both the first and second authors of the study.
- After completing the transcriptions, the third author of the study verified the transcripts of both the parents and teachers.
- After completing the transcription and validation process, all three authors independently coded the data and separated them into themes. We then met to examine the codes and themes together in order to reach consensus by talking

through any issues where we initially disagreed. After reaching consensus, we finalized the findings after editing the codes and themes according to our agreement.

2.6. Validity and Reliability of the Study

2.6.1. External Validity

The purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize the results obtained to other environments and situations; instead, it is to be able to transfer the results obtained to similar environments (Shenton, 2004; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). In the current study, detailed description and purposeful sampling were preferred in order to ensure external validity.

2.6.2. Internal Validity

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research requires the researcher to convince readers of the validity and relevance of the observations and data obtained during the research using multiple data collection techniques. The better the researcher does this, the higher the internal validity of the research (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). In the current study, expert review and participant confirmation were used to ensure the internal validity of the research.

2.6.3. Reliability

Reliability in qualitative research requires the researcher to confirm the study's results according to the data collected (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). The external reliability method used in the current study is a short confirmation.

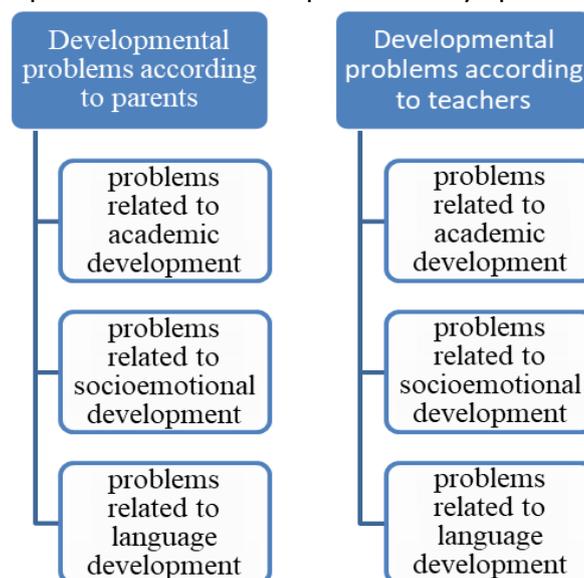
3. RESULTS

In this section, the findings of the research are presented under two main headings, Developmental Problems and Instructional Problems. Whilst presenting evidential examples from the answers given by the participants, examples are used from both the parents and the teachers of the same child.

3.1. Developmental Problems of Special Needs Students during the Pandemic

Both the parents' and teachers' views on the developmental problems faced by the students with special needs during the pandemic process are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Developmental Problems Experienced by Special Needs Students



When Figure 1 is examined, it can be seen that the answers given by both parents and teachers were divided into the same three categories: problems related to academic development, problems related to socioemotional development, and problems related to language development. These themes are explained next in further detail.

3.1.1. Problems Related to Academic Development

According to the interview data, it was seen that the parents and teachers generally focused on the academic skills development of the children with special needs. Among the most frequently given answers were that the children experienced difficulties in learning, that they performed below the class level, and that they experienced difficulties with abstract concepts. In addition, the parents and teachers both stated that the students' motivation decreased when receiving distance education, and that there were problems also seen with their literacy skills. Sample statements regarding this subject are as follows:

My child is a different child from other children. I think I am one of the most victimized parents in this respect. My child does not write, he has a writing problem, he was receiving supportive education at school, then the school was closed due to the pandemic, and my child remained the same [did not progress further]. Even a first-grade child can write better than my son, I completed most of his writing tasks during this process [distance education], and then he read it to his teacher. I did not hide this fact, the teacher also knows... (P.1)

During this period, it [the child's academic development] was below the general level. Normally we were going from the lower class with my student, this process caused the level to stabilize, I could not take this level far too much. (T.1)

