

## Working with Young Children with Special Needs in Earthquake Zone: Experiences of Special Education Teachers

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**Abstract:** Two devastating earthquakes occurred in the southeast of Türkiye on February 6, 2023. Millions of people were damaged in these Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquakes, which seriously affected 11 provinces. It is known that children and individuals with special needs were most affected by such traumatic events, and young children with special needs are in the group at the highest risk in this respect. In this study, in which we employed qualitative phenomenological approach, we aimed to reveal the experiences of special education teachers who worked or are currently working in the earthquake zone with young children with special needs. In this study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers determined by purposeful sampling and we analyzed the data inductively. The findings demonstrate that the participant teachers provided services not only to young children with special needs but also to all children in need. It is also noted that there were deficiencies in planning for working with children with special needs, there were difficulties in initiating and maintaining educational activities, and teachers' experiences of working in the region had positive effects on them. Since the physical and psychological difficulties of the earthquakes and the need for support in the region will continue for a long time, it is essential to provide training on what to do in disasters to teachers who are currently on duty and those who will be assigned later. The necessity of providing psychological support to teachers during active work in the region and upon their return should also be underlined.

**Keywords:** Natural Disaster, Earthquake, Young Children with Special Needs, Special Education Teachers, Phenomenological Approach

### 1. Introduction

Two devastating earthquakes occurred in the southeast of Türkiye on February 6, 2023, at 04.17 and 13.24, respectively (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency [AFAD], 2023). More than 50 thousand people lost their lives, hundreds of thousands of buildings were destroyed, and 14 million people were affected as a result of these Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquakes, which affected 11 provinces in the region (Anadolu Agency [AA], 2023; Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Presidency of Strategy and Budget [PoSB], 2023). In addition to being destructive, the 'February 6 earthquakes', can also be seen as the most damaging earthquakes in the country's history due to their devastating impact on the economy and human life. A lot of lives shattered and millions of people's livelihoods destroyed in one day. So, this was really the disaster of the century for Türkiye. (AFAD, 2023) International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [IFRC], 2024).

As in most natural disasters, it is impossible to know the exact time when an earthquake will occur (Indriasari et al., 2018; İşçi, 2008), and individuals and children with special needs are harmed the most by its possible effects. Most of the individuals with special needs move slowly and this is one of the usual reasons for the risk. In addition, the type of disability with the co-current conditions of the individual can also increase this risk (Hashemi, 2018). For instance, while it is thought that individuals with visual impairments can be aware of natural disasters and take the necessary precautions, if these individuals have co-current intellectual disabilities, it will be difficult for them to understand natural disasters and apply the necessary safety skills (Alexander et al., 2012). Young children with special needs constitute the group at the highest risk (Williams et al., 2008). Not having safety skills such as being able to create a life triangle during an earthquake, moving away from risky places, and managing the crisis makes young children with special needs more vulnerable to earthquakes (Aslangiri & Açkalın, 2019).

Earthquakes are considered important traumatic events in human life because they affect life suddenly in a very negative way. It is known that the impacts of these traumatic events can be long-lasting,

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particularly for the children (Kurt & Gülbahçe, 2019). The majority of individuals with special needs may be ignored in natural disasters, which causes serious harm or death of these individuals. It has been reported that the probability of children with special needs having a new disability or dying as a result of the earthquake is considerably higher than that of their peers with typical development (TD) (World Federation Occupational Therapy [WFOT], 2007). One reason for the high risk of new disabilities or death is related to the difficulties in reaching individuals with special needs in search and rescue efforts. White's (2006) study clearly showed how these individuals were forgotten and could not be saved during the 2005 Hurricane Katrina. Other studies also indicate that children with special needs and their families who have experienced natural disasters often suffer due to the lack of planning for themselves (Bilik & Akdağ, 2023; Hemingway & Priestley 2006; Masten & Osofsky, 2010; Yarımkaaya & Bakkaloğlu, 2024).

In individuals with special needs, adaptation problems such as significant increase in behavioral problems and significant decrease in displaying social communication skills and daily living skills can be observed along with the earthquake disaster. Behavioral problems observed in these individuals can continue to affect them even months later (Valenti et al., 2012). The re-emergence of previously eliminated behavioral problems, the exacerbation of the child's reactions to the events, and the emergence of new problem behaviors are possible changes that may be observed (Söğüt & Kaya, 2024). Since there is a correlation between children's self-regulation skills and social interaction skills, particularly in early childhood, the quick return of young children to school and social settings after a disaster significantly affects their return to normal life (Masten, 2007). In every emergency, schooling is one of the most important requirements for society to stand on its feet, to return to normal life, and to build a new life. Socialization in schools after trauma also plays an important role in the self-regulation and adaptive behavior of young children with special needs (Ager et al., 2010).

