





The Challenges that Special Education School Principals Face: The Case of Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the challenges that special education school principals face in Türkiye. The literature indicated that there are a variety of challenges that impact school principals and school management. Most of these challenges were based on school personnel. Shortage and attrition of Special Education (SPED) teachers, lack of teaching and knowledge on teaching students with disabilities, some work-related challenges, and lack of collaboration and advocacy among school staff were the challenges indicated in the literature. There are few Turkish studies that explore the challenges that SPED school administrators face. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore what challenges Turkish SE school principals face and whether these challenges are different from those reported in the literature. A semi-structured interview was conducted with 12 school principals. The results of this study indicated that some challenges that Turkish SPED principals have been facing were consistent with the literature, while others were not indicated in the literature. Implications for practice and directions for future research are presented.

Keywords:

Special education, principals, schools, challenges

1. Introduction

The education of children with disabilities has been given emphasis, especially in developed and developing countries, because providing Special Education (SPED) is considered a human right that ensures equal opportunities among all students. However, the education of children with disabilities has some challenges. The present literature indicates that these challenges stem from different components of education (Berry, 2012; Major, 2012). For example, while a shortage of well-trained SPED teachers is a challenge related to school personnel, insufficient school building capacity or resources is a challenge related to the school setting. Most challenges indicated in the literature were related to school personnel (McLeskey et al., 2004; Berry, 2012). Particularly, shortage and attrition of SPED teachers, insufficient knowledge and training of administrators and teachers, lack of advocacy for children with disabilities, inadequate collaboration among school personnel, and work-related challenges were mentioned throughout the literature.

1.1. Shortage and Attrition of Sped Teachers

Along with the increase in the number of students with disabilities enrolled in schools, the demand for SPED teachers has been increasing in the US (Billingsley, 2004a). However, the rate of SPED teachers who quit teaching is higher than that of their regular education peers (Katsiyannis et al., 2003). The research indicated that higher levels of job-related stress (Fore et al., 2002; Stempien & Loeb, 2002), specific challenges faced in teaching (Major, 2012), lack of administrative support (Bianca, 2011; Conley & You, 2017), and lack of teacher

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experience (Conley & You, 2017) had an impact on teachers' decisions to quit teaching. The sufficient level of support provided by administrators was the main reason for teachers to stay in the field (Conley & You, 2017). In a study, 40% of teachers left their positions because they were dissatisfied with the support from their principals (Marvel et al., 2006). Furthermore, the support that teachers received during their initial years was critically important for them to stay in the field (Bianca, 2011). Those SPED teachers with enough support had lower intentions to quit teaching (Conley & You, 2017).

1.2. Insufficient Knowledge and Training of Principals and SPED Teachers

According to the U.S. Department of Education, school districts are having difficulties finding SPED teachers with appropriate training. (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Brownell et al. (2010) reported that teacher preparation programs are not adequate to provide all the knowledge and skills that are needed to provide effective education for children with disabilities. However, many school principals do not receive sufficient formal preservice and in-service training (Wakeman et al., 2006). Special education principals have reported that they were not confident enough in the ability of special education teachers to teach students with disabilities to meet state standards (Defur, 2002). SPED principals can cultivate effective SPED teachers: (a) by being more selective when hiring SPED teachers (Harris et al., 2010); (b) by promoting more interactions among teachers; (c) by mentoring new teachers to develop their instructional skills (Wang et al., 2008); and (d) by supporting teacher development through professional development. Tatlıoğlu and Okyay (2012) investigated the level of instructional leadership applied by SPED school principals from the perspective of SPED teachers. The study indicated that the principals had not used instructional leadership to support the development of teachers.

1.3. Lack of Finance and Advocacy for Children with Disabilities

One of the challenges addressed in the literature was the shortage of finance. Education funds from the state and federal governments do not usually meet the cost of providing special education services (Parrish & Wolman, 2004). Bianche (2100) suggested that the core mission of local school leadership was to provide high-quality education, which seems difficult as long as state and federal funding for SPED is limited.

