

THE EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES DURING THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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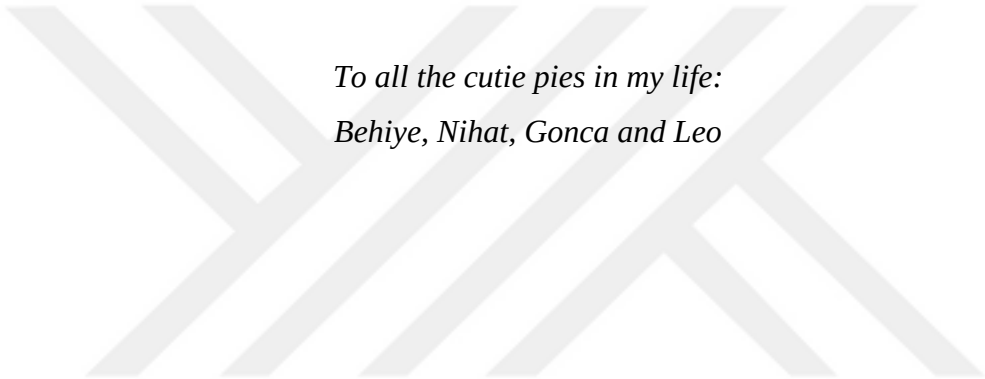
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*To all the cutie pies in my life:
Behiye, Nihat, Gonca and Leo*

ABSTRACT

All children, particularly those with special needs, have been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative study explored the experiences of children with learning disabilities (LD) during the COVID-19 Pandemic. A criterion sample of twenty-three children ranging in ages from 7 to 10 ($M= 8.56$, $SD= 1.12$) from Turkey was interviewed. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data. Six themes and thirteen subthemes were generated: 1) pre-pandemic activities, 2) activities during the pandemic, 3) perceived changes, 4) educational process, 5) feelings during the pandemic, and 6) support during the pandemic. Overall, findings from the present study provided insights into the experiences of children with LD during the COVID-19 pandemic. Themes and subthemes are discussed in the framework of Ecological Systems Theory.

Keywords: learning disabilities, pandemic experiences, low socioeconomic status

ÖZET

Başta özel ihtiyaçları olanlar olmak üzere tüm çocuklar COVID-19 salgın sürecinden olumsuz etkilenmiştir. Mevcut nitel çalışma, COVID-19 Pandemisi sırasında öğrenme güçlüğü (LD) olan çocukların deneyimlerini araştırdı. Türkiye'den 7-10 ($Ort= 8.56$, $SS= 1.12$) yaşları arasında 23 çocuktan oluşan bir ölçüt örneklem ile görüşme yapılmıştır. Toplanan verilerin analizinde tematik analiz kullanılmıştır. Altı tema ve on üç alt tema oluşturulmuştur: 1) pandemi öncesi faaliyetler, 2) pandemi sırasındaki faaliyetler, 3) algılanan değişiklikler, 4) eğitim süreci, 5) pandemi sırasındaki duygular, 6) pandemi sırasında destek. Genel olarak, bu çalışmadan elde edilen bulgular, COVID-19 pandemisi sırasında öğrenme güçlüğü olan çocukların deneyimlerine ilişkin içgörüler sağlamıştır. Temalar ve alt temalar Ekolojik Sistemler Teorisi çerçevesinde tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: öğrenme güçlüğü, pandemi deneyimleri, alt sosyoekonomik aileler

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, the world met with a new, global, contagious virus namely, Coronavirus (COVID-19). It has made a huge negative impact on people all around the world since it causes health problems and even death. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) published several guidelines which help governments to manage the risky situation of spreading the virus.

The policymakers in Turkey have urged people through the media to wear masks, keep their physical distance, and pay attention to hygiene, as to do so has been advised by other countries' policymakers around the world. The Turkish Government has taken several precautions to prevent the spread of the virus. For instance, weekend lockdowns, curfews for people below the age of 20 and over 65 at certain times, closure of workplaces, schools, transition to the online education system, travel bans, and so on (Ministry of Interior Affairs, 2021). Since then, these measures have affected the Turkish economy, as well as people's lifestyles in many ways, particularly vulnerable populations such as, low-income people, children, and people with special needs (Örün & Topal, 2020). A report published by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021) highlighted that, due to greater susceptibility of impacted by health issues and economic crisis: "vulnerable groups are doubly affected by the crisis." (p.43).

1.1 Special Needs and Education

Some individuals in society have special needs in terms of physical and/or developmental. These needs are generally supported by services including special education, so that they can take an active role in society. Special education is for individuals who differ from others due to the characteristics in their physical, mental, communicative, social, and emotional development and cannot benefit from regular education, benefit partially or can

continue their education with support programs. It is the training given by specially trained personnel with special methods and tools, and special programs developed differently for each group with special needs, if necessary, in special places such as special education institutions (Baykoç-Dönmez, 2010).

Constitution of the Republic of Turkey (1982) includes the law for children who need special education (no.2916) which aims to ensure that children with special education needs receive an education that is in line with the expectations of the Turkish National Education System. This law also defines special education as the education of children with special needs. These individuals are those who cannot receive regular education services due to their physical, mental, psychological, emotional, social and health conditions (First Special Education Council, 1991). According to the statistics of the Ministry of National Education (2020), there are approximately half a million students with special needs in formal education.

Further, during the pandemic, an increase in the number of chronic illnesses and other medical conditions has been observed in people with special needs (Neumeyer et al., 2019). These medical conditions may make children with disabilities more vulnerable to the COVID-19 Pandemic due to their atypical immune responses compared to typically developing children (Meltzer & Water, 2017). The higher risk of contracting the disease may have been a major source of stress for children with special needs.

This qualitative study aimed to explore the experiences of a particularly disadvantaged group in Turkey, namely children who need special education due to their learning disabilities living in low-income families.

1.2 Learning Disabilities (LD)

Learning disabilities are caused by genetic and/or neurobiological factors or damage to the brain's functioning in a way that affects one or more of the processes involved (Learning Disabilities Association of America; LDA). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical

Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) past or current specific difficulties in a child's learning performance in acquiring reading (e.g.: inaccurate word reading), writing (e.g.: omitting vowels or consonants), or math skills (e.g.: inaccurate calculation) are defined as learning disabilities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Further, LD should be linked to daily functioning and interfere with school performance (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). LD can occur as verbal (e.g.: dyslexia), and non-verbal (e.g.: dyscalculia) dysfunction (Hendriksen, 2007). Additionally, LD can be associated with a variety of conditions, such as attention, behavioral and emotional disorders, sensory disorders, or other medical conditions (Gillberg et al., 2004).

In the process of diagnosing learning disabilities, first of all, physical possibilities (e.g., visual, and auditory problems) are eliminated and an intelligence test is performed to predict the individual's cognitive strengths and weaknesses and special education needs. Further, some cognitive tests can be conducted to diagnose learning disorders such as Cognitive Assessment System Second Edition (CAS2; Naglieri et al., 2014a). CAS2 leads professionals to discover neurological variability that increases comprehension of people with learning difficulties (Naglieri & Otero, 2017). In the psychiatric evaluation, the child's detailed developmental and family history is taken, and attention, concentration, receptive and expressive language, vocabulary, verbal fluency, listening, and comprehension skills are evaluated (Wong et al., 2011; Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2015).