Since teachers spend a significant time of the day with children in schools, their support in ensuring that students' lives return to normal and providing a safe and supportive environment after extraordinary situations is essential (Akman & Gündoğdu, 2002). At this point, teachers play an important role to the same extent as parents in helping children adapt to social life again. A study showed that children with special needs stated that they felt safer with their special education (SE) teachers in case of any natural disaster (Ronoh et al., 2015). On the other hand, according to an another study which focused on teachers who support children suffering from traumatic stress, participant teachers noted that they faced difficulties in supporting students in their daily school lives following trauma. Teachers revealed that they did not well equipped to support their students since they had no trauma training and they experienced difficulties engaging their students emotionally (Alisic et al., 2012).

To minimize the traces of the terrible earthquakes, several projects and initiation which provided financial and educational support were launched. Emergency Appeal for Turkey provided support to the immediate and/or long-term needs of people in the earthquake zone, such as food, shelter and livelihoods, first aid and community health, mental health and psychosocial support (IFRC, 2023). The Ministry of National Education started sending volunteer teachers to the region within the days after the earthquake and immediately initiated education and psychosocial support processes (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2023a). Volunteer SE teachers also took an active role in these processes and took part in the education of children with special needs, who are considered the most vulnerable segment in earthquakes and all other natural disasters. The General Directorate of Special Education and Guidance Services has prepared an activity book to support teachers' practices in terms of educational efforts and especially reinforce the teachers' psychosocial support activities in the region. This book includes various activities that aim to ensure that all children in the region, especially children with special needs, are affected from the incidents in the region as little as possible, spend their time effectively and their transition and adaptation processes are facilitated (MoNE, 2023b). Other bodies of

the Turkish government initiated some efforts too. For instance, Disability Rights National Action Plan is enured by Ministry of Family, Labour and and Social Services (2023). Within the scope of this action plan, 110 volunteer sign language interpreters served the individuals with hearing impairment in the region. Koç and Yalçın (2023) also pointed out that Ministry of Family, Labour and and Social Services provided care and shelter for the elderly individuals and the individuals with special needs right after the earthquakes. In addition to these, various projects were carried out after the earthquake in order to provide educational and psychosocial support for children with special needs and their families and to ensure that students with special needs will be prepared for a possible earthquake in future (Gazi University, 2023; Foundation for the Raising and Protection of Children with Intellectual Disabilities [ZİÇEV], n.d.).

Some recent studies conducted with the teachers from different grades and/or disciplines at the region. In their study, Arıcı et al. (2023) investigated the impact of the earthquakes on educational activities in Kahramanmaraş province by interviewing 42 teachers who witnessed the earthquakes and continued to teach in the region afterwards. The interviews were conducted with these teachers to assess the difficulties they encountered after the earthquakes. The results showed that issues about education continuity, student participation, security and health conditions, psychological and emotional problems, and management and logistical challenges were emerged. Also, additional efforts were put by the teachers in order to find solutions to students' psychosocial problems. The study is also suggested that students need a kind of post-earthquake education which should include topics such as adjusting to a new life, psychological support, preparedness training for the unexpected events, disaster awareness, values education, and social awareness. Teachers also emphasized the importance of preparing education more inclusive and efficient (Arıcı et al., 2023). Similarly, Polat and Sarıçam conducted a case study with 25 teachers in Hatay province to explore the current issues they experienced as education, nutrition, accomodation, transportation and other environmental, and psychosocial factors. It is quite significant that all participant teachers indicated a need for comprehensive psychological support. However, they also emphasized the adverse effects of delayed psychological support. The results showed that accomodation problems of the students and especially school and classroom equipment issues have not only affected students' academic performance but also increased the challenges faced by teachers in the education process (Polat & Sarıçam, 2024). Since the teachers who were and/or are in earthquake region noted some significant issues about supporting their students in terms of educational, social and emotional aspects, investigating the experiences of SE teachers specifically are crucial. In the present study, we aimed to examine the experiences of SE teachers to provide services in the region affected by the Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquakes that occurred on February 6, 2023, and who worked or are currently working especially with young children with special needs.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Research methodology**

Qualitative research which is the most suitable method for addressing a research problem when not knowing the specific factors (Creswell, 2012) aims to reveal events or phenomena in a holistic and realistic way within a naturalistic setting (Morgan, 1996). The main feature of a qualitative research is to examine the subject in a comprehensive manner and understand it in depth (Creswell, 2012). Phenomenological approach frequently used in qualitative research intents to explain the meaning of the experiences of the individuals. In other words, phenomenology studies refer to all of the lived experiences (Giorgi, 1997) and focus on understanding participants' experiences with regard to an event or phenomenon and how they explain the meaning of these experiences (Van Manen et al., 2007). The phenomenology approach defines the true nature of the phenomenon by aiming to reveal the basic structure of various experiences through individuals who experience and can reflect on the phenomenon which the research focuses (Merriam, 2013). In the present research, we wanted to

examine the experiences of SE teachers who worked or are currently working in the earthquake zone in working with young children with special needs using phenomenological approach.

