



## Investigation of doctoral dissertations in special education in Turkey

**Özge Ünlü**, Ministry of National Education, Turkey, [ozgezybk@gmail.com](mailto:ozgezybk@gmail.com) ORCID: 0000-0003-2569-2851

**Nevin Güner-Yıldız**, Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Turkey, [antreh@gmail.com](mailto:antreh@gmail.com) ORCID: 0000-0002-9135-6429

**Esra Aktar**, Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Turkey, [esraak762@gmail.com](mailto:esraak762@gmail.com) ORCID: 0000-0002-7414-1200

**Abstract.** This research is a descriptive study aims to investigate doctoral thesis in special education in terms of various variables. 183 doctoral thesis completed from 1989 to 2017 in special education branch have been gained by searching the thesis center of Council of Higher Education. In order to get descriptive information about doctoral thesis included in the research the technique of document analyzing has been used. The findings obtained at the end of the research have exposed that the subject of intellectual disability was studied most in the thesis, “single subject design” was preferred mostly and a large part of the thesis was completed in Anadolu University. Also, according to the findings it has been revealed that in parallel with the developments in special education the number of thesis has been increasing in late years and more than half of all thesis were completed after 2011. These findings were discussed in the context of special education’s development.

**Keywords:** Special education, doctoral thesis, graduate education

Received: 29.10.2018

Accepted: 08.04.2019

Published: 15.03.2020

### INTRODUCTION

Special education, a field where the first practices date back to the 18th century, has undergone a rapid change and advancement especially since the second half of the 20th century parallel to sociological and scientific developments. The field of special education was highly influenced by different paradigms in this process of rapid change. From the beginning of the twentieth century to the mid-twentieth century, the medical/institutional paradigm, based on blaming individuals for their defects and set on removing those individuals from society, was effective. Along with the developments in the field of human rights, concepts such as equal rights and educational opportunities, mainstreaming and normalization became prominent since the 1950s (Thompson, Schalock, Agosta, Teninty and Fortune, 2014). The fact that governments signed many international conventions in regards to individuals with special needs obliged them to develop special education policies and therefore equal access to education opportunities for every child regardless of their needs has become a national policy for many states during the 21st century (Akçamete, 2009).

Special education is defined as providing comprehensive and research-based assessment, teaching and support services to gifted students or students with disabilities in cognitive, behavioral, social-emotional, physical, sensory areas (Bryant, Smith and Bryant, 2008). Special education departments at universities and the scientific research carried out in these departments are of great importance in order to ensure that special education is offered in accordance with the characteristics of its definition with the necessary expertise and support. Some of the scientific studies conducted in universities consist of research carried out in the process of preparing graduate theses and dissertations. Graduate education (Solmaz, Ergen and Alkan, 2018) aims to train qualified individuals who are experts in their fields with the capacity to do research and it includes Master's and doctoral degrees (Solmaz, Ergen and Alkan, 2018). The theses and dissertations prepared during this process contribute to the related scientific

discipline and provide ideas for future studies (Özçelik and Güven, 2017). Graduate studies, considered to be the main source of knowledge in the field, can make significant contributions to the development of the relevant field and the theses/dissertations examined in terms of thematic (subject), methodological (method) and statistical (analysis techniques) aspects can contribute to the identification of current trends in the field and can draw attention to neglected dimensions with the help of researchers (Aydın, Selvitopu and Kaya, 2018).

Literature includes many studies that analyze graduate theses/dissertations in order to present their various contributions to relevant scientific fields. For example, several studies that combined both master's theses and doctoral dissertations examined different areas such as teaching mathematics (Yenilmez and Sölpük, 2014), preschool education (Kaytez and Durualp, 2014), teaching Turkish (Büyükkiz, 2014) and primary education programs (Koç, 2016). There are also studies that analyzed only doctoral dissertations. These studies focused on various fields such as educational sciences (Karadağ, 2009; Aydın and Uysal, 2014), educational technologies (Erdoğan and Çağiltay, 2009), science education (Ataalkın and Şeker, 2012), classroom teaching (Ceyhun and Küçüköğlü, 2013) and classroom management (Aydın, Selvitopu and Kaya, 2018).

