Examining Postgraduate Thesis Held with Families of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Turkey

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Abstract: Aim of this study is to examine current research trends in postgraduate thesis carried out with families of children with autism spectrum disorder in Turkey. Document analysis as one of the qualitative research methods was used. The study included 70 open-access postgraduate theses obtained from the thesis archive of Higher Education Council (YOK) of Turkey between 2015-2019. Theses included in the research were analyzed using thesis analysis form prepared by the researchers. In the prepared form, theses were examined according to year, level of thesis, university, institute, department, title of thesis supervisor, research model, participant and number of participants, data collection tool and data analysis method. The results obtained within the framework of the investigation were interpreted with percentage and frequency tables and recommendations were presented for future research.

Keywords: *Autism spectrum disorder; family; thesis.*

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Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neuro-developmental disorder that can manifest itself in all segments of cultures and societies with limited repetitive behaviors and limited areas of interest, with problems in the areas of social interaction and communication occurring up to the age of three (Livingston & Happe, 2017). Autism, whose self-expression and severity vary from individual to individual and persist throughout life, are classified as *“Those with Mild Level-Support needs”*, *“Those with Moderate-Significant support needs”* and *“Severe Level-Those who need very significant support”* (Koroglu, 2013; Doenyas & Mutluer, 2020).

Autism was included in the DSM-III in 1980 for the first time in psychiatry classification systems. Later, DSM-IV divided it into five categories under the definition of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD). These are classified as Autistic Disorder, Asperger Disorder, Rett disorder, Disintegrative disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder that are not otherwise called. All of these classifications were collected under the term Autism Spectrum Disorder in DSM-V, published by the Psychiatric Association of America in 2013. DSM-V has discussed the symptoms of ASD in two dimensions including inadequacies in social-communication and social interaction and repetitive behaviors and interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, Mukaddes et al., 2017).

A large proportion of children with autism, who have difficulty in making eye contact, and who experience difficulties in verbal and nonverbal communication characteristics that are important for social interaction, seem to have problems with language development (Vismara & Rogers, 2010). It is evident that children with ASD who have difficulty using their emotions, gestures and facial expressions do not understand the emotional states experienced by those around them due to their inability to empathize. It is observed that children diagnosed with ASD cannot go outside the people and objects they have adopted around them. Again, among the limited and repetitive behaviors of children with ASD diagnosis, they are among the frequently encountered characteristics that they are more interested in certain subjects, they always do certain activities in order, and they have routines that are determined in their own life (Gorgun & Melekoglu, 2016).

Literature review

Studies have concluded that families whose children have been diagnosed with ASD are more likely to experience difficulties, stress levels,

and coping with problems compared to families whose children have normal development and whose children are affected by other disabilities (Boyd, 2002; Meral & Cavkaytar, 2012).

According to the study conducted by Kubler and Ross, the individual's responses to the trauma he/she experienced coincide with the processes experienced in the families of individuals with disabilities and took their place in the literature. Family members who experience psychological processes such as shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, whose children have ASD, do not experience the processes determined by Kubler gradually in the face of uncertainty about the origin of the disability, the lack of a definitive treatment, and the life-long duration. On the contrary, these families can experience these processes cyclically. The fact that the diagnostic process is difficult and long, the family does not have enough information about what to do after the diagnosis, the physical appearance of their children is normal despite the abnormal behavior, and the financial burden of the process is highly influencing the condition of the parents and pushing them to depression (Gray, 2002; Daniels et al., 2008). It seems that parents' intense interest in their children, but their children do not understand their emotional state and keep their own state, leads families to more desperation (Fairthorne et al., 2014).

Although the number of studies conducted in Turkey is less than those conducted abroad, it is seen that the common issues that existing studies have received in the field are social support, depression and anxiety, burnout and despair, life levels, quality of life, determination of family needs, psychological problems experienced by mothers. Again, a comparison of the status of parents whose child has been diagnosed with ASD and family members whose children do not have disabilities or have different disabilities takes place in studies. In line with the studies conducted, the use of early intervention methods reduces the stress level experienced by the family with the active participation of the family, and increases the quality of the interaction between family and child. In addition, with a good implementation of effective teaching and interaction strategies, the family education program improves families' feelings of self - sufficiency and self-confidence, as well as allows them to more comfortably respond to their children's needs (Solish & Perry, 2008). Research on social support programs and studies on the acquisition of knowledge that enables families with children with ASD to gain the courage to face problems and to cope are also at the forefront (McIntyre & Brown, 2018; Yassibas & Colak, 2019).