## 2.2. Participants

The participants of this study consist of 12 SE teachers who have worked or are currently working in the provinces affected by the Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquakes. We determined the participants purposefully by criterion and snowball sampling. Criterion sampling aims to achieve a specific quality or characteristic that is desired to be achieved (Kothari, 2004). In snowball sampling, it is possible to reach other individuals who can contribute more to the study in question through one or more participants who have been determined and reached in line with the study's purpose (Patton, 2002). So before we started our research we determined the criteria as follows: a. being a SE teacher, b. having worked or currently working in the affected regions by the current earthquakes, and c. having provided or currently providing educational services to young children (between the ages of 0-8) with special needs. The second and the fourth authors are currently working in SE schools as SE teachers. So, each of them reached out one interviewee through their school environment. After reaching these two teachers meeting the aforesaid criteria, we reached other participants through these interviewees and invited them to participate in the study. The table below contains information about the participants:

**Table 1**

### *Information About the Participants*

Participant	Gender	Age	City where the participant worked in the region	Date when the participant went to the region	Duration of stay in the region (days)	Is the participant currently working in the region?
P1	M	24	Malatya	1 <sup>st</sup> 26.02.2023	6	No
			Gaziantep	2 <sup>nd</sup> 25.03.2023	7	
P2	F	24	Hatay	03.03.2023	8	No
P3	M	24	Hatay	03.03.2023	8	No
P4	F	24	Gaziantep	26.03.2023	5	No
P5	M	24	Malatya	1 <sup>st</sup> 26.02.2023	6	No
			Gaziantep	2 <sup>nd</sup> 25.03.2023	7	
P6	F	24	Kahramanmaraş	19.03.2023	5	No
P7	M	24	Malatya	26.02.2023	7	No
P8	F	23	Gaziantep	26.03.2023	7	No
P9	M	23	Hatay	03.03.2023	9	No
P10	M	27	Hatay	01.03.2023	17	No
P11	M	26	Hatay	1 <sup>st</sup> 08.02.2023	7	Yes
			Hatay	2 <sup>nd</sup> 18.05.2023	-	
P12	M	25	Hatay	1 <sup>st</sup> 09.04.2023	7	Yes
			Hatay	2 <sup>nd</sup> 27.05.2023	-	

Note: P1, P5, P11 and P12 went to the region twice. 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> time of their arrivals indicated at the table. P11's first arrival to the region was only for search and rescue operations.

## 2.3. Data collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) with the participants to determine the experiences of SE teachers in working with young children with special needs in the earthquake zone. After verbally explaining the purpose and scope of the study to each potential participant, we sent the informed consent form and set a time to interview individuals who decided to take part in the study. Besides the questions in the interview form, the end of each interview, we asked the participants whether there was anything they would like to add to be ensure that the participants reviewed the entire interview. We conducted all the interviews online with an application used for video conference calls. We audio-recorded all interviews and transcribed verbatim them later.

## **2.4. Data analysis**

We employed the inductive analysis approach (Thomas, 2006) to examine participants' experiences related to our study's purpose in depth by systematically examining the raw data we collected from the interviews. In inductive analysis, the researcher presents the results by coding, categorizing, describing the raw data and reaching the main framework, unlike deductive analysis conducted to test an assumption or theory (Thomas, 2006). In this sense, inductive analysis presents a structure that is easily applicable and increases the trustworthiness of the results achieved with its systematic structure (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First we all read the transcribed files several times and took some notes. Then, we came together and perform open coding by selecting the four interviews that we thought contained the richest data. During the open coding, we marked the participants' excerpts which were related to our research and briefly wrote down the main idea or concept they contained. Then we divided the workload for the other files and completed the coding process. After that, we gathered again and reviewed our codes. We resolved the disagreements if there was any by discussing on it. We created nine categories (subordinate themes) by grouping the codes and we eventually combined subordinate themes into four superordinate themes. After the peer debriefing process, the themes were determined.

## **2.5. Trustworthiness and research ethics**

Trustworthiness of the study was ensured by collaborative work (Gershon, 2009) and peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000) processes. We worked for the study collaboratively every step of the way. Additionally, we prepared a file containing excerpts of the participants that rationalized the subordinate and superordinate themes we reached and we asked for opinions from two experts working in the field of early childhood SE and also have experiences on conducting qualitative research. The ethics committee document for this study was obtained from the Istanbul Medeniyet University Educational Sciences Ethics Committee with the decision numbered 2023/04-09 dated 08.05.2023.