Although the data on the number of individuals with learning disabilities are limited, the prevalence of specific learning disorders is between 3-9% and it is known that males are affected by this condition 3-4 times more (Turkish Grand National Assembly- Assembly Research Commission, 2020). On the other hand, according to unofficial data from the experts in Turkey, one out of every six children in schools in Turkey is thought to have dyslexia which is one of the subtypes of learning disabilities (Bahçetepe, 2021).

Although LD is not primarily due to hearing and/or vision problems, socio-economic factors, cultural or linguistic differences, lack of motivation, or ineffective teaching, these factors can further complicate the difficulties faced by individuals with LD (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2015).

Social competence, which is necessary for developing and maintaining peer, familial, teacher, and other adult interactions, is absent in children with learning difficulties (Vaughn & Haager, 1994). Those who lack social competence struggle to adapt to new conditions and frequently engage in maladaptive behaviors (i.e., poor self-control, anxiety, inattention, and disruptive outbursts). Additionally, although nonverbal learning disorders are not yet recognized as a distinct form of learning disability in the DSM-5, according to a growing amount of research, roughly 5% of people with learning impairments experience the cognitive and scholastic challenges associated with nonverbal learning disabilities. Nonverbal learning disorders are known to affect various areas of social and motor skills. People with nonverbal learning disabilities are unable to understand nonverbal communication and have difficulties transmitting and interpreting emotion, therefore they miss out on the important social clues that allow people to properly conduct many social interactions (Harnadek & Rourke, 1994). Research showed that successful and fulfilling peer interactions help people build and improve their social skills (Allsopp et al., 2000; Stone & La Greca, 1990).

Measures such as curfews, closure of schools, and social distance introduced during the pandemic period have limited the interaction of children with their peers. Those changes and social restrictions that come with the pandemic period might affect the social competence of children with learning disabilities. Further, with the closure of schools, face-to-face interactive education opportunities have disappeared for children with learning difficulties. The online education process may have been a disadvantage for these children, as these children need to put more effort than other children to learn in a healthy way. In other words,

electronic devices may not be an effective learning platform for children with learning difficulties due to distractions and some technological features (e.g., accessing other sites during the lesson, turning off the microphone of each other by the children during the lesson).

1.3 Living in Low Income Households as a Risk Factor

Poverty represents a risky situation as it limits children's access to the important resources they need for their healthy development, such as education, health, and nutrition (UNICEF, 2016). We have mentioned earlier in the paper that one of the difficulties as a result of the pandemic is the financial burdens damage to the population. Pandemics mainly cause sudden and widespread illness and death; social, and political and cause significant economic problems (Madhav et al., 2018). Low-income families can be expected to be more affected than others by the country's deteriorating economy during the pandemic period, as access to the resources necessary to maintain health, such as masks, disinfectants, and clean and healthy food, requires financial sufficiency.

Additionally, one of the biggest changes as a result of the pandemic is the closure of schools and online classes with essential resources such as computers, internet connections, and suitable environments for participation. However, low-income families' children who do not have access to these sources face academic lag compared to their peers who can easily access these resources (Van Lancker et al., 2020).

Childhood poverty is measured by checking whether the child is living in a household below an absolute poverty level (Boat & Wu, 2015). Children living in poverty had higher rates of most chronic health disorders, more severe diseases and consequences, and less access to care in general. Indeed, children who grow up in poverty are less likely to be treated for their conditions because they have limited access to care (Van Cleave et al., 2010). Besides, opportunities provided by socioeconomic status are not limited to health care services. Children from low-income families are more likely to experience food insecurity,

parental depression and other mental health disorders, and housing instability, as well as to live in neighborhoods with more environmental hazards, which may be linked to higher rates of injury and traumatic events (Merikangas et al., 2010). As a result, children from low-income families are more likely to suffer from distress, which has been linked to long-term well-being (Shonkoff et al., 2012).

In many aspects, the pandemic has had devastating social consequences. The most serious disadvantage for the impoverished is that their children are unable to attend school. In 189 countries, schools were closed because of the pandemic, and education was moved online. This has worsened inequities among children, affecting an average of more than 1.5 billion students (90 percent of the world's students) (UNDP, 2020). As a result, as schooling moves online, it is unavoidable that more negative repercussions will occur for children who live in households where digital chances are limited (OECD, 2020: 19)

1.4 Conceptual Framework

Children develop through bidirectional interactions with their environments as conceptualized in the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The systems around the individual child interact and through this interaction, the individual child is actively influenced by the interactions as well as influence the environment as an active agent in a given context. The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced all the systems in the ecology of children, given negative consequences of the pandemic have penetrated each aspect of the society from home context to policy-making processes. One that ground, the developmental trajectories of children with learning disabilities have been negatively influenced as disruptions in within-family relationships, within-school, and social environment have placed burden on care providers for these children. This burdensome on children has been particularly more compelling for families living in disadvantaged conditions due to socioeconomic status (e.g.: financial struggles) (UNICEF, 2020). Considering the

collaborative influences of the pandemic on children with LD, I used the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to conceptualize the current study. By doing so, I attempted to comprehend at a deeper level how children with LD have perceived and experienced the pandemic. A striking feature of this research is that children narrated their experiences directly to the researcher. Thus, the data in this research comprised of children's personal experiences, such as their emotions and perceptions obtained firsthand.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children

Routines within the family have been shown to promote positive interactions between parents and their children as well as provide a sense of security and predictability for children (Cassidy, 1992; Kase, 1999; Ren & Fan, 2019). During the pandemic that has undoubtedly brought a lot of changes to our lives, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2020) has urged parents to create a consistent daily routine for their children. Additionally, the significance of routines for children with special educational needs and disabilities is highlighted since any disruptions or changes could be serious stressors for them (Altable, 2020; Eshraghi et al., 2020). Further, a previous study was focused on the influences of disrupted routines of children during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Liu et al. 2021). The authors used the Child Routine Inventory (CRI; Sysma et al., 2001) which is based on parent reports on school-age children's (ages 5 to 12) daily routines focusing on daily living, household responsibilities, discipline, and homework routines. Researchers found that children who had more regular routines during the pandemic reported lower levels of depressive symptoms.

Moreover, OECD (2020) stated that children who have difficulties in social skills, such as children with LD may encounter difficulties in emotions such as anxiety due to stress,

lack of socialization, and disrupted routines. Consistently, according to the UNICEF report (2021), namely *The State of the World's Children 2021*, some of the consequences of the pandemic are stress and anxiety stemming from fear of infection, and uncertainty about lifestyle changes brought about by isolation, behavioral problems such as inattention, especially among children with special needs (p.103).

Another significant issue is that attending online classes and relying on technological devices such as computers, telephones, and tablets for socializing, and joy heightened the duration of time children spent on screens; previously it was shown that many parents give their children extra access to technology beyond the screen time they normally control. (Cheng & Wilkinson, 2020; Orlando, 2020).

Furthermore, the pandemic and accompanying limitations are likely to have had harmful consequences on children, both directly (e.g., through changes in their everyday life) and indirectly (e.g., via increased parental stress). According to preliminary findings, the pandemic is having a direct harmful impact on children (Patrick et al., 2020). However, the majority of this information is based on parental reports (Jiao et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020; Spinelli et al., 2020).

2.2 Family Relationships during the Pandemic

In many research conducted during the pandemic, parents no matter of whether they have typically developed children or not reported high levels of parental stress (Johnson et al., 2020; During the pandemic, many parents referring to a more specific issue reported that dealing with online classes was a source of stress in and on of itself (APA, 2020) Yet, online education is just one of many changes, such as changing routines, economic problems, restrictions as a result of the pandemic. The complete reorganization of the lifecycle resulted in intense psychological distress for the entire family (Perelman, 2020). Parental stress has

been found to negatively affect children's emotional conditions (Finch & Hernández Finch, 2020; Griffith, 2020).