Analysis studies in the field of special education include different categories such as implemented projects (Doğru, Özlü, Kançeşme and Doğru, 2015), published articles (Güner-Yıldız, Melekoğlu and Paftalı, 2016) and reviews of theses/dissertations (Eliçin and Diken, 2011; Erdem and Güner-Yıldız, 2017; Gül and Diken, 2009; Özak and Diken, 2010). Findings of these studies provide a summary of research trends in the field of special education. For example, the findings of the study (Güner-Yıldız, Melekoğlu and Paftalı, 2016), which examined the articles on special education published in five Turkish journals in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), demonstrated that 33.63% of the authors were employed at Anadolu University and 24.78% worked in Ankara University; the number of articles published over the years increased steadily and the period with the highest number of published articles was the period after 2011. In addition, it was found that 75% of the studies used survey model and 75% of the studies with trials used single-subject research methods. One of the studies on graduate theses/dissertations (Gül and Diken, 2009) investigated a total of 24 theses/dissertations (14 master's theses, 8 doctoral dissertations and 2 specialty training theses in medicine) on 0-6/8 year old children with developmental delays/disabilities, their parents and instruction and services offered to these children. Based on the results of the study, it was determined that children with autism spectrum disorder were mostly studied in the theses and skill instruction was the most prominent subject topic.

In another analysis, Özak and Diken (2010) investigated 29 graduate theses/dissertations (23 theses, 6 dissertations), conducted in Turkey on the functional academic skills of students with intellectual disabilities (a total of 17 on reading-writing skills with 14 theses and 3 dissertations; a total of 12 on mathematics skills with 9 theses and 3 dissertations). Researchers found that the most commonly used research method was single-subject research design, that most of the studies were conducted with children with intellectual disabilities and that the number of studies on reading and writing instruction was insufficient. Another study carried out by Eliçin and Diken (2011) examined 79 graduate theses/dissertations in the field of pervasive developmental disorder in the period of 1990-2011 and reported that most of the conducted studies focused on families or examined a training program. In another study, Coşkun, Dündar and Parlak (2014) examined the graduate theses/dissertations conducted in the field of special education between 2008 and 2013 in terms of different variables. The authors concluded that individuals with intellectual disability was the disability group that was studied the most, the most studied subject was skills instruction and concept teaching and quantitative research methods were used predominantly in these studies. Another study (Erdem and Güner-Yıldız, 2017) examined the scientific production and general characteristics of the special education departments of universities in Turkey. According to the findings of the study, it was determined that most of the graduate theses/dissertations were carried out during the period of 1998-2015, the university with the highest number of graduate theses/dissertations was Anadolu University and intellectual disability was the most commonly studied subject. In addition to the above-mentioned studies, literature also includes two compilations with no additional analysis studies.

These compilations only aimed to present the theses/dissertations with their titles and reviewed graduate theses/dissertations on intellectual disability and autism (Diken, Ünlü and Karaaslan, 2008) and inclusion (Uyanık-Balat, Şahsuvaroğlu and Açar, 2011). Also, an article compilation that reviewed the articles in the field of special education (Diken, Bozkurt and Güldenoğlu, 2009) can be found in the literature

Examination of doctoral dissertations carried out in the field of special education is important in terms of demonstrating the developments in the field. It is believed that these studies will shed light on the field to develop and support the practices in the field of special education and will make a significant contribution to the practitioners. Investigation of the studies in the literature demonstrates an increase in recent years in the number of studies examining scientific studies in the field of special education with a special focus on doctoral dissertations. However, there are no studies in this realm that cover all types of disabilities, are not limited to a specific study subject, include a wide period of time and focus on determining the orientations of the subjects studied in doctoral dissertations. In line with this need, this study aimed to provide answers to the following question: "What is the distribution of doctoral dissertations written in the field of special education Turkey according to different variables?"

## METHODS

This study is a descriptive study which examined the completed doctoral dissertations in the special education departments of universities in Turkey. Document analysis technique, also called document review, was used in the research. Document analysis technique or document review (Karasar, 2005) involves finding, reading, evaluating resources and taking notes for a specific purpose (Karasar, 2005) and it is regarded as a data collection technique required for almost every research. Within the scope of this research, the completed doctorate theses in the field of special education were systematically reviewed, evaluated and summarized by using document analysis.