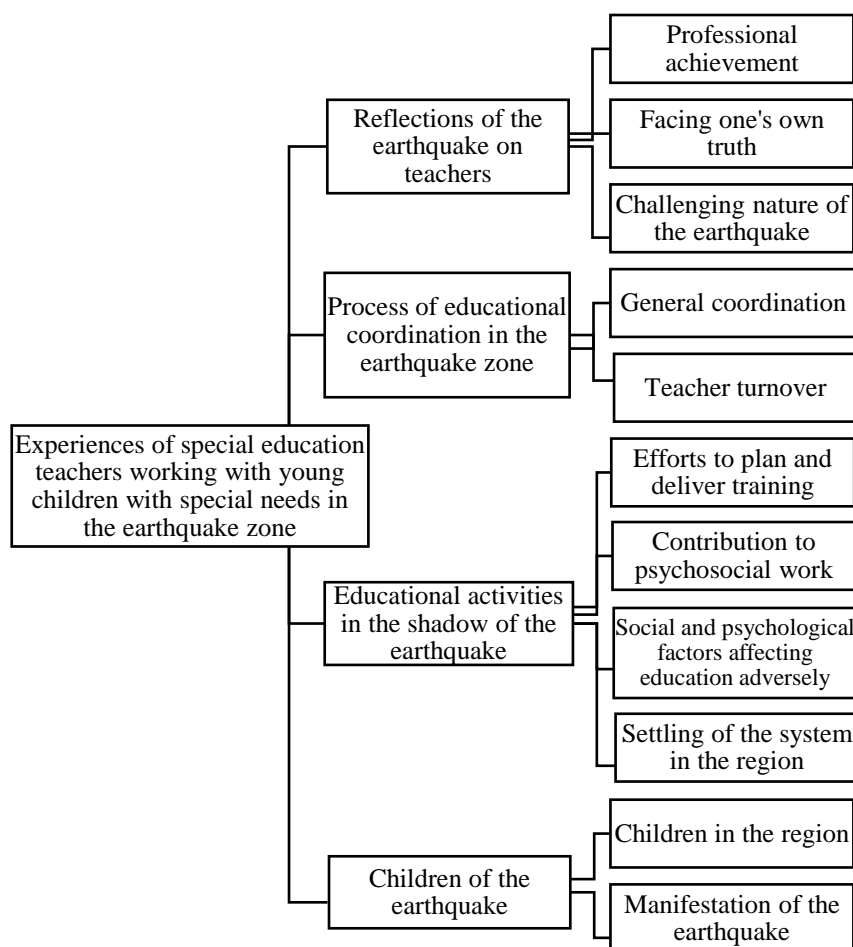
## **3. Findings**

The results of the present study indicate four superordinate and nine subordinate themes. Although we specifically focused on young children with special needs since the main purpose of our study was to examine the experiences of SE teachers in working especially with such children, the participants mentioned their experiences with all children with special needs in general. They also expressed their experiences with young children through children with special needs and children with TD.



**Figure 1**

Superordinate and Subordinate Themes



### 3.1. Reflections of the earthquake on teachers

The findings clearly show that the earthquake had some reflections on the participants concerning their professional achievement and facing their own truth, both personally and professionally. The participants also stressed the effects of the challenging nature of the experiences. Concerning professional achievement, they mentioned how willing they were to go to the region and talked about the contribution of their experience in working with different children, positive effects of going to the region and the experiences they gained. At this point, P4 expressed her experience as, *"I think I was affected in a good way. You know, we saw those students as well in this way. Seeing them and gaining different experiences affected me positively in professional terms."* P1 who went to the region more than once, described his experience of working with different children in following way,

*"I met an individual with autism... Another child actually had a learning disability... He was between the ages of 6-7... There was also a young age group. There were 17-18-years-old students. There were also a lot of Syrians and Afghans in the region where I was present, that is 50%, maybe more. We were making announcements in Arabic as well as Turkish."*

This same participant noted his experience of how the process was coordinated when he came to the region for the first time as,

*"Frankly, it was a great experience for me to go there twice. It also benefited me greatly in professional terms. You know, the next time we encounter such a disaster, God forbid! It actually taught us what we could do and how we could approach it. For example, we coordinated and arranged the situation at first. We set up the tents, did scanning, etc. It*

*provided us with knowledge and experience about how we can manage the process if we encounter such a disaster again."*

P2 emphasized the general positive impact of working in the earthquake zone on teachers by saying the following, *"It was a very good experience. Just think, I am 24 years old, and it makes me very proud to have such an experience."* One of the other important findings that SE teachers questioned themselves personally and professionally while expressing their feelings and thoughts about the earthquake zone. P10 who has been a teacher for six years and worked in the earthquake zone for 17 days said,

*"I felt a sense of professional satisfaction. This is the first time I've experienced such satisfaction. I have been teaching for six years, and this is the first time I have been professionally satisfied. In fact, before this I was asking myself 'Did I choose the wrong profession?'. Now it really made me say, 'Being a teacher is in my soul.' I realized that I chose the right profession and was doing a very meaningful job."*

