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UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING SPECIAL EDUCATION: EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

COMPREENDENDO E APOIANDO A EDUCAÇÃO ESPECIAL: EXPERIÊNCIAS DE ADMINISTRADORES ESCOLAR

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine school administrators' attitudes toward special education, their level of knowledge, their collaboration experiences, and their in-service training needs. The study group of the research, which was conducted with a case study based on qualitative research methods, consisted of eight school administrators who served in public schools in the academic year of 2022-2023. Five themes were identified by analyzing the data obtained through the interview technique. The results of the study revealed that the school administrators described individuals with special needs as individuals who differ from their peers in certain areas and need special attention and education. The school administrators considered themselves inadequate in the field of special education. In the collaboration theme, they emphasized the significance of family collaboration but indicated that they were not supported as needed. Moreover, the administrators needed in-service trainings and seminars. Consequently, the role of administrators in special education has a direct impact on the education and development of students with special needs. They should have a broad accumulation of knowledge, exhibit strong leadership skills and act with an empathetic approach. In this sense, it is expected that the organization of in-service trainings and seminars will enhance the quality of special education services by improving the knowledge and skills of administrators.

Keywords: Special education, school administrators, case study, educational need, role of administrators.

RESUMO

Este estudo tem como objetivo determinar as atitudes dos administradores escolares em relação à educação especial, seu nível de conhecimento, suas experiências de colaboração e suas necessidades de treinamento em serviço. O grupo de estudo da pesquisa, que foi conduzido com um estudo de caso baseado em métodos de pesquisa qualitativa, consistiu em oito administradores escolares que atuaram em escolas públicas no ano acadêmico de 2022-2023. Cinco temas foram identificados pela análise dos dados obtidos por meio da técnica de entrevista. Os resultados do estudo revelaram que os administradores escolares descreveram indivíduos com necessidades especiais como indivíduos que diferem de seus pares em certas áreas e precisam de atenção e educação especiais. Os administradores escolares se consideraram inadequados no campo da educação especial. No tema colaboração, eles enfatizaram a importância da colaboração familiar, mas indicaram que não foram apoiados conforme necessário. Além disso, os administradores precisavam de treinamentos e seminários em serviço. Consequentemente, o papel dos administradores na educação especial tem um impacto direto na educação e no desenvolvimento de alunos com necessidades especiais. Eles devem ter um amplo acúmulo de conhecimento, exibir fortes habilidades de liderança e agir com uma abordagem empática. Nesse sentido, espera-se que a organização de treinamentos e seminários em serviço melhore a qualidade dos serviços de educação especial ao melhorar o conhecimento e as habilidades dos administradores.

Palabras clave: Educação especial, administradores escolares, estudo de caso, necessidade educacional, papel dos administradores.

Introduction

Recognized as a fundamental part of human rights, education is an important element that prepares individuals for life, shapes social structures, and promotes economic growth (UNESCO, 2023). As opposed to the goal of academic achievement alone, education turns individuals into active participants in social, cultural, and economic life (UNDP, 2020). This holistic structure plays a pivotal role in achieving sustainable development (UN, 2015). Special education allows everyone to exercise this right equally in accordance with their learning needs (Francisco et al., 2020). From this standpoint, special education services are interpreted as a means of seeking ways to respond to the different characteristics and needs of individuals as well as delivering a common education to each individual (Nilholm, 2006).

Special education is defined as a type of adapted and individualized training according to the different learning needs of individuals (Kirk et al., 2015). Special education needs come up at the center of physical, psychological, intellectual, communicative, and social needs (Bessarab et al., 2023). It is important to rely on individualized learning approaches to provide support and resources in order to

meet these needs (Chekan et al., 2023). Therefore, special education includes a wide range of methods, approaches, and materials specific to the needs (Kavale et al., 1990; Oliveira et al., 2022).