According to the findings of a longitudinal study (Cassinat et al., 2021), overall, the commencement of the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with heightened tension and upheaval in many families, which had repercussions for multi-family relationships. Family chaos increased with the commencement of pandemic-related closures, and the level of chaos within a family during closures had consequences for changes in several parenting processes and family connection aspects. Increases in mother-child conflict, father-child conflict, sibling conflict, and declines in father-child closeness, sibling intimacy, and sibling disclosure have been linked to family disruption during pandemic-related shutdowns.

2.3 Education during the Pandemic

Due to the constraints put out by the Ministry of National Education, special education was transitioned to online platforms. Besides, the Ministry of National Education provided distance education for Turkish children with special needs via Education Informatics Network (EBA) which one can access through television or the Internet (Yazcayir & Gurgur, 2020). The closure of educational institutions had negative consequences for many children regarding diminished mental health, and academic performance (Engzell et al., 2021; Lee, 2020). Besides, adapting to the education system that has moved to online platforms has also been challenging for the parents, individuals (e.g., educators), and institutions that provide education. In a study conducted with teachers, parents, and administrators in Turkey, it was stated that lack of technological resources, struggle in creating content adapted to online education and using digital tools by teachers, and increased responsibilities of parents at home are the difficulties encountered as a result of online education (Yıldız et al., 2022). Further, it was not easy for those with special needs to continue their special education online.

According to United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG, 2020), the COVID-

19 pandemic has affected students with special needs, stating that these individuals are most likely to be affected by remote learning. A study conducted in Turkey revealed some issues in the delivery of digital education for children with special needs. One of the issues mentioned in this study was that some special education teachers did not offer online classes, which could lead to a lack of education for some children (Yazcayir & Gurgur, 2020). Moreover, children with LD had already struggled in paying attention to learning materials prior to the pandemic and online education has created another context in which children struggled even more in their attentiveness to learning materials provided by teachers (UNICEF, 2021).

2.4 The Goals and Research Questions of Current Study

In this study, it is aimed to examine in depth the experiences of children with learning disabilities from the perspective of Ecological Systems Theory. As mentioned earlier, the influences of the COVID-19 pandemic on children with special educational needs were examined; however, they generally focused on the experiences of the care providers (e.g.: parents or teachers) (e.g.: Alhuzmi, 2021; Dordevic et al., 2021; Esentürk, 2020). In addition, studies on children carried out during the pandemic period mostly focused on the either typically developing children (Lee, 2020; Phelps & Sperry, 2020; Tso et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020) or children with autism (Majoko & Dudu, 2020; Latzer et al., 2021; Kreysa et al., 2021, Simpson & Adams, 2022) For our knowledge, the present study is the only study which focuses on children with LD from Turkey during the pandemic.

Unlike previous work, this study aimed to reach children's experiences first-hand, instead of asking caregivers about their observations of their children. The rationale behind why the sample age group of this research was chosen between 7-10 years old, which corresponds to the primary school age in Turkey, is because learning disabilities are mostly recognized and diagnosed during the school years, and they can get better over time with extra attention with intensive training (LDAC, 2015).

Since learning disability persists throughout life (LDAC, 2015), another aim of this study that can shed light on future studies is to address the challenges faced by children with LD during the pandemic period that can be used to support these children in terms of education, and when the pandemic period is left behind.

From the perspective of the Ecological Systems Theory, the findings from the current study would shed a light on the understanding of how children with LD have experienced the pandemic and future research on children with LD.

To fulfill the purpose, the current study has two main- and corresponding sub-research questions:

- 1- How children with learning disabilities have been experiencing the COVID-19 Pandemic?
 - 1.1. How have the daily routines including eating and sleeping habits of the participants changed due to the pandemic and what are the consequences of this change?
- 2- What are support resources and coping strategies during the COVID-19 Pandemic of children with learning disabilities?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to explore the experiences of children with learning disabilities (LD) during the pandemic period. The main purpose of the current study was to understand and interpret how children with LD experience the pandemic from many angles (e.g.: individual, family, and educational experiences) using the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

3.1 Design

The current study was designed as qualitative research. The rationale behind using qualitative methods in this study is that they have been used to allow researchers to delve deeper into the participants' personal experiences on a focused topic (Hammerberg et al., 2016). Since the main purpose of this study is to understand the pandemic experiences of children with learning disabilities and to realize the research purpose, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner.

3.2 Participants

Criterion sampling was used to investigate all individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The main criterion for sampling in the current study was being children with learning disabilities. The ages of the children participating in the research are between 7 and 10, and this age range includes the primary school age in Turkey. I have a relationship with several special education schools as I have worked in them as a psychologist. That's how I reached the sample for the current study.

A total of 25 children participated in this study, but two of them were not included in the sample because during the interview they both declared that they did not have any contact with one of their parents due to divorce. Since this research includes children's experiences with both parents, we found that asking children about parents who did not communicate with them would be misleading for the research findings. However, the interview was conducted without making the children feel that not all questions have been asked. We followed the concept of "information power" as a saturation strategy (Malterud et al., 2016). In this strategy, researchers should consider the aim of the study, sample specificity, use of established theory, quality of dialogue, and analysis strategy during their interviews. Given the aim of the current sample was narrow and the sample characteristics were rather homogenous, indicating specificity in the sampling procedure, we checked saturation after

each interview. As the number of interviews increased, it was clear that there was maximized commonality in the given responses answers given by the children. Around the nineteenth child, the interviewer experienced that there were no novel or additional points made by participants. Therefore, the researcher went up to 23 children just to make sure this saturation was accurate or not, which was accurate in the end. Consequently, of the children in the sample, 9 were girls, and 14 were boys with an average age of 8.5.

Demographic information for the current study was collected from the parents of children with LD, as represented in Table 1. To maintain confidentiality, all participating children's real names have been replaced with pseudonyms. In order to include children with learning disabilities in the study, firstly, the families of children with this diagnosis were reached from the information system of special education institutions. Then, information about the diagnosis of their children was obtained from the parents. While some parents provided specific information such as dyslexia and dyscalculia, subtypes of learning disabilities, some gave information about learning disabilities. Families who gave information by looking at their children's reports stated there was no specific information such as dyslexia or dyscalculia in the report. Parents of 13 out of 23 children stated that their child had a learning disability as well as a diagnosis of attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Further, on average, approximately 5 people and 3 children live in each household.

Furthermore, data were collected in December 2021. The monthly income declared by the families participating in the research varies between 0 and 10,000 Turkish liras (TL) with an average income of 4141.3 TL. According to a survey conducted in December 2021 by The Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (2021) which is one of the major national trade unions in Turkey:

- 1- The monthly food expenditure (hunger limit) required for a healthy, balanced, and adequate diet for a family of four is 4,013.26 TL.

- 2- The total amount (poverty limit) of other mandatory monthly expenditures for clothing, housing (rent, electricity, water, fuel), transportation, education, health, and similar needs, along with food expenditure for a family of four, is 13,072.51 TL.

According to the survey results, the household income of all participants is below the poverty line, except for a family of three with a monthly income of 10000 TL which means 2% above the poverty line. In fact, more than half of the participating families (13 families) are below the hunger limit.