P6 who encountered a different situation than she thought when she went to the region, expressed this situation with the following words,

*"You know I went there with great motivation. I was saying, 'I'm going to do this and that. I'm strong'. But when I arrived there, I saw what a limited being I was and how limited the areas of my profession actually were."*

In addition to the negative emotions experienced by the participants, such as sadness, shock, and inadequacy, the fact that their emotional states were affected by the challenging situations clearly showed the challenging nature of the earthquake. While talking about his work at the beginning with the education of students with special needs, P7 expressed the challenges of the process by saying, *"It was a tiring process, especially to find and screen students."* P12 who is continuing to work in the region, expressed the sadness he experienced with one of the students with as follows,

*"I have a student, four years old. He has autism. He lost his entire family. He only has his elder sister and her husband. They rescued him from the wreckage and are looking after him. All his other family members are dead. There are only two of them left and it makes me very sad every time I see it."*

P11 who also continues to work in the region, described his emotional state when he went to the region for search and rescue operations on the second day after the earthquake as,

*"There was chaos there, it was really bad. I can't find my tongue since the memories are bad. I was psychologically affected a lot when I saw different people and different lives coming out of the wreckage there. I felt very bad."*

### **3.2. Process of educational coordination in the earthquake zone**

In the process of educational coordination in the earthquake zone, two important points draw attention: how the situation immediately after the earthquake and the current situation are coordinated and the turnover of teachers providing services in the region. Some points such the coordination process in the region, problems and the current situation, the working environment and its effects were emphasized by the participants. For instance, P7, who went to the region in the third week after the earthquake, stated that he observed the coordination problems, *"Actually, there was a huge lack of coordination in terms of special education. The system was not fully established."* and P4 defined the coordination system established in the region where she was present with the following words,

*"Each province has a coordinator. For example, there was a coordinator of PCG, there was a coordinator of special education, we also had a special education coordinator. But since he was the coordinator of Islahiye district only, he has not got individual information about all*

*students. He only had general information about how many students there were in the container city."*

From P11's statements, who had been in the region before for the search and rescue operations and went there for the second time as a SE teacher and is currently serving in the region, it is possible to see that the working environment and the system have already been improved,

*"It has started to progress more systematically compared to the first time I came here. Classes have been started in tent cities and container cities. It is systematic now. There were no materials the first time I came. Now, there are a lot of materials. It's much better in every respect."*

Teacher turnover is another situation related to educational coordination, which is shaped around the temporary teachers in the region and how children with special needs are affected by this. P10 stated that teachers who came voluntarily left the region shortly after arriving and it is continued in this way, *"There was teacher turnover. A teacher comes here, stays for a week or so, then leaves."* P4 mentioned the effect of this turnover on children with special needs as,

*"Actually, they were children who could progress very quickly. But there was no permanent teacher. They were very affected by the change of teachers. Children get used to seeing strangers coming and going all the time. There was someone else a week ago, and there will be another one the next week."*

Later in the interview, the same participant stressed the challenging effect of teacher turnover on children with special needs in the following way, *"Children had behavioral problems because of the constant change of teachers, because of the lack of discipline."* Fortunately, in the interview conducted with P12 who is currently working in the region, it is seen that as time goes by the process improves in terms of decreased teacher turnover and permanent teachers starting to work in the region.

*"The number of volunteer teachers has decreased, and the Ministry of National Education has started to hire paid teachers. Fixed-wage teachers now work in most places. So turnover has decreased."*

### **3.3. Educational activities in the shadow of the earthquake**

Among the efforts to plan and deliver education under the influence of the earthquake and the events experienced, the participants carried out a kind of screening and evaluation process through their own efforts to identify children with special needs. P1 expressed this situation as follows,

*"We determined students by our efforts. We were scanning the tents one by one, together with a psychological counselor. And if there was an individual with special needs in one tent, we were taking his/her report information, which tent was he/she in, family information, phone number, and his/her name. We did such scans to find out how many students were in a tent city, how many students should receive services, how many of them had a serious condition, etc."*

It is clearly seen from P4's statements that the participants wanted to start education by obtaining as much information as possible from the families of the children they reached,

*"When families brought their children for the first time, they used to tell us, their child knew this and that, could not do this and that, it would be good for them if we worked in this direction, etc. They used to express their wishes in this way. So we made evaluations and started accordingly."*

Furthermore, it is understood from P5's statements that there were also SE teachers who were trying to deliver educational services to the tents where children with special needs were staying since these



children had difficulties accessing educational services and their families could not bring them to the points of SE services. He said,

*"We had one student in the early childhood period. He was in a wheelchair, and his mother could not bring him because he had severe epileptic seizures. Actually, his mother could not leave her other child in the tent alone and come. Hence we started something called education services in the tent. Our special education teachers working on a rotating basis, went to the families' tents to serve. While one teacher was working in a special education tent, the other teacher was delivering service to the children, whom we would provide two hours of education during the day, in their own tents."*