The primary objectives of providing students who need special education with educational support are to integrate them into society and allow them to socialize (Oliinyk et al., 2023). Therefore, the activities carried out based on special education rely on the understanding of collaboration and social integration (Loreman et al., 2010). Collaboration, support, and various activities appropriate to the developmental level and needs of each child are among the basic components of this understanding (Lopatynska et al., 2023). Given the current goals of the modern education system, special education has become more and more important for meeting individual needs, attaining independent living skills, and ensuring an effective participation in society (Stepanenko et al., 2023).

Providing appropriate educational opportunities to students with special needs requires interdisciplinary collaboration and responsibility (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019). Formulating educational plans for individuals with special educational needs based on collaboration and identifying their needs allows for the construction of inclusive learning settings (Bhroin & King, 2019). It is necessary to establish collaboration between stakeholders, formulate joint plans, and involve all school staff for the effective transformation of schools therein (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020).

Over time, the responsibility for managing special education policies and practices therein has become more apparent for school administrators (Patterson et al., 2000). Therefore, school administrators are expected to have sufficient level of knowledge about the functions and implementation procedures of special education (Pregot, 2021). It is thought that this competence will allow implementation, evaluation, and improvement activities to function in a coherent structure (Murphy, 2018), and a common vision for special education can be built (Bettini et al., 2016). The understanding of special education activities and the development of appropriate leadership skills by school administrators therein are among the factors that directly affect the success of schools for special education

(Billingsley, 2019). In this regard, administrators are expected to build a climate that offers consistent and frequent opportunities to support the development of all students (Wakeman et al., 2006).

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) emphasize that successful school leadership has a significant impact on students' learning outcomes. Likewise, leaders' supportive and inclusive approaches (Zigmond et al., 2009) in special education improve the achievement of students with special needs. From this standpoint, it is considered that administrators play an active role in the provision and effective use of the resources required for special education services (Rodriguez & Gil, 2014), in setting the special education policies by the school (Reindal, 2010) and directing them, and in making strategic decisions for the implementation of special education programs. Moreover, administrators are expected to provide the necessary support in the ongoing development of special education personnel and in the process of realizing the potential of students with special needs (Idol, 2006).

Aim of the Study

Collaborative efforts with special education staff, teachers, other school personnel, and students in a school setting play a key role in building inclusive educational settings. School administrators contribute to the holistic, harmonious, and successful services provided to all students by standing at the center of these collaborative efforts. At this point, school administrators' opinions on special education matter and steer the process. Therefore, this study aims to determine the opinions of school administrators in educational institutions about special education. Based on this objective, the following sub-objectives are discussed in the study:

- To determine the opinions of school administrators about individuals with special needs based on their knowledge and experience.
- To determine whether or not school administrators have sufficient level of knowledge about children with special needs.

- To determine school administrators' participation in seminars and in-service trainings on children with special needs and their opinions on the subject.
- To determine the thoughts of school administrators about the collaborative activities with the families of children with special needs.
- To determine the alternative program suggestions of school administrators about preparing programs for students with special needs.

Methodology

Research Model

The study, which was conducted to determine the opinions of school administrators in educational institutions about special education, adopted qualitative research methods and a case study design. The case study design investigates the factors related to a particular circumstance with a holistic approach and focuses on how they affect or are affected by the case (Silverman, 2018). Merriam (1998) argues that a case study is an effective tool for conducting quality research in education and states that it can be adopted to understand and evaluate educational processes and practices in depth. Yin (2009) defines a case study as a method that comprehensively and systematically examines real-life events that exist in a particular context. Case studies usually aim to arrive at generalizations through one or more case studies, and in-depth data collection techniques are used thereon. The present study aims to understand the process in depth with the case study design in order to reach detailed data about the circumstances analyzed through case studies and experiences.