To sum up, what has been stated so far, the sample of this study represents children between the ages of 7 and 10 with learning disabilities from families with low socioeconomic status (SES) in Turkey.

Table 1

Demographics

Pseudonym of Child	Child Age	Child Sex	Diagnosis of Child	Monthly Family Income (TL)*	Number of People in the Household	Number of Children in the Household
Hazal	7	F	Learning Disabilities, ADHD	4250	5	3
Arif	7	M	Learning Disabilities	3000	6	4
Ahmet	7	M	Learning Disabilities	4250	7	4
Nilgün	7	F	Dyslexia, ADHD	4000	3	1
Selin	7	F	Dyslexia, ADHD	4250	4	2
Sadık	8	M	Learning Disabilities	4250	5	3
Elif	8	F	Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, ADHD	3000	4	2
Yakup	8	M	Learning Disabilities	4250	4	2
Fatih	8	M	Dyslexia, ADHD	5000	3	2
Rıfat	8	M	Dyslexia, ADHD	4250	4	2
Eda	8	F	Dyslexia	10000	3	1
Feriha	9	F	Learning Disabilities	4250	5	3
Namık	9	M	Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, ADHD	4250	7	2
Buket	9	F	Dyscalculia, ADHD	4250	4	2
Berat	9	M	Dyslexia, ADHD	5000	4	2

Kamil	9	M	Dyslexia	4000	5	2
Murat	9	M	Learning Disabilities, ADHD	4250	5	3
Yahya	10	M	Learning Disabilities	6000	5	2
Ercan	10	M	Learning Disabilities, ADHD	4250	5	3
Fadime	10	F	Dyslexia	2500	6	3
Emre	10	M	Learning Disabilities, ADHD	0	4	2
Nalan	10	F	Learning Disabilities	1000	5	3
Akın	10	M	Learning Disabilities, ADHD	5000	4	2

*F = female, M = male; *family income is written in monthly Turkish lira*

3.3 Data Collection Materials

In the process of formation of the interview questions, firstly, I prepared candidate interview questions based on previous research in accordance with the purpose and theoretical framework of the current study, which is Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As explained earlier, Ecological Systems Theory focuses on the experiences derived from relationships between different environments that children encounter, such as home, and school. That is why I took care to include the experiences of children in their different environments in the interview questions to explore their experiences deeply during the pandemic period.

One of the qualitative studies that guided the formation of the candidate questions of this study was focused on the parental experiences of children with autism during the pandemic (Latzer et al., 2021). The findings that have an important influence on the formation

of the questions of this study are parents' reports on the functional (e.g.: abilities that children used to have such as using a spoon), social (e.g.: lack of communication, and social interaction), and behavioral (e.g.: greater life skills due to more involvement in chores) implications on their children due to the changes brought by the pandemic (e.g.: disrupted routines). These findings gave the idea to include benchmarking questions for the pre-pandemic period and the pandemic period regarding children's daily routine, and activities in order to understand what has changed during the pandemic and how children are affected by these changes.

Moreover, some research on how the COVID-19 Pandemic affected children with special needs emotionally has common findings which are it has a negative impact on children's well-being (Morelli et al., 2020; Engzell et al., 2021) and mental health (Liu, 2020) because it can get better over time with extra attention with intensive training, therefore, these findings lead us to include questions about emotions and support sources during the pandemic.

Additionally, a study conducted by Yazcayir and Gurgur (2021), addressing the problems that children receiving special education in Turkey face with online education during the pandemic period, led us to add questions about the online education system and children's relations with teachers and friends.

As the main purpose of the current study is to explore the experiences of the children during the pandemic, previous results led to the preparation of questions in accordance with the aims of the study.

After forming the potential interview questions, the proposal of this study was presented to the experts in the field, and feedback was received on the candidate interview questions. According to the feedback received, the candidate questions were updated, and the interview questions were prepared. As the last step in the formation of the interview

questions, a 7-year-old read the candidate interview questions and she asked if there were any questions she did not understand or if there were any points that were not clear enough. She declared that all questions were clear and understandable. In its final form, the questionnaire consisted of demographic questions for the parents and twenty open-end questions for the children. These questions were designed to explore various aspects of life experiences, including individual, family, and educational issues, as the pandemic outbreaks.

The interview question examples:

1. *Demographic questions.* Participants' parents were asked in terms of children's age, sex, financial income, and the number of people living in the household.
2. *Children questionnaire.* "How were your days before the pandemic period? What has changed?", and "What was it like to attend online classes?"

See Appendix A for complete interview questions.

3.4 Procedure

Upon receiving ethical approval from the Özyeğin University Ethics Committee, I informed the managers of special education and rehabilitation centers that I worked in before, and asked for their permission to reach out to the parents who receive educational service for their children with LD. After obtaining permission from the managers to conduct the study, I accessed the information of the children who received special education for special learning disabilities and met the age criteria of the study from the information systems of the institutions. Then, I gave information by phone to the parents who had a child aged between seven and ten who met the research criteria and asked for their approval. Afterward, we scheduled interviews with parents who gave the consent for their children to participate in the research. Interviews were conducted online (e.g.: Zoom, and WhatsApp) or face-to-face, depending on the participants' suitability and preferences. The whole interview process was audio-recorded and all the points that were seen as significant to the study were written by

hand. After the interviews, audio recordings were transcribed, and the names of the children were changed. Further, to ensure confidentiality, all documents that would reveal the identities of the participants and the documents included in the research using pseudonyms were separated and stored in different files and/or external memory devices that were only accessible to the researcher.

3.5 Analysis

To analyze the data, I used the thematic analysis method which is used to identify and interpret patterns within data (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest a series of steps to complete the process of developing a thematic analysis, including developing a good understanding of the data; identifying interesting features of it, searching for themes; reviewing themes; producing a report. During the analysis, I followed these steps.

To begin with, I transcribed all audiotaped interviews, then organized data by matching participants' names with their pseudonyms to consider ethical concerns.

As a second step, I read and re-read the transcripts to be more familiar with the data and add memos to identify codes that reflect salient features of this study as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). During the analysis process, the expert checking method was used to ensure that the researcher diminishes her biases regarding self-reflexivity. Another researcher checked the initial codes.

Afterward, I divided the codes into groups that reflected commonalities. In conclusion, the organized codes created themes and subthemes for this study (See Table 2 for themes, subthemes, and descriptions).

3.5 The Credibility of Data

There are several ways to ensure trustworthiness in a qualitative study. One of the significant factors that researchers should consider is ensuring that they are not prone to biases (Clarke, & Braun, 2013). Refraining from these biases as much as possible is critical to

ensure that the analysis procedures are not affected. The importance of refraining from biases is also noted for researchers who have a personal connection to the issues they aim to delve into. A study's credibility depends on the researchers' ability to explicitly document their thoughts through self-reflexivity. As a psychologist who has worked in the field of special education, I was aware of my personal reflections regarding collected data and attempted to put aside my personal reflections and biases during the coding and interoperation of the data. From the beginning to the end of the study, I tried to involve my experiences and beliefs regarding researched phenomenon (e.g., children with special needs from low SES households) as part of the self-reflection process. As I worked in the schools where I collected data, I set myself a time before and after each interview to reorganize my self-thoughts regarding participants. By doing so, I believe that I moved my interpretation of the statements by participants, indicating the interview rather reflects participants' perceptions. For example, having a seven-year-old child with SEN from a low-income household who is a relative to me has remarkably increased my sensitivity and interest in this field of children with SEN. Therefore, before starting the interviews with the children, I went over my own thoughts about the study and my expectations of the possible outcomes. In doing this, I have been as honest with myself as possible. In addition, as I noticed similarities in the answers I received from the children during the interviews, some thoughts began to form in my mind for my research questions. At the end of each interview, I wrote down these thoughts in the notebook where I took short notes throughout the interview. Then, besides these notes, I compared the audio recordings with the memos that were formed when I wrote them down and read them over and over. In this process, the feeling I usually felt after each interview was fatigue first and then sadness. That is why I left the process of transcribing the interviews until after all the interviews were over.