In a study that used a descriptive type of relational survey model about family quality of life perceptions of families of children with autism

(Meral & Cavkaytar, 2014), social support has been shown to improve the quality of family life although the situation in which individuals can share their problems and receive emotional support during difficult periods of their lives is the lowest area in which perception of family quality of life is observed. It was emphasized that the socio-economic status has an important place in dealing with the situation, but comes after the social support variable in terms of effectiveness. In another study, which examined the functional relationship between the problems experienced by families with autistic children and their mental states, Dalkilik and Guloglu (2016) observed that fathers who evaluated the possibility of moving away from the social life of mothers were lower in marital satisfaction with the mothers taking care of children with autism. In this study, it was observed that families with children with autism need more psychological support than families with a child of normal development, and their anxiety levels are high and their level of relational resilience is low, education and income differences do not differ in this context.

Furthermore, Kavaliotis (2017) stated that autism is a much more serious syndrome than other disabilities and examined the resilience of parents with children with autism and emphasized the importance of social support. Social support is defined as the material and spiritual help provided by the individual in the environment facing a difficult situation. Social support provides access to emotional comfort by providing access to the services and materials needed. It provides guidance by providing access to information that will allow you to deal with problems. In this context, it provides feedback to families with children with autism spectrum disorder in a way that improves their performance. It protects against the negative effects of stress by providing communication between individuals in daily life and in case of need. It is very important for families of children with autism to get support from these sources so that they do not experience constant anxiety (Ozkubat et al., 2014; Marsack & Samuel, 2017).

Aim of the study

The role of families in the lives of their children with autism spectrum disorder is crucial. A family that can correctly determine their expectations and attitudes cope with the difficulties in the adaptation process and accept the situation can go through this process in a healthy way. Thus, the quality of the interaction of family members with each other and the support they will offer to the child with ASD increases. In order to make various plans to improve the quality of life of families with children with ASD and to meet their needs,

it is necessary to determine what kinds of experiences families have because of their children with ASD and the factors on these experiences. When the literature is examined, it has been observed that there is a limited number of studies on detailed examination of theses made with families with children with ASD. The primary purpose of the studies conducted in this direction is to determine the strengths and needs of the family, and to provide solutions to meet their needs by increasing their strengths. On the other hand, it is thought that it is important to present up-to-date data to researchers, teachers and parents in this rapidly developing area, where academic studies are increasing day by day. In this context, scientific studies conducted with parents who contribute to many developmental areas of children are very important. Therefore, the aim of this research is to examine the graduate theses carried out in the last 5 years related to families with children with autism spectrum disorder in Turkey according to certain criteria.

Method

This section includes the research model, target population and sample, data collection tool and techniques used in data analysis.

Research model

Document analysis model, one of the qualitative research methods, was used in this study for the study of graduate theses conducted in Turkey with families with children with autism spectrum disorder. Document analysis involves analysis of written sources about the information obtained by collecting data about the intended phenomenon. Document analysis, which is a stand-alone data collection technique is a scientific research method that includes the processes of gathering the documents containing the data subject to research, the realization of control, analysis by questioning and interpretation (Gilgun, 2005; Yildirim & Simsek, 2011).

Target population and sample

The target population of the research is made up of graduate thesis studies conducted with families with children with ASD in Turkey. Especially in this subject, which has been determined in recent years, has been limited to 70 graduate theses that are open to access between 2015-2019 in order to determine and interpret the development in the literature.

Data collection tools

In this study, 70 graduate thesis studies scanned in the Higher Education Institution thesis center were processed into the thesis analysis

form. The titles of the thesis analysis form, which consists of 11 items, are the year of the thesis, the thesis degree, the department where the thesis was made, the institute and the university it is affiliated with, the thesis supervisor title, the research model of the thesis, the characteristics and number of participants, the thesis data collection tool and the data analysis method.

Data Collection and analysis

In this study, the data collection was scanned by examining National Thesis Center of Higher Education Council of Turkey in the search engine on the internet. The search for postgraduate theses made with families with children with ASD was selected as the years 2015-2019 from the advanced screening option. The search was made by typing only “autism” in the words to be searched section. Writing “autism” only in the words to be searched part has been done for the purpose of researching the contents of the thesis about the family in a wide area. By eliminating 242 thesis studies scanned from the advanced screening option according to their subject titles, 70 thesis studies have been reached. The data obtained through the document analysis method were analyzed by processing in the SPSS program; percentage and frequency calculations were made, and displayed and interpreted in tables and figures.