Study Group

The study group of the research consisted of eight school principals who are working as administrators in public schools affiliated with the Ministry of National Education in the academic year 2023-2024. Five of the eight administrators

continue to work as school principals and three as assistant principals. The study group of the research was identified by using the criterion sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods. The criterion sampling method is based on the understanding of the study of cases that meet a set of predetermined criteria (Christensen et al., 2020). The participants who voluntarily participated in the research among primary and secondary school administrators and had special education classrooms in their institutions were selected as the criterion for this study. Table 1 shows the demographic data of the participants.

Table 1 – Demographic characteristics of the school administrators

	Frequency
Gender	
Male	8
Age range	
30-39	2
40-49	2
50-59	4
Professional seniority	
11-15 years	4
20 years and more	4
Educational Background	
Bachelor's degree	4
Master's degree	3
Doctoral degree	1
Working level	
Primary school	5
Secondary school	3
TOTAL	8

When Table 1 was analyzed, it was observed that mostly participants over the age of 50 in the study group, which consisted entirely of men were involved in the study process. It was determined that the participants, who were distributed evenly according to their professional seniority, mostly held bachelor's degrees and mostly worked in primary schools.

Data Collection Tools

An interview form was used in the study on school administrators' opinions on special education. Literature review and expert opinions were used in the

preparation stages of the interview form. Opinions of four field experts were taken for the draft form with the questions prepared within the framework of the main purpose and sub-objectives of the study. Then, the form was revised for language and expression based on the expert opinion. Before the final interview, a pilot application was held, and responses to the interview questions were received from six participants. After the form was determined to be clear and understandable for the participants, it was put into final form. The interview form used in the study includes the following questions:

1. What comes to your mind when you think of an individual with special needs based on your own knowledge and experience? How do you describe these individuals?
2. Do you think you have enough knowledge about children with special needs?
3. Have you attended or would you like to attend seminars and in-service trainings on children with special needs? If yes, can you tell us why?
4. Are there students with special needs in your school? If yes, how do you cooperate with their families?
5. If you were authorized to prepare a program for students with special needs, what would you make different?

Data Collection Process

Eight school administrators participated in the study, and the data were collected through interviews. After the development of the data collection tool, the necessary formal permissions were obtained. The interview form was delivered to the participants in writing. However, the participants were informed about the study during this process. The participants gave their written and verbal consents. The principle of participant confidentiality was adhered to during the data collection phase and the ongoing process of the study. All participant opinions were matched with appropriate participant codes. The data were recorded as research notes and made ready for the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

A written document was created for the responses to the interview questions and was analyzed using the descriptive analysis technique. The main purpose of descriptive analysis is to reach concepts and correlations that can explain the collected data (Saldana, 2019). In this regard, the responses to the interview questions that constitute the data were analyzed and interpreted, and concepts and correlations were found based on the outcomes achieved.

Findings

After the data analysis process was completed, the opinions of the school administrators were discussed under five main themes. The themes called as Definition of Individuals with Special Needs, Competence, In-Service Training and Seminars, Collaboration, and Alternative Program Suggestions and the findings reached are presented in sub-headings.

Description of Individuals with Special Needs

The responses of the participants to the questions, "What comes to your mind when you think of an individual with special needs based on your own knowledge and experience?" and "How do you describe these individuals?" were analyzed under the theme of Definition of Individuals with Special Needs. When the participants were asked to define individuals with special needs, it was determined that they described individuals who differed from their peers in particular areas and therefore needed special attention and education. There were statements such as formulating individual education plans to promote the development of these individuals and maximize their potential and implementing these plans accordingly. Some of the opinions of the participants under this theme are as follows:

> They are people who have differences in particular areas compared to their peers and therefore need special attention. **(P6)**

> They are individuals who lack the ability to accomplish their own life skills on their own. **(P2)**

> "It requires special knowledge and skills. An education program that incorporates different teaching and techniques has been forthcoming." **(P7)**