I also implemented an additional strategy known as prolonged engagement with some degree of familiarity and professional relationship with the participants. Since all of the participants were from institutions where I worked as a psychologist before, I have a professional relationship with them prior to this study. This strategy involves spending time with participants to build rapport and increase their level of trust with researchers, which leads them to be more open (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Li, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 1998).

Moreover, according to Guba and Lincoln (1985), transferability refers to the ability of a study to be used in different contexts and at different times. This concept can be assessed by clearly stating the demographic information of the participants and the contexts of the interviews, which I clarified within the scope of the research.

Furthermore, the expert checking method was used recurrently. To explain, during the analysis while I coded and defined the themes, another researcher continually checked the findings in order to ensure that biases are minimized. Besides, while the interview questions were being formed, constructive feedback was received from the experts in the field, and necessary arrangements were made in accordance with the main purpose of the research.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

4.1 Overview of Generated Themes

Twenty-three interviews that were transcribed were examined one by one, codes that touched on the common point were determined, and finally, the themes and subthemes of the research were formed as illustrated in Table 2. Six main themes were generated from the current study: 1) Pre-pandemic activities 2) Activities during the pandemic 3) Perceived changes 4) Educational process 5) Feelings during the pandemic 6) Support during the

pandemic. Each theme is clarified and exemplified with quotations in the following sections.

Quotations are indicated by the pseudonyms of the children with their ages in parentheses.

Table 2

Summary and Description of Themes

Themes and Subthemes	Description
Theme 1:	Children's activities before the pandemic,
Pre-Pandemic Activities	such as going out, and meeting with friends,
Subtheme 1a:	etc.
Individual Pre-Pandemic Activities	
Subtheme 1b:	
Family Pre-Pandemic Activities	
Theme 2:	Children's activities during the pandemic
Activities during the Pandemic	period, such as painting, playing phone
Subtheme 2a:	games and helping with housework, etc.
Individual Pandemic Activities	
Subtheme 2b:	
Family Pandemic Activities	
Theme 3:	Reflects how children experience changes in
Perceived Changes	their routines including sleeping and eating,
Subtheme 3a:	and activities before and during the
Individual Changes	pandemic
Subtheme 3b:	
Family Dynamics	
Theme 4:	Reflects how children experience changes in
Educational Process	the education system during the pandemic,

Subtheme 4a:	including online education and relationships
Online Education	with their teachers
Subtheme 4b:	
Relationship with Teachers	

Theme 5:

Feelings During the Pandemic	Children's feelings about the pandemic
Subtheme 5a:	
Positive Feelings	
Subtheme 5b:	
Negative Feelings	

Theme 6:

Support During the Pandemic	Supporting factors that enable children to cope with negative emotions such as fear during the pandemic
Subtheme 6a:	
Self-support	
Subtheme 6b:	
Family-support	
Subtheme 6c:	
Peer-support	

4.1.1 Theme 1: Pre-pandemic Activities

Since learning how children spent their pandemic days is one of the main purposes of this study, open-ended questions were asked to the children based on the comparison between the pre-pandemic and the pandemic period. Children mostly mentioned about the activities that they engaged in before the pandemic. This theme includes children's pre-pandemic activities, such as going out, and meeting with friends. After grouping and codifying common

discourses, two subthemes of this theme were formed: 1a) Individual activities (e.g.: painting) 1b) Family activities (e.g.: watching TV with family). The activities that children talked about the most during the pre-pandemic period were outdoor activities.

4.1.1.1 Subtheme 1a: Pre-pandemic Individual Activities:

This subtheme consists of activities that children do on their own in the pre-pandemic period. The most common pre-pandemic individual activities among children were playing outside, and meeting with friends. Nearly all of the children mentioned that before the pandemic they spent their leisure time at outdoor places like the park.

4.1.1.2 Subtheme 1b: Pre-pandemic Family Activities:

This subtheme includes activities that children do with at least one family member in the pre-pandemic period. The most common pre-pandemic family activities among children were going out (e.g.: for shopping, to the park) and visiting relatives or friends with family members. Almost all of the children mentioned that they spent more time outside with their families before the pandemic. For instance, Hazal (7):

“Before the pandemic, I used to go on a picnic with my family almost every weekend.”

4.1.2 Theme 2: Activities During the Pandemic

This theme represents how children spent their pandemic days based on their activities. More than half of the children first stated that doing homework is one of their primary activities. Some also included their parents when they talked about doing homework, mentioning that they were helpful. On the other hand, the number of children talking about individual activities was high. The children mentioned that they spend most of their time at home with art activities such as painting.

This theme also comprises of two subthemes: 2a) Individual activities (e.g.: painting) 2b) Family activities (e.g.: watching TV with family).

4.1.2.1 Subtheme 2a: Individual Activities During the Pandemic

This subtheme represents activities that children do on their own during the pandemic period. The most common individual activities during the pandemic among children were painting, doing homework, playing with toys, and playing computer games.

4.1.2.2 Subtheme 2b: Family Activities During the Pandemic

This subtheme represents activities that children do with at least one family member during the pandemic period. The most common family activities during the pandemic among children were playing with siblings, watching TV with parents, and helping family members with household chores.

4.1.3 Theme 3: Perceived Changes

This theme reflects children's experiences of changes in their lives before and during the pandemic. The comparison of pre-pandemic and pandemic experiences sheds light on the research in terms of understanding the changes that children experience in different issues such as sleep and eating habits, and their relationships with their social environment. Two subthemes were formed 3a) Individual changes (e.g.: eating habits) 3b) Family dynamics (e.g.: spending more time with family members).

4.1.3.1 Subtheme 3a: Individual Changes

It reflects how children's experience changes regarding individual issues including sleeping, eating habits, and activities compared to the pre-pandemic period. Although some of the children participating in the study did not observe any changes in their sleep and eating routines during the pandemic period, the common discourse of some children about their sleep was effective in the formation of this theme. One of the individual changes during the pandemic period was exemplified by Kamil (9) when asked how his sleep has changed compared to before the pandemic:

"I wake up at night, I have nightmares. It did not exist before the coronavirus."

Here the child clearly stated how he experienced the change in his sleep with the pandemic. While the child here expressed the change in his sleep compared to the pre-pandemic period, he also stated that this change was in the negative direction.

Additionally, Fatih's (8) statement of individual change included his assumed effect on his daytime activity and sleep:

“My sleep is interrupted because I mostly played with my phone late at night.”

The discourses of children participating in this study on sleep quality coincide with the findings of a previous study which during the pandemic despite the increase in sleep duration, there was a reported decrease in sleep quality among toddlers and preschoolers (Aguilar-Farias et al., 2020).

4.1.3.2 Subtheme 3b: Family Dynamics

Changes in how children spend time with family members and the relationships between children and other family members constitute this subtheme. It represents children's statements that there has been a change in their relationship with family members compared to the pre-pandemic. A few excerpts from the interviews may clarify how children experience changes regarding family during the pandemic. Buket (9) when asked about the relationship with her mother before and during the pandemic:

“My mom was working before the pandemic, so we could not do activities together.