Findings

Distribution of postgraduate theses conducted with families with children with autism spectrum disorder by years

Source: authors of work

Figure 1 Distribution of theses by years

Figure 1 shows the distribution of graduate theses for the last 5 years performed with families with children with autism spectrum disorder in Turkey by year. When Figure 2 is examined, it is concluded that 8 theses were conducted in 2015, 9 theses were conducted in 2016, 12 theses were conducted in 2017, 13 theses were conducted in 2018 and 28 theses were conducted in 2019. According to these findings, the number of theses made with families with children with autism spectrum disorder has consistently increased in the last 5 years.

Distribution of postgraduate theses conducted with families with children with autism spectrum disorder by thesis level

Table 1 Distribution of theses according to their levels

Thesis level	f	%
Master's level	62	88.6
Doctorate level	5	7.1
Medical specialty	3	4.3
Total	70	100

Source: authors of work

When the results of the distribution of dissertations with families with children with autism spectrum disorder in Turkey were examined, it was observed that the most dissertations were written at the master's level ($f=62$, 88.6%). In addition, 5 doctoral theses (7.1%) and 3 specialty theses in medicine (4.3%) were conducted with families with children with autism spectrum disorder.

Distribution of graduate theses performed by universities on families with children with autism spectrum disorder

Table 2 Distribution of dissertations by universities

University	f	%
Uskudar University	13	18.6
Anadolu University	9	12.9
Beykent University	6	8.6
Maltepe University	3	4.3

Abant İzzet Baysal University	3	4.3
Istanbul Gelisim University	3	4.3

Source: authors of work

Findings from the study showed that in the last 5 years, graduate theses performed on families with children with autism spectrum disorder were performed at 32 different universities. In Table 2, the top 6 universities with the highest number of dissertations are listed. According to the results, the most graduate theses were conducted at Üsküdar university (f=13, 18.6%). This finding is followed by Anadolu University (f=9, 12.9%), Beykent University (f=6, 8.6%), Maltepe University (f=3, 4.3%), Abant İzzet Baysal university (f=3, 4.3%) and Istanbul Gelişim University (f=3, 4.3%). In the remaining 26 universities, 1 and 2 theses were conducted on families with children with autism spectrum disorder.

Distribution of dissertations conducted on families with children with autism spectrum disorder by institutes

Table 3 Distribution of dissertations by institutes

Institutes	f	%
Institute of Social Sciences	39	55.7
Institute of Educational Sciences	18	25.7
Institute of Health Sciences	10	14.3
Specialty in Medicine	3	4.3
Total	70	100

Source: authors of work

When the results of the distribution of graduate theses conducted in relation to families with children with autism spectrum disorder in Turkey, in the last 5 years by institutes were examined, the institute where the most dissertations were written was the Institute of Social Sciences (f=7, 55.7%). In addition, it was concluded that the number of theses in the Institute of Educational Sciences was 18 (25.7%) and the number of theses in the Institute of Medical Sciences was 10 (14.3%).

Distribution of graduate theses performed on families with children with autism spectrum disorder by department

Table 4 Distribution of dissertations according to the department

Department	f	%
Psychology	30	42.9
Special education	15	21.4
Social services	4	5.7
Child development	3	4.3
Applied behavior analysis	2	2.9
Family education and counseling	2	2.9
Nursing	2	2.9
Disability studies	2	2.9
Primary education	1	1.4
Motion and training sciences	1	1.4
Family medicine	1	1.4
Education management	1	1.4
Child and adolescent mental health and diseases	1	1.4
Neuroscience	1	1.4
Guidance and psychological counseling	1	1.4
Physical education and sports sciences	1	1.4
Sociology	1	1.4
Public relations and identification	1	1.4
Total	70	100

Source: authors of work

The findings from the research showed that theses were conducted depending on 19 different departments. Examining table 4, a maximum of graduate theses conducted with families who have children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder were in the departments of psychology (f=30, 42.9%), special education (F=15, 21.4%) and social services (f=4, 5.7%).

Distribution of graduate theses performed with families with children with autism spectrum disorder by titles of supervisors

Table 5 Distribution of dissertations by titles of supervisors

Titles	f	%
Prof. Dr.	22	31.4
Assoc. Dr.	10	14.3
Assist. Prof. Dr.	38	54.3
Total	70	100

Source: authors of work

According to table 5, when the titles supervisors who conduct graduate theses with families with children with autism spectrum disorder in Turkey are examined, it was determined that the number of professors was 22 people (31.4%), the number of associate professors was 10 (14.3%), the number of those with the title of assistant professors was 38 (54.3%). Accordingly, it can be said that the theses are mostly managed by the thesis advisors with the title of Assist. Prof. Dr.