It is also seen that the SE teachers who participated in the study worked on what the situation there prioritized when working with children with special needs. In this sense, the participants also provided psychosocial support activities. For example, P6 stated that she also worked on how the families should behave to their children with special needs due to the adverse effects of the earthquake which made education and other life situations more difficult, in the following way, *"We took families from time to time and conducted parent trainings on how they could behave in this process."* This was sometimes requested by families, like *"There were parents who wanted psychological support"* (P6) and sometimes, it was performed to respond to a need arose spontaneously of some of the children, *"We wanted to reassure them. 'Come, my child. It is quite safe here, a truck passed outside, this is the sound of it. This place is solid. It won't be destroyed.' We tried to provide that reassurance"* (P3)

Social and psychological factors that negatively affect education include negativities that impact on the performance of participants in the region. These can be listed as the social and economic deprivation of the people in the region, the ongoing fear of earthquakes, the decrease in teacher motivation when the neat organization cannot be provided, and the negative impact of the teacher turnover on children with special needs. P8 expressed the problem that prevented a young child with special needs from participating in education as,

*"He was 3 years old and had hearing impairment. We worked with him there together with teacher T. We had taken that child once or twice before. Later, when we called him with an appointment, his mother said she was sick and could not bring him. So we said that we could take him if she wanted. My colleague T. went to take the child. When he went there, the mother said that she hadn't sent him because he didn't have socks and a coat and she was ashamed to say it."*

P1 on the other hand emphasized that children did not come to receive education due to the fear of earthquakes with the following words, *"Many children were not coming due to the effects of earthquake. We worked at school, which was a building not a tent. So families were afraid to send their children, and children also were afraid to come."* P9's statement regarding the negative impact of the lack of order in the tent city on educational activities and teachers' motivation is noteworthy,

*"The fact that the tent areas were not established in a certain system was very demoralizing for us. So, when there was a fight or any other incidents in the camp, in the tent area, etc., we were very affected by it."*

P7 also stated that children with special needs could not progress at the desired level due to the short stay of volunteer teachers coming to the region and frequent teacher changes, *"The fact that teachers change every week is very bad for students because students have a constant fear of separation. In this case, the provided training is not effective."*

Settling of the neat system in the earthquake zone after a while is also among the very important findings. In the interview we conducted approximately five months after the earthquake, P12 stated that the problematic situations in the system in the region decreased and this had positive reflections as

follows, *“A system has been already established. We take children on an individual basis. So their families are also satisfied.”* P6 also indicated that as SE teachers continued their work, they received positive feedback from families and they saw the reward of their work in children with special needs as *“The families were praying for and thanking to us all the time.”*

### **3.4. Children of the earthquake**

Under this superordinate theme, almost all of the participants talked about the different ages, types and severity of disabilities of the children with special needs that they worked. They also emphasized their experiences with children with TD. P6 expressed the types of disabilities of the children she worked with as follows, *“There were children with autism and Down syndrome, children groups with intellectual disabilities, children with attention deficits and hyperactivity disorders, two students with hearing impairment.”* while P5 indicated the severity of the disabilities of the children in the following way, *“There were children with severe, profound disabilities. We had one young student like this.”* P3 stated that there were refugee children with special needs as well as Turkish citizen children by saying,

*“There were five to ten children with special needs among refugees.”* The emphasis of P10, who also worked with children with TD in the region due to the lack of activities for these children for sometimes is noteworthy,

*“Nothing was available at that time for normal children, typically developing children, children of preschool age. Then we tried to do something about it too. At least until something was established for them, we also tried to serve these children.”*

The participants of this study also revealed the ways of children with special needs in terms of how their expressing the earthquake. P3 talked about an incident he experienced while working with children with special needs as follows,

*“While we were inside, let's say a garbage truck was passing by outside, children were hiding under the table. It was the effect of the earthquake. Another thing with the legos. We were playing with the legos and children were shaking them and saying, ‘There is an earthquake, there is an earthquake.’”*

The following words of P5 concerning the situation of children with special needs, particularly the little ones, developing challenging behaviors after the earthquake and the reflections of their negative experiences on their relationships with their parents are also noteworthy:

*“Children in early childhood generally have a tremendous dependency on their parents due to the earthquake. Situations such as children crying when they go to school or crying when they leave home are observed even in normal children due to their age. But it was something we encountered very frequently in special education. After the earthquake, this situation in such children was generalized to the point of developing reactions and displaying challenging behaviors when their parents came out of the tent and reached a state that could not slow down. In other words, the mother goes out of the tent to get food, the child knocks the tent down, wondering where his mother is going. Or he would go together with his mother. These kind of behaviors are strongly linked to the fear of staying away from parents.”*