### Data Collection and Analysis

For data collection Higher Education Council (HEC) National Thesis Center web page was examined and completed doctoral dissertations in the field of special education were reviewed. A total of 183 doctoral dissertations were accessed for the period of 1989-2017. For review, <https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/> link was used and the following keywords were selected: "special education, people with intellectual disabilities, hearing impaired, visually impaired, gifted and departments". A total of 183 doctoral dissertations accessed via the related keywords were analyzed according to participants, method, subject, submission year and the university where the dissertation was submitted. The universe of the research consisted of doctoral dissertations in the field of special education in universities in Turkey while the sample was composed of the doctoral dissertations in Higher Education Council (HEC) National Thesis Center in the field of special education for 1989-2017 which were accessed by the researchers.

The data obtained from the dissertations in regards to participants, method, subject, submission year and the relevant universities were analyzed with descriptive techniques such as frequency and percentage. Content analysis was used while analyzing the characteristics of dissertations. Content analysis, a systematic technique that summarizes the words or phrases of a text into smaller content categories using rule-based coding (Büyüköztürk, Kılıç-Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz and Demirel, 2014) was utilized to summarize the dissertations submitted by special education departments as meaningful or smaller content categories. This study accessed a total of 184 doctoral dissertations via HEC National Thesis Center. One of the studies was excluded due to the lack of information about the dissertation. A detailed list was prepared for these dissertations including the year, number, author, title, method, working group, type of dissertation and the university. Then, each graduate dissertation was coded under relevant topics. The data related to the frequency of the codes were entered into the summary table and the percentages were calculated.

The data related to this research were obtained as a result of data collection work which took place during the 2017-2018 academic year and it was completed at the end of May 2018. Constant

change of data is the limitation of this study. However, the data in the accessed sources were scrupulously examined, classified and counted. The collected data were examined by the researchers separately and the results were compared to ensure reliability of the research findings. Reliability analysis was performed by comparing the data obtained as a result of the content analysis conducted separately by researchers. Reliability among researchers was calculated with “Reliability = Consensus / Consensus + Disagreement X 100” formula and reliability was calculated as 0.98.

## RESULTS

The dissertations obtained as a result of the review conducted in the framework of this study were examined under the following headings: participant characteristics, method, subject, submission year and university. The findings are provided below. Findings related to the participants in these dissertations are presented in Table 1. Examination of the findings demonstrates that the majority (28%) of the participants in the doctoral dissertations were individuals with intellectual disabilities followed by teachers (27%). Very few studies (1%) have been conducted with individuals with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder, physically handicapped individuals and individuals with multiple disabilities.

**Table 1.** *Doctoral dissertations according to participants*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Individuals with intellectual disabilities	51	%28
Teachers	49	%27
Families	38	%21
Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder	35	%19
Students with Normal Developmental Patterns	20	%11
Individuals with Hearing Impairment	16	%9
Down Syndrome	9	%5
Individuals with Visual Impairment	9	%5
Gifted Individuals	7	%4
Individuals with Learning Difficulties	7	%4
Senior Administrators	6	%3
Inclusion students	4	%2
Academicians	4	%2
Children with Developmental Disabilities	3	%2
Individuals with Language and Speech Impairment	2	%1
Individuals with Cerebral Palsy	2	%1
Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder	1	%1
Physically Handicapped Individuals	1	%1
Individuals with Multiple Disabilities	1	%1
<b>Total</b>	<b>265</b>	<b>%147</b>

\* Since some of these studies were conducted with more than one group of participants, the total frequency exceeds 183 and the total value exceeds 100%

Table 2 presents the findings related to the methods used in the dissertations obtained within the scope of the research. Findings show that the majority of the doctoral theses (29%) used single subject research design followed by studies conducted with experimental design (19%). Qualitative Case and Quantitative Validity-Reliability (2%) designs were found to be the least used research designs. Furthermore, it was observed that quantitative research designs were utilized more frequently than qualitative research designs in these dissertations.