We used to not spend a lot of time, now we spend more time.”

Eda (8) when asked about the relationship with her father before and during the pandemic:

“Usually, during the pandemic, we do not do anything together anymore because my father is always on the phone. Before the pandemic, he always took me to the park. My father also rides a bicycle, we used to ride bicycles together.”

Congruently, Ercan (10) summarized the changes in the relationship between him and his father:

“We cannot go anywhere anymore due to the pandemic, so we do not do anything together. Before the pandemic, my father used to take me for a ride, now we cannot go anywhere.”

The statements of Eda and Ercan observed changes regarding their relationships with their fathers, which include less interaction, may be a clear example of the decrease in paternal-child intimacy during the COVID-19 Pandemic period in the literature (Cassinat, 2021).

4.1.4 Theme 4: Educational Process

The educational process is one of the important facets of this study, as the participants were diagnosed with a learning disability. During the pandemic, education in Turkey has transitioned from face-to-face to online platforms. Children were asked whether they attended classes at school or on an online platform. All children except one child stated that they attended classes online. Additionally, as a natural consequence of online education, children's relations with their teachers have been moved to online platforms. I wanted to know what this change in education was like for the children. This theme reflects how children with LD experience the changes in educational process that come with the pandemic. Educational process includes two subthemes: 4a) Online education (e.g.: it was hard to understand the lesson) 4b) Relationship with teachers (e.g.: the teacher was nice to me).

4.1.4.1 Subtheme 4a: Online Education

This subtheme reflects children's experiences of online education process. In this subtheme, while most children talked about the negative aspects and difficulties (e.g.: bad internet connections, difficulty understanding the lesson) of online education, some pointed out the positive (e.g.: being at home) and “fun aspects” (e.g.: playing online games on another tab during the lesson) of it. You can see some quotes below describing both situations.

Nilgün (7) described some of her negative experiences with online education as follows:

“During the online class, I could not write sometimes, and I could not say to my teacher that I could not write. Sometimes they write fast while I cannot, and since I cannot tell my teacher about it, I write as much as I can.”

On the contrary, Fatih (8) mentioned the positive aspect of online education himself as follows:

“It was good for me as I turned off my computer’s camera and sound and eat something in front of the screen.”

He also talked about the one thing he disliked about online education:

“I prefer school face to face because we do gym class with my friends, but we cannot do gym in online class.”

Similarly, Berat (9) mentioned both positive and negative aspects of the online education:

“I did not attend the class I do not like, that was good. It was a bad experience because I could not play games with my friends at school, I was bored.”

4.1.4.2 Subtheme 4b: Relationship with Teachers

This subtheme reflects how children’s relationships with their teachers changed during the pandemic. Most of the students who observed that their relationship with their teacher changed with online education mentioned that these changes were negative. This was exemplified by Selin (7):

“Sometimes in the online course, the teacher kicks us out of the lesson.”

Nilgün (7) who mentioned that during online courses sometimes she could not keep up with her friends while writing also said:

“Teacher gets angry when I cannot write.”

4.1.5 Theme 5: Feelings During the Pandemic

This theme represents how children feel about the pandemic. Two subthemes of this theme were formed: 5a) Positive feelings (e.g.: happiness) 5b) Negative (e.g.: fear) feelings.

4.1.5.1 Subtheme 5a: Positive Feelings

The most shared positive feelings such as happiness about the pandemic period constitute this subtheme. Children reflected their positive feelings about the pandemic by telling what they liked about the changes that this period brought. Talking about the positive emotions caused by the pandemic, children mostly emphasized the increase in the time they spend with their families. For instance, Ercan (10):

“Spending more time with my family during the pandemic and reopening of schools made me happy.”

4.1.5.2 Subtheme 5b: Negative Feelings

The most shared negative feelings such as fear, and boredom about the pandemic period constitute this subtheme. Children reflected their negative feelings by talking about the coronavirus or the changes brought about by the pandemic. Exemplarily, Rıfat (8):

“Coronavirus makes me feel bad. It broke my feelings. It is killing people.”

4.1.6 Theme 6: Support During the Pandemic

This theme includes the activities, and individuals that help children to cope with their negative feelings such as fear during the pandemic. According to the shared points, children’s support sources during the pandemic formed this theme that consists of three subthemes: 6a) Self-support (e.g.: playing games) 6b) Family-support (e.g.: chat with mother), 6c) Peer-support (e.g.: playing with friends).

4.1.6.1 Subtheme 6a: Self-support

It consists of children’s self-regulation actions to cope with their negative feelings during the pandemic. To explain, while most children mentioned the activities they do alone

like painting, playing others talked about the actions they took for looking after themselves. Murat (9) exemplified these activities and actions as follows when asked what you did when you felt bad during the pandemic:

“I played games, ate vegetables, and took care of my health.”

Additional example from Rıfat (8):

“I prayed when I feel bad.”

4.1.6.2 Subtheme 6b: Family-support

It involves children getting support from a family member while coping with their negative feelings. For example, most children reported that their mothers supported them verbally or physically when they were feeling down. Nilgün (7) said:

“My mother soothes me by hugging me and sometimes supports me by taking me out.”

A similar statement from Yakup (8):

“My mom hugs me and chat with me when I feel bad.”

Another example from Namık (9):

“My mom supports me when I feel bad by painting with me.”

Here, the children mentioned that the mother’s support includes verbal, physical touch, and joint activities. Although almost all children mentioned that they got their support from their mothers, some of them also mentioned that the games they played with their siblings helped them cope with their negative feelings during the pandemic. However, the fact that none of the children mentioned their fathers as a source of support was one of the important findings of this study.

4.1.6.3 Subtheme 6c: Peer-support

It involves children getting support from their peers while coping with their negative feelings. To explain, children reported that they called their friends or played with their friends to feel better. Nalan (10) exemplified peer-support as follows:

“During the pandemic, we sometimes played online games on the computer with my friends, and it made me feel good.”

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

In the present qualitative study, we explored the experiences of children with LD during the COVID-19 pandemic. Six themes and their corresponding subthemes were generated. The findings from the current study provided insights into the understanding how children with LD experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, we discussed the findings around the Ecological System Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) that living in disadvantaged households may contribute to the additional external stressors on children’s psychological health. We organized the discussion around our research questions, as shown below.

5.1 Experiences of Children with LD Pre-and During-Pandemic

When the children talked about the changes in their lives during the outbreak of the pandemic, they mostly mentioned the activities they did. The leading activity was that they spent more time outside with their family or friends before the pandemic. In the period when the risk of transmission of the virus is high during the pandemic, under the age of 20 in Turkey, it was allowed to go out at certain hours (Ministry of Interior Affairs, 2021). The children participating in this study mostly mentioned that during the pandemic playing computer games at home, watched TV with their families, or played games with their siblings instead of going out or playing outside. They also mentioned that they spent time with their friends outdoor such as in parks before the pandemic, but because they could not see their friends during the pandemic period, they mostly talked about the activities they did in the house such as painting. These findings are consistent with the findings of a previous study conducted in Turkey (Özyürek & Çetinkaya, 2021). According to the research, during the pandemic, it was discovered that all family members spent more time at home watching

television, using computers, talking on the phone, and surfing the internet. When we consider the restrictions that have come to our lives with the pandemic, we can understand that the activities that children talk about are also restricted. The pandemic literature also included restricted activities as an urgent concern of this period because the decrease in physical activities is associated with negative effects on the mental health of children (Caputo & Reichert, 2020).