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), which is a well-known professional association in the U.S., announced six standards and a code of ethics for SPED professionals that address the responsibilities for SPED advocacy (CEC, 1983; CEC, 2003). The implementation of the code of ethics and the lack of advocacy for children with disabilities were issues that SPED principals and teachers faced (Fiedler & Van Haren, 2009). CEC has been regularly organizing the biggest professional special education conferences with the support of its various divisions and numerous professional members. Because the CEC is the voice of evidence-based practices in SPED, what the CEC offers is not only considered by researchers and other professionals but also by policymakers in the field. Fiedler and Van Haren (2009) investigated the knowledge and application of the CEC standards for professional practice. The study indicated that 46% of participants, including teachers and principals, reported minimal or no knowledge regarding the codes of ethics announced by CEC. Furthermore, the study indicated that there were significant differences between SPED principals and teachers pertaining to how they advocate and to what extent. The SPED principals reported that they served as advocates for children with disabilities more than SPED teachers did. In another study, Rock et al. (1992) found that special education principals engaged in significantly more advocacy actions than special education teachers.

1.4. Inadequate Collaboration among Teachers and Principals

School leaders have been asked to support collaborative practices among teachers and between teachers and principals (McLaughlin, 2012). School principals know that the quality of service in schools is their administrative responsibility (Fiedler & Van Haren, 2009). Special education teachers who collaborated with other special educators reported lower levels of job-related stress and increased job satisfaction and commitment (Berry, 2012; Gehrke & Murri, 2006). Furthermore, the collaboration between school personnel and parents was also indicated in the literature. Fiedler and Van Haren (2009) conducted interviews with SPED teachers and asked the parents about their willingness to collaborate with parents. The result of the study indicated that only 20% of them were willing to collaborate with their parents.

1.5 Work-related Challenges

Research indicated that some of the challenges in SPED were pertaining to work-related issues. These challenges may prevent administrators and teachers from engaging in professional responsibilities to advocate for students with disabilities (Murry, 2005). Most of the studies in the literature addressed the importance of administrative support that SPED teachers needed. Providing social support and autonomy (Bettini et al., 2015) and instrumental and emotional support were reported as supportive elements that satisfy teachers to stay in the field (Bettini et al., 2015). In a study conducted in Türkiye, Kizir and Memişoğlu (2017) interviewed 10 special education school principals to investigate their perceptions of (a) the comprehensiveness and clarity of special education policies; (b) the adequacy of the policies to protect all individuals with disabilities; and (c) the difficulties they faced pertaining to the application of policies. Seven out of ten principals reported that the language of the legislation was not clear and too general. For example, one principal stated that the meaning of some terms was not articulated, so it was difficult to understand. d. Eight out of ten principals reported that the SPED legislation was not comprehensive enough to represent all disability groups. In addition, all principals reported that the legislation was not enough to fulfill their needs as SPED principals. Furthermore, a principal reported that although legislation seems comprehensive enough and well written, when it comes to application in the field, it was not enough to solve the dilemmas that they faced in school settings; therefore, they were having difficulties implementing the legislation (Kizir & Memişoğlu, 2017).

The literature review for this study was conducted both in Turkish and English. Turkish literature is quite limited regarding the issues that special education principals face at SPED schools. The indicated challenges may have a crucial impact not only on teachers but also on students. Therefore, in order to increase the effectiveness of education at SPED schools, it is first important to figure out the challenges. The purpose of this study was to determine the challenges that special education principals in Türkiye face. The following research question was addressed in this study: What are the common challenges that SPED school principals face?

2. Methodology

2.1. Model

Qualitative research method is used to understand people's experiences, beliefs, and attitudes (Creswell, 2016). Typically, the data is collected through interviews in qualitative research that enable more understanding about individuals' perceptions about the research topic (Manu, 2018). Therefore, this study used a phenomenological research model through interviews to address the challenges faced by special education principals in Turkey.

2.2. Participants

Participants in this study were 12 school principals and vice principals working in special education schools in one of the metropolitan cities in Türkiye. Throughout the rest of the paper, the term "principals" is used to refer to both principals and vice principals. Convenience sampling was employed to recruit participants. Two of the authors used their personal and professional connections to reach potential participants. For confidentiality purposes, the names of the schools were not reported in the paper, and the names of the principals were coded. Each code represented a principal (Ex: A1). Participants' experiences as school principals ranged from 3 to 17 years. Demographic information about participants is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Information About Participants (N=12)

Participants	Professional Role at School	Experience as Administrator/ Vice Administrator (year)	Gender M (Male) -F (Female)
A1	Administrator	7	M
A2	Administrator	11	M
A3	Administrator	6	M
A4	Administrator	9	M
A5	Administrator	13	F
A6	Administrator	17	M
A7	Vice Administrator	8	M
A8	Vice Administrator	5	F
A9	Vice Administrator	7	F
A10	Vice Administrator	4	M
A11	Vice Administrator	3	M
A12	Vice Administrator	9	M

2.3. Data Collection

A semi-structured interview form was developed by the authors to collect the data. The interview included eight questions. The first version of the interview form was reviewed by three experts in the field and revised based on the feedback from the experts. Accordingly, three questions were revised, but the number of questions in total has not changed. Interviews were conducted at schools where school administrators work. All interviews were audio recorded after obtaining the written and verbal consent of the participants.