Competence

The responses of the participants to the question, "Do you think you have enough knowledge about children with special needs?" were analyzed under the Competence theme. The participants mostly stated hereunder that they found themselves incompetent in this field. They explained their opinions thereon with the involvement of complex processes in the field of special education. Evaluations such as the emergence of different needs and the necessity of having up-to-date information about innovations and developments in this field are among the issues that participants took into account when evaluating their level of competence. Some of the opinions of the participants under this theme are as follows:

> No, I do not think so. I think this field involves quite complex processes. **(P1)**

> Partially. I do not have enough knowledge. Because it is a complex field with different needs. **(P2)**

In-Service Training and Seminars

The responses of the participants to the questions, "Have you attended or would you like to attend seminars and in-service trainings on children with special needs?" and "If yes, can you tell us why?" were analyzed under the In-Service Training and Seminars theme. The participants demanded in-service training and seminars in the field of special education. They emphasized that they endeavored to expand their knowledge and improve their skills in this field, follow current advances, and respond more effectively to the needs of students with special needs. The participants believe that in-service trainings and seminars will provide them with knowledge about new approaches, methods, and strategies and help them manage special education practices more efficiently. Some of the opinions of the participants under this theme are as follows:

> I attended trainings. I would like to help more when there are such children in my class. **(P3)**
>
> I have attended a course on special education before. I would like to attend training on this subject again. **(P5)**
>
> "I attended a few trainings on this subject. I think I should have knowledge on the subject." **(P8)**

Collaboration

The responses of the participants to the questions, "Are there students with special needs in your school?" and "If yes, how do you cooperate with their families?" were analyzed under the Collaboration theme. This theme was structured according to school administrators' opinions on collaboration with families, teachers, administrators, and other students and teachers in special education. Therefore, the participants emphasize particularly the importance of family collaboration in special education. However, they stated that they were not supported enough by the families, they worked in collaboration with the teacher in the school, and they planned and implemented social, cultural, awareness, and responsibility activities and projects with other teachers and students under inclusive education. Based on their opinions accordingly, it is considered that the joint efforts of all stakeholders will ensure the complete and effective integration of individuals with special needs in society. Some of the opinions of the participants under this theme are as follows:

> There are students with special needs in my school. They are not involved in the school setting and student groups. I believe that their families are generally interested. However, they still have problems in joining activities. **(P1)**
>
> Individuals with a mild level of autism need intensive special education and support education due to limitations in the fields of social interaction and communication. Collaborative activities such as sharing information with families and attending training programs are held. **(P6)**

Alternative Program Suggestions

When the alternative suggestions offered by the administrators for preparing programs for students with special needs were examined, it was observed that

individualized education, collaboration, and flexibility were frequently discussed. Accordingly, focusing on the needs of the students and conducting need-oriented studies were suggested. Accordingly, these needs have been considered as a critical factor in order to manage the learning processes of students with special needs with maximum efficiency. Related participant opinions emphasized that education for students with special needs should be flexible and inclusive.

They also suggested that stakeholders should cooperate effectively in order to meet these individual needs. Participants made evaluations about the active participation of all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, school administrators, and experts, during this process. Therefore, the contributions of stakeholders in the education process were argued to make the efficiency to be offered to students more comprehensive and effective.

> When preparing a program for students with special needs, I would focus on the individualized approach. The needs of each student are different. This approach is important to provide the most appropriate education for the student. I would also make use of various learning methods, materials, and activities in the program for diversity and flexibility. I would create a flexible structure that would allow students to progress at different paces and be suitable for different learning styles. **(P7)**

> I would make sure that necessary arrangements are made based on joint efforts with parents, teachers, school administrators, and experts who are the stakeholders of special education. **(P8)**

Discussion and Conclusion

This study evaluated school administrators' definitions of individuals with special needs, their level of competence, their collaboration experiences, and their in-service training needs. The definition by school administrators for individuals with special needs as people who have differences in particular areas compared to their peers and need special attention and education underline the requirement for an individualized approach in special education (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The definitions of the participants as "they are people who have differences in particular areas compared to their peers and therefore need special attention" and

"differently developing individuals" indicated that they had an understanding responsive to the needs of students with special needs (Smith et al., 2006).