On the other hand, it was one of the findings of this study that the routines of children changed along with their activities. Although most children mentioned that their sleeping and eating habits did not change compared to before the pandemic, more than one child mentioned that they slept later than before, and even their sleep was interrupted, based on reasons such as spending more time at home and spending more time with technological devices. The increase in screen time that children are exposed to is in line with the findings of studies conducted in other countries (Bergmann et al., 2022). Even this previous study showed that SES was negatively correlated with screen time during isolation; it could also mean that the consequences of screen exposure may be more damaging for children from low-income families who have difficulties with social skills, such as children with LD. These findings of this study are consistent with the conclusion reached in the literature study by Yomoda and Kurita (2021): during the pandemic, most studies found a significant reduction in physical activity and changes in health-related behaviors such as increased screen time, sedentary behaviors, and sleep duration.

The restriction of movement areas of children and family members along with the pandemic restrictions (e.g., staying at home) may have caused the children participating in the study to talk about the changes in their lives, frequently talking about changes in the activities they do individually, with their families or with their friends. On the other hand, another issue that children perceive as changing is the time they spend with their families. While most

children talked about the increase in the number of activities they did together compared to the past because they spent more time at home with their families, other children stated that they spent more time with their families by doing outdoor activities before the pandemic and therefore they could not do anything at home as a family. The fact that children feel the time they spend with their families during the pandemic period as a change is not only related to the duration of time they spend but also to how much and/or quality they spend their time together.

Findings from parent-based studies include that the positive aspects of children spending more time at home with their families outweigh. For example, according to findings based on parental views in a study conducted in Turkey, most of the children are satisfied with spending time at home as a family during the pandemic, they are satisfied with the lifestyle at home, and family relationships are improving. In addition, there are similarities between the past and current findings regarding the changes in the habits and activities of children such as sleeping and eating during the pandemic process. It has been determined that although they have difficulty in adapting to the new educational system, they participate in online education and the time they spend on television, computer, telephone, and the internet has increased. (Özyürek & Çetinkaya, 2021).

Although the COVID pandemic has brought substantial adverse effects on the daily functioning of all children, this adversity may be more devastating for children with special needs. Children with special needs require additional support in their daily functioning due to their developmental delays in certain aspects of mental functioning (Chen et al., 2020). Naturally, the pandemic process has undermined the daily functioning of children with SEN as parents have to juggle several in-and-out of home tasks (Chen et al., 2020; O'Hagan et al., 2020). Consequently, the adversity in the daily functioning of children with learning

disabilities appeared during educational activities (O'Hagan et al., 2020; Parmigiani et al., 2020).

5.2 Educational Process of Children with LD During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Previously, it was suggested that during the pandemic with long durations of school closure, even typically developing children may be in danger of psychosocial difficulties such as diminished emotional, and social functioning, and lower physical activity levels (Tso, 2020). This study has contributed to broadening our understanding of children's experiences during the pandemic, both within context (e.g., home and school) and inter-context (e.g., home-school interactions), specifically those with LD and low-income families.

Children with LD are highly likely to have attention and hyperactivity disorders as part of their learning process (Gillberg et al., 2004). Given attention problems are substantially required during online education, children with LD naturally fall behind their peers in adapting to online educational tools (Kkese, 2020; Parmigiani et al., 2020). The reason why children with LD have struggled during the educational process could be that these children require personalized support and tailored lessons aligned with their attention spans (Parmigiani et al., 2020). However, teachers or parents did not have the means to tailor the learning process for children with LD, in turn, these children either stayed away or gained less from the learning process. Previous research concluded that children who have inattention-related problems had more difficulties in the remote learning process during the pandemic than typically developing children (Becker et al., 2020; He et al., 2021). Overall, the drawbacks of online education such as the lack of a rich learning environment, children with LD may have a hard time keeping their attention focused and stay in connecting with their teachers (Dong et al., 2020; Poletti, 2020). In a nutshell, given their developmental delays in cognitive abilities such as attention, children with LD may have struggled to adapt

themselves to the remote learning process during the pandemic compared to typically developing peers.

Previously, this study described how the pandemic, in many ways, could have more devastating effects on children with learning disabilities coming from low-income families. One reason why this economically and socially disadvantaged group is exposed to inequality in the field of education is that their access to technological opportunities may be limited. Although most of the children participating in the study said that they could participate in online education, the number of children who stated that these educations were not adequate compared to regular education due to their facilities at home (such as internet connection problems, lack of devices that could attend the lesson at home with more than one child) was also high. This problem is congruent with the previous findings (Yazcayir & Gurgur, 2021; Valicenti-McDermott et al., 2022), stating that lack of access to technological devices is one of the major problems with online education.

Inequality in schooling grew as a result of learning disruption during the pandemic. Interrupted learning, difficulties obtaining regular economic support (e.g., meals at school), child neglect (in case parents went to work) or high economic costs of childcare (if it prevented parents from working outside the home), and consequences directly related to schooling: increased dropout rates, are just a few of the threats related to education (Radina & Balakina, 2020).

In addition, the fact that children attend classes online has also burdened parents with extra work at home. One study showed that the involvement of parents in their children's online education processes required them to adapt to the role of being teachers at home as well as caregivers (Yıldız et al., 2022). Since children with learning disabilities need to be supported more than other children in their educational processes, greater involvement of parents in education processes may have positive results for children's learning processes.

However, in this study, more than one child also said that online education is more fun than regular education because they do not have to participate in the lessons actively, and they can even play games, eat, and turn off the camera and microphone during the class. Such situations may harm the educational processes of children with learning disabilities more than other children and thus increase inequality in education. A study conducted with families with children with special needs also supports this finding. According to this research, almost all children needed the support of their families to get the most out of online education (Valicenti-McDermott et al., 2022).

Further, it is believed that in order to continue their education and actualize their learning, students require instructor leadership (Kritzer & Smith, 2020; Mustafa, 2020). It is reasonable to conclude that teacher help and supervision in the education of children with special needs is critical, significant, and required. During the pandemic, teacher-student relations were also maintained online. Most of the children who participated in the study said that their relations with their teachers were not different from the past and that their relations were good, which is one of the families' expectations from the teachers mentioned in a previous study (Yazcayir & Gurgur, 2021).

5.3 Support and Coping Strategies of Children with LD During the COVID-19

Pandemic

More than half of the children participating in the study talked about the emotionally negative effects of the virus and the pandemic period. This finding is in line with previous studies (Jiao et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Zainel et al., 2021), children reported modest to intermediate levels of general anxiety in previous research conducted during the pandemic. It was also reported that children were mentally disturbed and experienced behavioral issues, including anxiety. In order to cope with negative feelings, again, most children first

mentioned that they use the methods of chatting with their mothers or making physical contact (e.g., hugging, and kissing) with them.

In addition, it can be stated that children used art (e.g., painting) as a coping tool for their negative feelings during the pandemic. Similar to this finding, another study found that parents also used games and painting activities with their children as a coping method for themselves during their stay at home to control their anxieties (Binay-Yaz et al., 2022).