3.1.2. Problems Related to Socioemotional Development

When the views of the parents and teachers on this area are examined, it can be seen that both focused on the social situations, emotional states, and behavioral situations. Both commented that the children had become irritable, did not perform with the expected behaviors, became introverted, did not socialize due to the use of technology, and a decline was seen in their peer relationships during this period. Sample statements on this subject are presented as follows:

I have an introverted and emotional son. During this pandemic process, we did not allow him to attend school when it started, and he was very upset that he could not go to be with his friends. (P.6)

He was very lonely due to being excluded. He turned to the students in his brother's class instead. He seemed a bit crushed in the family, was not sociable, and could not express himself, even when injured. We encouraged the development of social relations with his friends a little last year, but due to the pandemic, there has been a regression in his socialization again. (T.6)

3.1.3. Problems Related to Language Development

The parent and teacher (P.5, T.5) of one student opined about the problems the child experienced in language development. Regarding this issue, they stated the following:

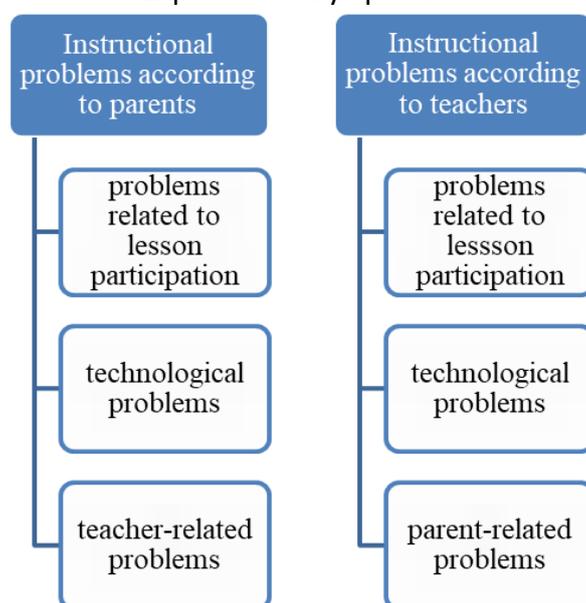
There are a lot of things that she could not express herself. She experienced problems with her teeth before which left her with a speech problem. At that time she was so self-conscious that she did not communicate with anyone, and during the distance education period she became more introverted again because she did not talk to anyone. (P.5)

The language problem is significant She was suffering from not being able to express herself, not defending her rights, and not being able to say when an incident happened. She was trying to open up just when the distance education classes started. She tries to communicate, and also tries to do her research assignments. (T.5)

3.2. Instructional Problems of Special Needs Students During the Pandemic

The parents' and teachers' views on the instructional problems faced by students with special needs during the pandemic process are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Instructional Problems Experienced by Special Needs Students During Pandemic



When Figure 2 is examined, it can be seen that the answers given by both the parents and the teachers are divided into three categories: problems related to participation in the lesson, technological problems, and teacher-related/parent-related problems. These themes are explained in detail as follows:

3.2.1. Difficulties Related to Class Participation

When problems related to the in-class participation of the children with special needs were examined, it was determined that both the parents and the teachers emphasized that the children were unwilling to participate in the online lessons, that they experienced difficulties in getting used to distance education, and that they remained “in the background” with their classmates. The following quotations exemplify this issue:

We did not experience any problems in terms of connectivity [to the lessons]; instead we had problems such as him going to bed late at night and waking up late during the day. My child therefore did not want to attend the first lessons of the day because he

was still sleepy. We had such problems, and he's more reluctant to attend school right now. (P.3)

He does not participate in distance education with the class group. If he attends distance education with a one-on-one teacher, he may be able to learn the lessons in a more beneficial way. (T.3)

3.2.2. Technological Challenges

It was observed that the answers given by both the parents and teachers regarding problems related to technology focused on the inability to use technological devices and technology addiction. Regarding this issue, the following were stated:

He always wanted a phone and a computer, his life was always all about that. But, the pandemic has made my child addicted; he is always playing with the computer, searching for things that interest him. He watches games a lot and has learned about the computer far better than me. However, he cannot stop using the computer; for example, we even go to the village looking for a computer to play with. We couldn't go out and play much because of the virus, I have a baby and there is this pandemic, so we can't go anywhere and I have to take care of my baby. It is because of this that he gave himself to the computer. (P.1)