The administrators stated that they found themselves incompetent when it came to competence in special education. This feeling of incompetence was attributed to factors such as lack of adequate training in the field of special education, lack of up-to-date knowledge about innovations and advances, and lack of adequate material and human resources (Ainscow, 1999; Lindsay, 2007). This leads to difficulties in providing special education programs and support services. As a matter of fact, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) discussed bureaucratic affairs and procedures as a factor that limited the competencies of administrators.

Regarding collaboration, the administrators emphasized that family collaboration is of great importance in special education. Friend and Cook (2010) associated this with the quality of teaching. However, school administrators stated that they were not supported enough by the families and they worked in collaboration with teachers in the school. They also stated that they planned and implemented social, cultural, awareness, and responsibility activities with other teachers and students under inclusive education. These collaborative efforts play an important role in allowing individuals with special needs to integrate into society as complete and active members (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019; Villa & Thousand, 2005).

As discussed by Westwood (2018), the administrators' demand for in-service training and seminars reflected their efforts to expand their knowledge and improve their skills in this field, to follow current advances, and to respond more effectively to the needs of students with special needs. These trainings and seminars will provide administrators with knowledge about new approaches, methods, and strategies and help them manage special education practices more efficiently (Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

Finally, the role of administrators in special education has a direct impact on the education, development, and overall well-being of students with special needs. Therefore, as Kauffman and Landrum (2018) discuss, administrators need to have a broad accumulation of knowledge, strong leadership skills, and an empathetic approach. The effective fulfilment of these roles by administrators will improve the

quality of the educational experiences of students with special needs and allow them to integrate into society as complete and active members (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Results of this study provide important information about school administrators' definitions of individuals with special needs, their level of competence, their collaboration experiences, and their in-service training needs. The correct definition of individuals with special needs by school administrators and their emphasis on the necessity of formulating individual education plans showed that they understood the importance of special education (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Smith et al., 2006). The fact that administrators found themselves insufficient in special education suggested the need for more training and resources in this field. In this sense, Westwood (2018) emphasized that the knowledge and skills of administrators would improve with the organization of in-service training and seminars, and the quality of special education services could improve accordingly. Moreover, family collaboration and inclusive education activities are important elements to support the integration of individuals with special needs into society (Friend & Cook, 2010).

Consequently, the role of school administrators in special education has critical importance in the success of these services. Having sufficient knowledge and skills, exhibiting strong leadership qualities, and acting with an empathic approach by administrators have a great impact on maximizing the potential of students with special needs and their participation in society as active individuals (Ainscow, 1999; Kauffman & Landrum, 2018).

Suggestions

Based on the study results, the following suggestions were developed for school administrators to be more effective and competent in the education of individuals with special needs:

Studies can be done to increase in-service trainings and seminars. These trainings will provide administrators with knowledge about current approaches,

methods, and strategies in special education and improve their competencies in this field. They will also ensure that they have up-to-date knowledge about innovations and advances.

Administrators suffer from difficulties in providing special education programs and support services. Therefore, strategic plans should be formulated for the provision of necessary resources and the effective use of these resources. This is important to meet the needs of both teachers and students.

The role of administrators in special education has a direct impact on the education, development, and overall well-being of students with special needs. Therefore, administrators need to have a broad accumulation of knowledge and strong leadership skills. Adopting an empathic approach will improve the educational experiences of students with special needs and allow them to integrate into society as complete and active members. Accordingly, programs and support should be provided to improve the training and leadership skills of administrators.

The suggestions offered will guide school administrators to be more effective in special education and to maximize the potential of students with special needs. Inclusive and supportive approaches in education will contribute to the growth of all students as successful and happy individuals.

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