The current study contributes to the body of knowledge on time-sensitive investigations that look into the experiences of children with LD during the COVID-19 Pandemic. According to preliminary findings, the pandemic is having a direct harmful impact on children (Patrick et al., 2020). However, the majority of this information is based on parental reports (Jiao et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020; Spinelli et al., 2020). One of the contributing factors of the current study to the pandemic literature is the scarcity of studies based on child expressions in the literature. In addition, based on our knowledge, this study is the first among the studies conducted during the pandemic period, which is based on children with learning difficulties and uses the technique of directly interviewing children with special needs. Moreover, studies based on the experiences of children during the pandemic often include typically developing children (e.g., Yomoda & Kurita, 2021; Özyürek & Çetinkaya, 2021; Bergmann et al., 2021). In addition to the fact that parental reports have an important place in the literature, the first-hand research of children's experiences during the pandemic period, especially with the information we gained about school experiences, made this study unique. For example, seeing the teacher-child interaction through the eyes of the child in the online education process or listening to the difficulties of the child with learning difficulties is the information we cannot get from the parents. Further, understanding the pandemic's impact is crucial for providing resources and interventions for children and families both during and after the outbreak.

According to Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), multiple factors and systems of a child's environment have an influence on a child's development. The microsystem includes the most proximal things like parents and siblings who have direct interaction with the child in their immediate environment. Those relationships are bidirectional, which means that the kid can be impacted by others in their environment while simultaneously having the ability to change the beliefs and behaviors of others. Considering the findings of this study and the conditions of the pandemic period, the challenging situations mentioned before such as difficulty in adapting to changing conditions (e.g., disrupted routines), difficulties in social skills, and attention deficit problems, may be caused by or co-exist with having learning disabilities, it is seen that children's interactions with their environment (e.g., family relations, teacher-child relations, peer relations) are affected (Dong et al., 2020; Poletti, 2020). Additionally, poverty is another context for these children. As we mentioned before, it can be expected that the deteriorating economy during the pandemic period undoubtedly created more negative situations in low-income families compared to affluent families (Aguilar-Farias et al., 2020; Poletti, 2020). Having learning disabilities and being a child of a low-income family together creates an adverse situation, especially during the pandemic period. To elaborate, the fact that children with learning disabilities need more attention than others in their educational processes, restrictive measures (e.g., restriction of social activities, and peer relations) during the pandemic period, and their limited access to some opportunities (for example, the lack of devices to take online lessons) due to their economic situation may hinder the healthy development and education of children.

We were able to interpret experiences reflecting both within-context (e.g., home and school) and between-context (e.g., home-school interactions) of children with LD by considering data from the current study in the framework of the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

5.4 Limitations and Future Directions

While measures were taken to ensure the credibility of data and analysis, there are some limitations that one should consider when interpreting the findings. First, only semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, which may have limited the triangulation of sources (Creswell, 2013). Future work could utilize observations and interviews with parents and teachers to triangulate data sources. Second, children who were interviewed from low-income households in the current study may have limited our understanding of children's experiences from different living conditions.

5.5 Suggestions for Implication and Policy

In this moment of global crisis, authorities must focus on putting in place systems that help low-income families, as childhood poverty is associated with various negative outcomes (e.g., health issues due to limited access). Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that additional education be provided for children with special needs via compensatory education with special education services and adaptations at an appropriate time (e.g., summer school) for students with special needs to close the gap in education due to the pandemic. Supporting teachers to work extra for children with special educational needs in their classrooms during the summer period requires education ministries to make new regulations and incentives. In this process, it is also possible to increase the weekly course support that children receive in special education and rehabilitation centers in the state. It is reasonable to assume that instructor leadership and follow-up are more important in the distance education process. Similarly, as part of Individualized Education Programs (IEP) which is a special education program that is prepared to reach the targeted goals in line with the development characteristics, training needs, and performances of individuals with special

education needs, based on the program they follow and includes support services to be given to these individuals (Özel Eğitim ve Rehberlik Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 2022) it may be advantageous to customize the contents like worksheets, and activities for students with particular needs. Based on these findings, it is suggested that IEP development units establish a practicable program involving teacher-family cooperation for both face-to-face and distance education to compensate for the loss of face-to-face education.

The challenges are not limited to the educational processes during the pandemic. Given the negative impact of depression, anxiety, and parental stress on one's quality of life (Spinelli et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020), as well as negative child outcomes and the likelihood of child abuse and neglect (Brown et al, 2020), it is suggested that appropriate action should be taken to prevent these symptoms from developing further. Families may be offered opportunities to participate in intervention programs that help families to deal with negative situations. For example, the Triple P: Positive Parenting Program developed by Sanders (2001) and is used in many countries around the world, can be offered to parents for support. Triple P: Positive Parenting Program is a multilevel parenting intervention program that integrates universal and more customized interventions for high-risk children and their parents into a single intervention. The primary purpose of Triple P is to improve parents' overall knowledge, abilities, and confidence, hence lowering the prevalence of behavioral and emotional disorders in children and adolescents (Sanders, 2008).

Furthermore, it is important for families to guide their children about the use of technological tools and the content they access through these tools (Eastin et al., 2006). At the same time, they should take precautions against all kinds of dangers they may be exposed to through technology and the internet. Adult support is important in order to consciously use the positive aspects of technological devices (e.g., access to information) and to protect themselves from the negative aspects (e.g., internet addiction).

Additionally, since the time that families spend with their children at home increases during the pandemic period, plans to improve the situation that the materials and activities that support the development of children are also limited in families with limited opportunities under normal conditions can be made by the state. To explain, it is proposed that institutions encourage children from disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances to participate in creative activities as a cost-effective strategy to engage them. For instance, Korea is used as an example to show how giving more resources to children during a pandemic might result in greater societal benefits. To alleviate parental worry and strain, most South Korean municipalities adopted drive-through or walk-through toy rental systems. The Korean government also gave low-income people a subsidy card to encourage them to participate in cultural and artistic events (Choi et al., 2020). Other countries, including Turkey, can also provide such incentives to facilitate child care for low-income families and support healthy development.

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APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

Demographic Questions (Parents)

1. How old is your child?
2. What is your child's gender?
3. Your average monthly income?
4. How many people live in the household?
5. How many children are there in the household?

Interview Questions (Children)

1. How were your days during the pandemic period?
2. How were your days before the pandemic period? What has changed?
 - . Has there been a change in your sleep compared to before the pandemic period? If so, how?
 - . Has there been a change in the things you eat compared to before the pandemic period? If so, how?
 - . Have there been any changes in mealtimes compared to before the pandemic period? If so, how?
 - . Have there been any changes in the activities you do with your family? If so, how? Which of these changes make you happy and which ones make you unhappy? Why?
3. How did you spend time with your mother during the pandemic? What did you do? (Was your mother working or at home?)
4. What were you doing with your mother before the pandemic? How were you spending your time? When you think about the pre-pandemic period, did your activities with your mother change during the pandemic period? If so, what has changed?
5. How did you spend time with your father during the pandemic? What did you do? (Did your father work or was he at home?)

6. What were you doing with your father before the pandemic? How were you spending your time? When you think about the pre-pandemic period, did your activities with your father change during the pandemic period? If so, what has changed?
7. Did you continue to go to school during the pandemic period?
8. Did you attend online classes during the pandemic period?
9. What was it like to attend online classes?
10. How was your teacher towards you during the pandemic?
11. How much did you see your friends during the pandemic, how did you see them, what did you do?
12. What are the activities you do most during the pandemic?
13. How did you feel about the coronavirus? (e.g., I was worried)
- . What did you do to feel good when you felt bad? (If he does not give a negative answer in question 15, he may not be asked)
- . Who supported you when you felt bad? How?
14. What were the things that made you happiest during the pandemic period?