Another participant, P7 also shared the challenging behaviors he observed such,

*“I had an 8-years-old student. He had mild autism. Before the earthquakes, this student used to exhibit behaviors close to normal according to his mother. But afterwards, he suddenly withdrew into himself, he has turned into a child who has withdrawn even from his parents and does not communicate with them. He had only one toy. He has turned into a child who continuously plays with it, does nothing else. He didn't want to go into the tent, he didn't want to go to the playground, he didn't want to get involved in anything.”*

#### 4. Conclusion and Discussion

In the present study, we examined the experiences of SE teachers who went to the region to provide services in the provinces affected by the Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquakes that occurred on February 6, 2023, and worked or are currently working especially with children with special needs in the region. The phenomenon that we focused on specifically was SE teachers' experiences of working with young children with special needs. However, the interviews' results showed that the participants provide services not only to all age groups and children with special needs but also to children with TD. Therefore, we also discussed the results of this research upon this situation.

It is seen that the SE teachers participating in the study, experienced some important difficulties in the regions where the earthquakes that affected 11 provinces, but their presence in the region led them to gain some personal and professional acquisitions. Chen et al. (2022) stated that teachers working in SE classes should increase their knowledge of the dangers of earthquakes and the needs and requirements of students. The SE teachers who participated in our study noted that they did not know what they have faced when they first came to the region and were worried about this. The statement of P6, *"Due to the situation I encountered when I arrived there, I saw what a limited being I was and how limited the areas of my profession actually were."* shows how tangible the situation in the region is and to what extent teachers actually need support in improving their support and intervention skills after the earthquake for children with special needs. As it is clearly pointed out Alisic et al. (2012) study, teachers might experience difficulties and uncertainty in their roles and responsibilities regarding how to help students suffered from traumatic stress. On the other hand, in our study, SE teachers in the region indicated the positive contribution of their experiences in working with children with special needs. Teachers clearly stated that it provided them with professional and personal skills and acquisitions. Nurses, the participants of another study showing that individuals who worked in the region developed some professional and personal positive awareness after a disaster with extremely dramatic consequences like the earthquake we experienced, stressed that their experiences inevitably changed their lives (Sloand et al., 2012).

After the Marmara earthquake in 1999 and the Van earthquake in 2011 in our country, the professionals from all disciplines were sent to the disaster regions in the quickest way and thus various psychosocial services were provided. After these disasters, it was revealed that progress was made in interventions for children in the risk group and individuals with special needs, but it was still poor, not at the desired level, and general coordination problems were experienced (Altun, 2016). Bulk of studies reported that individuals with special needs are often forgotten and neglected after natural disasters and are more negatively affected by such situations than other individuals. These studies revealed the lack of an appropriate post-disaster planning (Bilik & Akdağ, 2023; Hemingway & Priestley 2006; Masten & Osofsky, 2010; White, 2006). A recent study on the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes emphasized the need for cooperation and coordination with individuals and institutions in order to maintain the continuity of education after the earthquakes (Arıcı et al., 2023). In our study, SE teachers indicated that there were coordination deficiencies and problems when they first went to the region and SE services was not yet established in a system in some places. The participants who worked voluntarily in the region highlighted the fact that especially in the first days, there was chaos due to the coordination problems in the services provided and they had to work in that chaos. In addition to the difficulties of working in the earthquake zone, it is clearly seen that the problems experienced in planning and maintaining services reduced SE teachers' motivation to work. As Polat and Sarıçam (2024) also found, teachers face challenges that affect motivation and job satisfaction. More neat and practical system was established in the region as time passed though, educational activities were also positively affected by this, and both the places where educational activities were carried out and the duties of teachers providing services became consistent. This improvement over time is clearly observed under the superordinate theme of

educational activities in the shadow of the earthquake. In other words, as the coordination process becomes systematic and predictable, its reflection on the field is positive.

The constant change and turnover of teachers who went to the region to take part in the education process of children with special needs is another finding obtained from the study. The effect of this turnover on both teachers and children with special needs is mentioned by the participants. Other studies also report situations such as the inability to enter a regular education process due to teacher turnover and children's being unwilling to be separated from teachers after they have got used to them. In the study by Ronoh et al. (2015), children with special needs as participants pointed out that they felt safe when they are with their SE teachers. Teacher turnover adversely affects both the students and the parents (Gibbons et al., 2021). So, it might be said that it also has a significant impact on an increase in challenging behaviors of children with special needs and their long-term adaptation problems after the earthquake. In addition to the personal and medical information of children with special needs, their individual education plans may also be lost after the disasters (Stough et al., 2020). The loss of these records made it difficult for teachers to reach children with special needs in an ongoing turnover and create beneficial and suitable educational plans. In the current situation, the two SE teachers who are still working in the region stated that teacher turnover decreased and permanent teachers are now working in the region. Children with special needs continue their education within a predictable environment, the system in terms of the educational services has started to be established, and families are satisfied with this. The decrease in teachers' turnover is positively reflected on children with special needs and their families.