When I talked to his mother, she said he was seriously addicted [to using the computer]. I also think that sometimes he was not interested in the lessons and that he was playing on the phone at that time instead. (T.1)

3.2.3. Problems with Parents / Teachers

Most of the parents and teachers did not actually state that they experienced difficulties with each other. However, some did mention communication problems and that some disagreements had arisen. Regarding this situation, the following are put forward as examples:

It's like there was a wall between us and the teacher. I couldn't speak comfortably the way I wanted. I was afraid to talk to him as I did with my child's other teachers. We had trouble communicating. Sometimes my child did not want to do something, for example, you have to make him do it. (P.5)

When I did not attend the classes, I was sending homework via WhatsApp, but he did not submit any completed homework. Also, the research assignments I gave and the poetry learning tasks were only completed during the class. (T.5)

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected human life in many areas, including significantly disrupting education in the field. Various solutions have been produced to ensure the continuity of education, and many countries have worked to apply many different methods and solutions. In order to conduct educational services in Turkey, a distance education system was developed and put into practice.

Students, their families, and also the teachers were affected by this sudden and fundamental change of approach. Undoubtedly, not only students with normal development

experienced certain problems during the emergency distance education process, but also students with special needs. In this study, we examined the problems faced by students with special needs during the distance education process applied throughout Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic through examining the perspectives of both parents and teachers. Two central themes were revealed: Developmental problems and Instructional problems.

The research showed that both the parents and teachers of children with special needs generally focused on problems in academic skills in terms of developmental problems. It was stated that the students who received inclusive education remained below their expected level of performance, experienced difficulties in learning, and exhibited increased levels of distraction and decreased interest in lessons as an academic negative. This situation was observed not only in children with special needs, but also in children with typical development. In a study conducted by Alhumaid et al. (2020), teachers emphasized certain problems experienced with online education, whilst Page et al. (2021) emphasized that students with special needs were found to struggle both academically and emotionally. In the study conducted by Mengi and Alpdoğan (2020), teachers stated that special education students faced similar difficulties during distance education learning, whilst Asri et al. (2021) reported that children with special needs experienced difficulties in learning during online learning. As known, in parallel with the Individualized Education Program of special needs students, instructional adaptations are needed that require students and teachers to work one-on-one. In distance education, it may be thought that students cannot reach a sufficient level of education with the formation of different factors. According to the opinions of teachers and parents in the current study, some of the students who received inclusive education via distance education experienced problems such as boredom, irritability, introversion, or crying in terms of their socioemotional development. Hassiotis et al. (2020) reported that people with developmental disorders experienced emotional difficulties during the pandemic process, and that their levels of boredom, disappointment, fear, and anxiety increased as a result. These findings paralleled that of the current study. Similarly, in studies conducted by Asbury et al. (2021) and Berasategi Sancho et al. (2021), it was determined that children with special needs became more irritable and upset, and experienced changes in their eating behaviors during the pandemic. As previously mentioned, Page et al. (2021) stated that students with special needs experienced emotional struggles. In the current study, when problems related to the language development of those students who received inclusive education via distance education were examined, it was revealed that only one parent-teacher pair reported any problems in this area.

When the responses of the teachers and parents concerning instructional problems were examined, most stated that students who received inclusive education were reluctant to participate in the lessons via the distance education that they did not want to participate in the lessons, were distracted, and as a result their lesson efficiency reportedly decreased. In a study by Şenol and Can Yaşar (2020) that was conducted with teachers and parents, it was found that children with special needs did not want to participate in the studies, that they exhibited increased behavioral problems, and that their academic development was inadequately supported. Yazcayir and Gurgur (2021) reached similar conclusions as a result of their interviews held with parents. Similarly, Inci Kuzu (2020) found that some students experienced problems such as distraction and not being able to take notes during lessons.