Distribution of postgraduate theses conducted with families with children with autism spectrum disorder according to research models

Table 6 Distribution of dissertations according to research models

Research model	f	%
Relational survey	25	35.7
Quantitative research	13	18.6
Qualitative research	11	15.7
Descriptive research	7	10.0
Mixed research	6	8.6
Experimental research	2	2.9
Single-subject research	2	2.9
Causal comparison	1	1.4
Focus group interview	1	1.4
Case control study	1	1.4
Cross-sectional pattern	1	1.4
Total	70	100

Source: authors of work

When the findings regarding the distribution of postgraduate theses conducted with families with children with autism spectrum disorder were examined, it was seen that a total of 11 different research models were used in the theses. According to Table 6, relational survey (35.7%) was used in 25 of the 70 theses studied, quantitative research (18.6) was used in 13 of the 70 theses, and qualitative research methods (15.7%) were used in 11 of the 70 theses. In addition to these findings, descriptive research (10.0%), mixed research (8.6%), experimental research (2.9%), single-subject research (2.9%) models were used in the theses. Finally, causal comparison, focus group interview, case control study and cross-sectional pattern were used 1 time in theses.

Distribution of graduate theses performed with families with children with autism spectrum disorder by participants

Table 7 Distribution of dissertations by participants

Participants	f	%
Families with children with ASD	36	51.4
Mothers with children with ASD	23	32.8
Families with children with ASD and children with normal development	6	8.6
Fathers with children with ASD	4	5.7
Families with children with ASD and children with learning disabilities	1	1.4
Total	70	100

Source: authors of work

According to Table 7, 70 graduate theses examined within the scope of the research show that the participants were families with children with ASD (F=36, 51.4%), mothers with children with ASD (f=23, 32.8%), families of children with ASD and children with normal development (f=6, 8.6%), fathers of children with ASD (f=4, 5.7%), and families of children with ASD and children with learning disabilities (f = 1, 1.4%).

Distribution of postgraduate theses conducted with families with children with autism spectrum disorder by number of participants

Table 8 Distribution of theses according to the number of participants

Number of participants	f	%
1-100	41	58.6
101-200	19	27.1
201-300	8	11.4
301-400	1	1.4
501-600	1	1.4
Total	70	100

Source: authors of work

According to Table 8, the number of samples applied in 70 graduate theses related to families with children with autism spectrum disorder in Turkey is made with a maximum of 58.6% between 1-100 people. The least is between 301-400 and 501-600 ($f = 1$, 1.4%). This finding shows us that the studies were generally carried out with sample groups of 1 to 200 people.

Distribution of postgraduate theses conducted with families with children with autism spectrum disorder by data collection tools

Figure 2 Distribution of theses by data collection tools

Source: authors of work

According to figure 2, in 70 graduate theses conducted with families with children with autism spectrum disorder, the most commonly used data collection tool was scale, semi-structured interview form, and scale and semi-structured interview form. It is seen that the least used data collection tool is the data recording form. Based on these findings, it is understood that quantitative and qualitative data collection tools were not used much together, instead either only quantitative or only qualitative data collection tools were used more.

Distribution of graduate theses performed on families with children with autism spectrum disorder according to data analysis methods

Figure 3 Distribution of theses according to data analysis methods

Source: authors of work

When the results of the distribution of data analysis methods of graduate theses performed with families with children with autism spectrum disorder in Turkey were examined according to Figure 3, it was concluded that the most commonly used data analysis method in theses is statistical analysis methods, and this finding is followed by statistical analysis and content analysis, only content analysis and descriptive analysis methods.

Discussion

This research was carried out between 2015 and 2019 with the aim of examining graduate theses carried out in Turkey with families with children with autism spectrum disorder. Conclusions have been reached based on the findings obtained for this purpose, and recommendations have been made for these results. When the distribution of graduate theses

conducted by year with families with children with autism spectrum disorder is examined, it is seen that the most thesis studies were conducted in 2019 and the least thesis studies were conducted in 2015. Although there has been an increase in studies on the subject in recent years, it is considered that the studies conducted are not sufficient and it is recommended to increase the number of studies to be carried out.

When examining the distribution of graduate theses performed with families with children with autism spectrum disorder by thesis level, it is seen that the number of Master's thesis studies is much higher than the number of doctoral and medical specialty thesis studies. It is believed that further research at the doctoral level will be important in providing original research and solution proposals on this topic. When the distribution of graduate theses performed with families with children with autism spectrum disorder is examined by universities, it is observed that the dissertation work is mostly performed at Uskudar University. It is seen that thesis studies carried out in foundation universities on this subject are more common than in public universities. Relevant studies should be encouraged in public universities.