The study revealed that the participants made efforts to identify the children with special needs in the earthquake zone and that they evaluated their educational performances after identifying the children. This situation postponed the time for children with special needs to start education. Such children became even more disadvantaged since these stages, which take time even in the normal flow of life, had to be reconstructed due to the earthquake. It is seen that the absence of planning about what should be done after natural disasters for children with special needs (Masten & Osofsky, 2010) made it difficult for them to benefit from educational services. The fact that SE teachers started providing education services at the families' tents for children who had problems reaching out the education tents caused them to make more effort and increased their workload. One mother's (P8) expression about she could not send her child to education because her son did not have socks and a coat, and she was ashamed to say it, indicated that families could not express this kind of things. The fact that families affected by the earthquakes did not send their children to the education tents because they were ashamed to clearly say that their children did not have clothes is similar to the events after the 2011 Van earthquake (Bilik & Akdağ, 2023). Although 12 years have passed, this situation has repeated. Of course such an unexpected and unfortunate event makes everything very hard and being organized for supplying food, clothes and accommodation is almost improbable. Nevertheless, to prevent such a situation, one should know and be aware how important planning in advance for what to do after natural disasters is.

It was also found that SE teachers, especially the first volunteer groups who went right after the earthquakes, carried out psychosocial support also. Teachers who observed that children also needed psychological support before their academic education needs shaped their work in this direction. This shows that children with special needs and their families have the priority in terms of a need of psychological support. We can say that the difficulty experienced by SE teachers who had to go beyond the definition of their profession originated from a lack of planning for children with special needs in natural disasters (Masten & Osofsky, 2010).

The quick return of young children to school and social settings after a disaster and return to their normal lives ensure a harmonious relationship between children's self-regulation skills and social interaction skills (Masten, 2007). In situations outside the normal flow of life, schooling is one of the

most important events for the recovery of society, returning to its normal life, and the construction of new life (Ager et al., 2010). The participants of our study worked with children with TD as well in the region. Our findings clearly shows that the SE teachers had to provide services to these children besides the children with special needs. In this way, they supported all children in the region to receive the necessary services before the school starts.

The unwillingness of young children to speak about the traumatic events they have experienced can be interpreted as that children are not affected or that they cope with the trauma more easily by society since they are too young and unaware of the events. The findings of our study are also supported by other studies reporting findings similar to the situation mentioned (Gökler Danışman & Okay, 2017; Schonfeld 2002). In other words, although children do not speak about earthquake, they are aware of and are affected by it. Fisher (2000) stated that children could recreate events that might have traumatic effects through play or drawing. In line with teachers' views, we found that children with special needs, as well as children with TD, recreated the earthquake while playing games and included it in their conversations. All children including the ones who have special needs experiencing the effects of traumatic events such as earthquakes through play. The event of recreating the earthquake by shaking legos, clearly expressed by P3, is a striking example of this.

All participants stated that some changes were observed in social skills, communication and daily living skills of children with special needs and that challenging behaviors emerged and/or increased after the earthquakes. These findings of the study coincide with the findings of research mentioning the effect of some traumatic experiences after such natural disasters (Beauchesne et al., 2002; Kurt & Gülbahçe, 2019; Ronoh et al., 2015; Valenti et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2008). According to the results, the behaviors of children with special needs differed before and after the earthquakes and challenging behaviors increased. Our findings emphasized that there has been an increase in challenging behaviors of children with special needs after the earthquake. This is an expected situation after traumatic events (Beauchesne et al., 2002; Deering, 2000; Kurt & Gülbahçe, 2019; Masten & Osofsky, 2010; Valenti et al., 2012) and it should be considered in the planning that should be prepared for the intervention for children with special needs.

## **5. Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations have been put forward:

- Upon evaluating all the results of our study, we think that for the efficiency and effectiveness of studies after natural disasters, relevant official bodies and non-governmental organizations should create prepared teams, considering the problems caused by teacher turnover in disaster areas.
- Pre-disaster planning need to be considered among the precautions that should be taken to solve the problems of SE teachers in terms of reaching children with special needs and their records and prevent loss of time.
- Moreover, we recommend providing professional support regarding the psychological adaptation difficulties that teachers who work actively in the region may experience during the process and teachers who have returned from the region upon their return and providing disaster training to teachers and preservice teachers within the undergraduate and other education processes.
- Considering that families of children with special needs are more affected by natural disasters compared to other families, it is also important to plan and provide training to families on disaster preparedness and post-disaster processes.
- Since it is obvious that the physical and psychological difficulties of the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes and the need for support in the region will continue for a long time, we believe that



all research to be conducted in the region will guide the practical work of the relevant institutions.

- To examine the duration and status of the difficulties identified as a result of this study, it would be useful to conduct longitudinal research on the experiences of teachers from all disciplines, family members and, if possible, children with special needs themselves.

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