When the technological situations of the students who received inclusive education during the distance education process of the pandemic were examined, there was a split

between students who reportedly did not experience any problems, as well as students who were unable to use technological devices by themselves, and those who experienced Internet connectivity problems. In addition, some students developed technology addiction as the use of social media increased during this process. Similar results were also obtained in a study conducted by Parmigiani et al. (2021) with 785 teachers, in which it was emphasized that technology should be used effectively in order for teaching to be successful during the pandemic process and that positive communication with the families of students was important. In a study conducted by Jarino et al. (2021), teachers stated that they considered cooperation with parents to be of significant importance. Mengi and Alpdoğan (2020), in their study, revealed that students receiving special education through mobile devices and social networks were also constantly connect to the EBA system, which increased their technology addiction, and as such also shared similarities with the findings of the current study. In the distance education process, the current study's finding predominantly showed that both teachers and parents supported each other and that together they did not experience any significant problems.

When the problems encountered were examined, teachers talked about parents' intervention in the course and not taking adequate care of their children, whilst the parents talked about communication problems they had with the teachers, and that their expectations were somewhat different than reality. Similar to these results, Sirem and Baş (2020) found in their study that families experienced some difficulties with homework during the distance education process, but that and they were satisfied with the communication established with the teachers, as well as the interest and patience exhibited by the teachers.

4.1. Limitations

In the current study, the developmental and instructional problems experienced by inclusive students in Turkish primary education during the pandemic were examined according to the views of the students' parents and teachers. When we look at the existing literature, no research was found that compares the views of children with special needs and their teachers. However, in the current study, both teachers and parents were interviewed and the results matched for each respective student in order to obtain more detailed information. However, each special needs group requires separate and specific developmental support. We formed a mixed group in this study; however, in future research, special needs groups could be customized. In addition, the current research was conducted through standardized interview, whereas semi-structured interviews could be useful in obtaining more detailed data.

5. SUGGESTIONS

We examined the problems faced by students with special needs in Turkey in accordance with the distance education process in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was conducted based on an examination of the parents' and teachers' perspectives. As a result, it was seen that children with special needs experienced problems in their academic, socioemotional, and language development. In order to mitigate the occurrence of such problems, the Turkish Ministry of National Education could create individualized programs aimed at improving students' academic skills, and teachers could start educating children with special needs prior to the main academic calendar starts if schools are reopened. These children could also join playgroups in order to support their social language development. The Turkish Ministry of National Education could provide additional support to

teachers' participation in early intervention program training. There already exists adaptations to programs such as Responsive Teaching, DIR Floortime, and Small Steps in Turkey, and children's development could be supported through these programs.

As a result of the current research, it was determined that inclusive students experienced some difficulties in using technology, participating in online classes, and in maintaining their concentration. Since this situation may result in the increased differences between inclusive students and their peers, intensive individual training could be provided for these children when face-to-face education resumes. However, if online education is to continue, individual education may be provided to these children before and/or after group lessons. In this study, it was determined that there were certain problems related to the parents and teachers in terms of instructional problems. If online education is set to continue, parents and teachers need to determine the process on a step-by-step basis and establish a detailed plan at the beginning of the semester in order to prevent such issues. Thus, difficulties in communication may be avoided through increased awareness of everyone's respective roles and responsibilities.

As mentioned in the conclusion to this study, both teachers and parents of children with different special needs were included in the research study group. It is thought that focusing on a specific needs group and a single class (e.g., ASD, severe special needs etc.) in future studies could help to reveal the needs more clearly. In addition, focus group discussions could be held with parents and teachers.

DECLARATIONS

Author Contributions The authors contributed equally to the current research with both data collection and data analysis. All authors have read and approved the published final version of the article.

Conflicts of Interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding None.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee, and also with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its subsequent amendments or comparable ethical standards. In addition, decision number 2020/777 was obtained from the Social and Humanities Ethics Committee of Ondokuz Mayıs University, Turkey, to conduct the current study.

Data Availability Statement The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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