2.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data collected through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach used to identify, analyze, and report the themes derived from the transcribed data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data was read by all authors, and themes and codes were identified. Authors met to discuss identified themes and placed codes into relevant themes with the cooperation of all authors. The frequency table was developed for each common theme and presented in frequency tables.

2.5. Ethical

In this study, all rules were complied with within the scope of the "Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive". In this study, all rules were complied with within the scope of the "Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive". In addition, for this study, Erciyes University Social Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee committee approval was obtained.

3. Results

The results of the study were presented through four main themes, including (a) challenges related to school personnel; (b) challenges related to administration; (c) financial challenges; and (d) parent-related challenges. Nine sub-themes derived from the analysis of the data are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and Sub-Themes Obtained as a Result of Qualitative Data Analysis

Challenges related School Personnel	Challenges related Administration	Financial challenges	Parent Related Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shortage of teachers expert in SPED • Issues in work ethics • Lack of collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of knowledge and care about SPED • Bureaucratic obstacles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of budget and material • Inconvenience of the educational environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very high expectations • Excessive complaints

3.1. Challenges Related to School Personnel

SPED school principals reported that many teachers at their schools were not experts in the field of SPED, which was a challenge for them. In the present study, the term expert refers to those teachers who have at least a bachelor's degree in the field of special education. In addition, some ethical issues related to their work and a lack of collaboration were reported as challenges that SPED principals faced. The frequency of challenges reported by principals is shown in Table 2, and detailed information is provided in the following section.

Table 2. Challenges Related to School Personnel

Main Themes	<i>f</i>
Shortage of teachers expert in SPED	12
Issues in work ethics	6
Lack of collaboration	4
Total	20

All participants reported that having some teachers who are not experts in the field of SPED was a challenge. Most SPED schools in Türkiye did not have enough SPED teachers officially hired by the Ministry of National Education in Türkiye (MONE). Therefore, the Directorate of National Education (DONE) in each province was allowed to appoint teachers to meet school needs. These teachers are called “paid teachers” in Turkish. Most of these teachers do not have a bachelor’s degree in the field of SPED, while many of them have a bachelor's degree from an education program such as elementary education. A vice principal stated that *“Sometimes these paid teachers resign from their contracts in the middle of the semester, and we are having difficulties finding a new teacher.”* Furthermore, many participants reported that because those paid teachers were not experts in the field, they were not trained enough to teach students with disabilities. In addition, a principal stated that *“Unfortunately, some SPED teachers and experts in the field seemed to not have enough training to teach SPED students.”*

Different types of ethical challenges were reported by six participants. Three principals reported that some teachers were used to smoking by the playground or inside the schoolyard. In addition, some principals reported that some teachers have been trying to solve the problems that they face without considering the regulations that should be followed, which resulted in administrative difficulties for principals. Two principals reported that they had staff coming from prison (ex-prisoners) for rehabilitation purposes through programs supported by the government. It is hard to get these people to follow the given instructions, and most of the time, they had no idea about special education settings. A participant stated that *“these people (ex-prisoners) should be employed in a different setting than an educational setting.”* Four principals in the present study reported that there had been a lack of collaboration among teachers and between teachers and principals.

3.2. Administrative Challenges

Two administrative challenges were reported by eight principals in total. These challenges were a lack of knowledge of some staff working at DONEs and some work-related challenges. The frequency of administrative challenges is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Challenges Related to the Administration of MEM

Main Themes	<i>f</i>
Lack of knowledge and care about SPED	5
Work-related challenges	3
Total	8

Eight of the 12 principals reported some challenges stemming from the administration of DONE. Three principals reported that some staff working at DONE did not have enough knowledge about SPED paperwork, which resulted in work-related barriers between schools and DONE. A principal reported that in some cases, DONE even did not know how to solve the problems that principals conveyed. Another participant reported that some official correspondences are emergent for themselves and should be completed by the administrative office as fast as possible, but the office has not given enough attention to the emergency of the case. The principal stated that *“sometimes we had to explain to some staff at DONE how to complete the work about SPED that they are responsible for doing.”*