When the distribution of dissertations on families with children with autism spectrum disorder was examined, it was determined that the most thesis studies were done in the psychology department of social sciences institute, and secondly in the special education department of educational sciences institute. The fact that dissertations in the field of psychology differ significantly from studies in the field of special education reflects that there are no collaborative studies between the two departments with the relevant subject. Increasing the work in the field of special education will ensure that the educational deficiencies that families will do for their children are eliminated. The main reasons for the psychological problems experienced by families with children with ASD, whose physical characteristics are the same as their peers and differ in some stages of development, are identified as taking care of their children, the inability to spare enough time for themselves and other family members, the interruption of their professional life, the concern of being blamed by their close environment and the concerns about the future of their children.

Nowadays, with the increase in the rate of individuals with ASD, these situations caused by the anxiety and stress experienced by families are found to cause depression and psychological problems (Woodgate et al., 2008; Bloch & Weinstein, 2010; Gill & Liamputtong, 2011). Recently, it has been increasing in line with the examination of families with children with ASD in the departments of the Psychology Department of the Social Sciences Institute. Studies conducted with family structures generally reveal

the effects of children in need of special education and the family, as they generally include the socio-demographic characteristics, dynamics and other family characteristics of the family (Cavkaytar, 2019). In this study, the fact that the studies conducted with families with ASD children in the Department of Special Education of the Institute of Educational Sciences are inadequate, their participation in special education processes, which is one of the needs of the family, and the development of family education programs, cannot give us enough answers. However, for families with children with autism spectrum disorder, family-centered intervention programs create significant positive changes in the family, and then in the child (Venker et al., 2012).

In the study of the distribution of graduate theses performed with families with children with autism spectrum disorder according to research models, it is seen that the relational screening model and quantitative research method are more frequently used. With the increase in qualitative research, realistic and holistic presentation of perceptions and events in the natural environment will enable a more effective presentation of the effectiveness and outcome of the research process. Since most of the graduate thesis studies studied take place in the Department of Psychology of the Institute of Social Sciences, it is natural that the quantitative method and the relational screening model from quantitative methods are mostly preferred. Secer, Ay, Ozan and Yilmaz (2014) analyzed 24 journals in the field of guidance and counseling were included and found that the quantitative method was used more than the qualitative method in their studies conducted with descriptive method and document analysis for a total of 250 articles published in these journals. When Aslan and Ozkubat (2019) examined 1742 studies in order to determine general research trends in special education papers in the proceedings of the Eleventh National Special Education Congress, they found that the screening model among the quantitative methods was the most preferred research method.

When the distribution of the graduate theses conducted with families with children with autism spectrum disorder according to the participants is examined, it is seen that families with children with ASD have gained weight and the studies conducted with mothers in other thesis studies are more than studies with fathers. The sample group of theses is mostly composed of participants in the range of 1-100. Increasing the number of samples of studies can eliminate study limitations and allow us to achieve a reliable result. In light of the data obtained in the studies, the number of participants in the sample groups is mostly between 1-100, indicating the limitations of the studies and not providing healthy results on their validity. As stated in

the postgraduate theses (Altunisik et al., 2012) in this research, in which non-experimental quantitative research methods are used extensively, sample sizes between 30 and 500 are sufficient for most studies.

The distribution of postgraduate theses conducted with families with children with autism spectrum disorder according to data collection tools mostly consists of scale-test or information form or questionnaire application. Increasing other data collection tools such as observation and interview, or the use of data collection tools in which quantitative and qualitative research methods are used together can be increased. Erdem (2011) supported the preference of using scales in special education and other fields in this study, which was also conducted due to the abundance of studies in the field of psychology. When the distribution of postgraduate theses conducted with families with children with autism spectrum disorder according to data analysis methods was examined, it was concluded that the most used data analysis method in theses was statistical analysis methods, and this finding was followed by statistical analysis and content analysis, only content analysis and descriptive analysis methods.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study tried to reveal the current trends in the postgraduate thesis on families of children with autism in Turkey. For these results, it can be recommended to determine the status of special education in Turkey in the future similar studies at certain intervals. Thus, in the field of education provided by private researchers to see the status of autism and family research in Turkey as a whole and with this perspective that exists with the past trends in the periods they get the opportunity to compare trends. It is believed that the results obtained from this research will help academicians and other stakeholders related to the field of autism and family to expand the scope of academic studies and make appropriate decisions.

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