3.3. Financial challenges

Financial challenges were one of the two most reported challenges that were mentioned by all participants. Lack of budget to meet the needs of SPED teachers, lack of materials, and inconvenience of the educational environment were the most reported financial challenges. The frequency of these challenges reported by principals is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. *Financial Challenges that School Principals Face*

Main Themes	<i>f</i>
Lack of budget and material	12
Inconvenience of the educational environment	8
Total	20

All principals reported some financial challenges regarding their role as school principals. Many principals reported that they wanted to organize some events, but they were not able to do that because of financial shortages. Limited educational materials were also another problem. Some principals reported that teachers have been asking for more educational and recreational materials to use for the education of their children. However, because the school budget was very limited, they were not able to meet teacher requirements relevant to educational materials. One principal stated that *“some planned activities are left incomplete because of financial issues.* Another principal stated that *“we are not expecting parents to contribute to the need of schools because most of them are limited in finance.”* Another challenge reported by eight participants was the inconvenience of schools and school settings for SPED children. Most of the principals who reported inconveniences in the educational environment also mentioned that their schools were not designed for SPED children. The participant stated that *“Classrooms, aisles, playgrounds, and many areas are not physically very convenient and usually smaller than we need... Most of the time, with the additional work of our teachers, we organize playgrounds and corridors, although it is not included in our job description.”*

3.4. Parent-related challenges

Principals in the present study reported some challenges related to parents. High expectations and excessive complaints from parents were listed as two common challenges. The frequency of these challenges reported by principals is listed in Table 5.

Table 5. *Challenges Related to Student Parents*

Main Themes	<i>f</i>
Very high expectations	10
Excessive Complaints	8
Total	18

Participants reported that high expectations of parents and excessive complaints were the main challenges they had related to parents. Some of the participants reported that even the smallest problems were exaggerated and complained. Some parents had unlimited demands from teachers that were impossible to accomplish. A participant stated that *“About 40-50 parents are visiting us every single day, and some of them want to wait in the classroom with their kids which makes teachers uncomfortable and takes too much time to handle.”* Some parents complained when they had not seen much improvement in their children’s development. A participant stated that *“It doesn’t matter how much quality education we offer for their children; nothing is changing. If you do not meet the constant requests of the parents, we have immediately complained.”*

Some statements of parents were important to present but did not fit into themes: *“Separated parents do not devote the necessary care and love to their children.” “Many children come from separated parents, and mothers are the ones who take care of their children. We see that father ignorance has negative impacts on children.”*

4. Discussion

The results of the present study indicated that some of the challenges reported in the literature were also reported as challenges by participants in the present study. However, some challenges reported in the present study were not reported in the literature and might be unique to the Turkish SPED education system. International literature indicates that the shortage of SPED teachers has been greater than in other fields of teaching certification (Berry, 2012; McLeskey et al., 2004). Higher levels of stress (Fore et al., 2002) and difficulties teaching children with severe disabilities (Major, 2012) were reported as some of the reasons why SPED teachers quit teaching. However, when a SPED teacher is hired by MONE in Türkiye, it is very rare for them to quit teaching because being hired by MONE is more in demand for its financial wellness than working at private schools. However, the issue is different in Türkiye. As of 2023, almost all in-service SPED teachers have been hired by the MONE because of the increasing number of SPED children at schools, while most schools still need SPED teachers. In order to meet this need, MONE allows the Directorate of National

Education (DONE) in each province to appoint paid teachers. Usually, these teachers do not have a bachelor's degree in the field of SPED, while many of them have a bachelor's degree from an education program such as elementary education. Therefore, the lack of expert teachers in SPED is a problem in Türkiye.

Other issues regarding the lack of expert teachers in SPED schools in Türkiye stem from a regulation that was employed about a decade ago. At that time, more SPED teachers were needed because only a few universities had special education departments. Thus, to meet the needs of schools, MONE provided SPED training for those who were coming from other fields in education and hired them as SPED teachers. They are not temporary anymore and have been teaching at schools as SPED teachers for years. Therefore, as mentioned in the findings of the present study, some of the SPED teachers were not trained enough to teach children with disabilities. Some of these teachers, coming from another field, have been doing their jobs well, but compared to teachers with bachelor's degrees from the SPED program, these teachers might not be qualified enough to teach SPED children. In the literature, sufficient levels of support by principals were mentioned as a reason to prevent teachers from quitting. This does not seem to be an issue in Türkiye because teachers hired by MONE usually do not quit teaching.

The results of the present study revealed some ethical challenges that were not mentioned in international literature. Teachers smoking close to children's playgrounds was reported as an ethical challenge. Another ethical challenge was about ex-prisoners who did not follow the instructions given by principals. Providing job opportunities is a humanistic approach to rehabilitating ex-prisoners; however, unfollowing the given directions is a serious issue that should be considered by MONE. As it was mentioned by a participant in the present study, these people might be considered to work in different settings than SPED schools, or they should be given some training about SPED and SPED settings before they start working at SPED schools. Confirming the findings in the literature (see Fiedler & Van Haren, 2009), the present study also indicated that there had been a lack of collaboration among teachers and between principals and teachers.

Lack of knowledge and care about SPED was another sub-theme derived from the analysis of the data. The literature indicated that some SPED teachers were not trained enough to teach children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) because teacher training programs were not sufficient to provide all the knowledge and skills that were needed to provide effective education for children with disabilities (Brown et al., 2010). The present study revealed that similar challenges are available in Türkiye. Paid teachers and some SPED teachers who did not hold a bachelor's degree in the field of SPED did not have enough training to provide effective education for children with disabilities. The literature indicated that, in order to enhance student success, administrators and principals can organize training programs to train teachers (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Honig & Copland, 2008). This is a good suggestion to be provided in Türkiye as well. Especially paid teachers should be given regular training, and some regulations should be conducted to prevent these teachers from quitting teaching in the middle of the semester.

The literature indicated that financial issues were the challenge at SPED schools. Specifically, the budget, both from state and federal governments, was not enough to meet the needs of SPED schools (Bianca, 2011; Parrish & Wolman, 2004). Financial challenges were reported by all participants in the present study, and some detailed information was provided regarding the results of the lack of budget. Basically, teachers could not organize some events and supply some necessary educational materials their students needed. To overcome these issues, the schools might connect with universities where in-service teachers develop educational materials as a course requirement. These materials developed by in-service SPED teachers can be donated to schools for their use.

It is not found in the literature, but eight participants in the present study reported that SPED schools and settings in Türkiye were not convenient for the education of children with disabilities. Small classrooms and playgrounds were given as examples. Sometimes DONE had to move students to different school buildings when the number of students changed. When they change schools, they probably do not consider the physical settings needed by children with disabilities. Therefore, SPED schools should be built based on the needs of children with disabilities from the beginning, and students should not be moved to different buildings.

Challenges with parents were reported by participants in the present study, but they were not mentioned in the reviewed literature. The result of the present study indicates that many parents are tracking the education of their children. This might be a good opportunity for teachers to inform parents regarding how they can

support the education of their children at home so that they do not have to visit school often. Considering that parents are essential members of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) of a child with a disability and parents have a strong impact on the development of their children, school principals should encourage teachers to collaborate with parents. Thus, parents can assist teachers regarding given tasks. In addition, informing parents regularly regarding how their children are doing at school may decrease parents' excessive complaints and desire to come to school often. Or, some parents who are willing to do so might be given some tasks at school to assist teachers if teachers need them.

5. Implications for Practice

The results of the present study have several implications for practice. First of all, only SPED experts should be hired to teach children with disabilities. If it is necessary to hire paid teachers who are not experts in SPED, they should either be trained regularly or mentored by an expert SPED teacher. Second, MONE should ensure that SPED buildings are convenient for the education of children with disabilities. Educational materials are important for the education of children. Therefore, SPED schools can collaborate with the universities close to them to get support in obtaining educational materials. Third, school principals should encourage school staff to collaborate more. Those parents who are willing to involve their children in the education of their children should be given some tasks at school to assist school staff or at least contribute to the education of their own child if it is found convenient by school staff.

6. Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

This study has some limitations to consider. The data obtained in this study were based on school principals' self-reports. To get a more in-depth understanding of the topic, future studies should collect data from different resources, including teachers, parents, and other school staff. The data for this study was collected in a metropolitan city. Findings might be different in rural cities. So, future research should collect data from different parts of Türkiye, including rural areas. To include more participants, a survey study might be employed.

7. Conclusion

This study conducted interviews with twelve SPED principals to explore the challenges that SPED principals face. The findings of this study indicated that there are a variety of challenges that impact school principals and school management. While some challenges were related to educational administration, the Directorate of National Education, the Ministry of National Education, school personnel, and parents, others were related to a lack of budget and inconvenient educational settings. This study provided some suggestions on how to deal with the challenges faced in SPED schools.

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