**Table 2.** *Doctoral dissertations according to research method*

<b>Research Design</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Single Subject	53	%29
Experimental	34	%19
Quantitative Survey	32	%17
Mixed Method	18	%10
Qualitative Descriptive	10	%5
Quantitative Descriptive	10	%5
Action Research	9	%5
Qualitative Status	7	%4
Design Based	6	%3
Qualitative Case	2	%1
Quantitative Validity-Reliability	2	%1
<b>Total</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>%100</b>

Table 3 demonstrates the distribution of doctoral dissertations according to subject. Findings show that Education and Training Program (21%) was the subject studied the most in doctoral dissertations by Family Studies (16%) and Skills Instruction (16%). The least studied topics were Scale Study (2%) and Inclusion (2%). In Table 3, 10 studies cited under the heading "other" addressed various subjects such as assessment of a travel program with children with intellectual disabilities, organizational management problems, visual arts practice, the effect of colors used in rehabilitation centers in architecture, gender roles of children with special needs etc.

**Table 3.** *Doctoral dissertations according to subject of study*

<b>Subject of Study</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Curriculum	39	%21
Family Studies	30	%16
Family Education (19)		
Other (11)		
Skills Instruction	29	%16
Social Skills (7)		
Daily Life (3)		
Writing / Drawing / Painting (3)		
Play Skills (2)		
Reading Comprehension (2)		
Free Time (2)		
Escape and Avoidance (2)		
Other (8)		
Opinion / Attitude / Perception	17	%10
Concept Teaching	10	%5
Teacher Training	9	%5
Mind and Cognitive Functions	7	%4
Sports and Physical Education	7	%4
Language and Communication	7	%4
Problem Behavior	6	%3
Oral and Dental Health	5	%3
Scale Study	4	%2
Inclusion/Mainstreaming	3	%2
Other	10	%5
<b>Total</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>%100</b>

Table 4 presents the distribution of doctoral theses according to year of submission. The findings show that the time interval with the highest number of doctoral dissertation was 2013-2017 (51%). The period with the smallest number of doctoral dissertations was found to be 1989-1997 (4%) and it was concluded that submission of doctoral dissertations was steadily increasing over the years.

**Table 4.** *Doctoral dissertations by year*

<b>Ph.D. Theses by Year</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1989-1997	8	%4
1998-2002	21	%11
2003-2007	26	%14
2008-2012	34	%20
2013-2017	94	%51
<b>Total</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>%100</b>

Table 5 presents the distribution of doctoral dissertations obtained in the scope of this study according to universities where they were submitted. It is concluded that Anadolu University was the university with the highest number of doctoral dissertations (25%) followed by Gazi University (21%) and Ankara University (15%).

**Table 5.** *Doctoral dissertations by university*

<b>University</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Anadolu University	45	%25
Gazi University	38	%21
Ankara University	28	%15
Hacettepe University	11	%6
Atatürk University	8	%4
Marmara University	7	%4
İstanbul University	6	%3
Abant İzzet Baysal University	5	%3
Ortadoğu Teknik University	5	%3
Necmettin Erbakan University	4	%2
Trakya University	4	%2
Süleyman Demirel University	2	%1
Erciyes University	2	%1
Selçuk University	2	%1
Ondokuz Mayıs University	2	%1
Uludağ University	2	%1
Ege University	2	%1
Dokuz Eylül University	2	%1
Sakarya University	1	%0.55
Yıldız Teknik University	1	%0.55
Yakın Doğu University	1	%0.55
Çukurova University	1	%0.55
Fırat University	1	%0.55
İnönü University	1	%0.55
GATA	1	%0.55
Celal Bayar University	1	%0.55
<b>Total</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>%100</b>

## DISCUSSION and CONCLUSIONS

This research was carried out to obtain information on doctoral dissertations in the field of special education in Turkey and the trends in these studies by examining the doctoral dissertations in the field of special education based on different variables. The findings of the study were grouped under five headings.

According to research results, individuals with intellectual disabilities (28%) were the principal target group among the participants of doctoral dissertations. The reason for this finding may be related to the fact that the incidence of this type of disability is higher in the population compared to other disabilities (Maulik, Mascarenhas, Mathers, Dua, and Saxena, 2011; Vohr, 2003). This result obtained in the study is consistent with the findings obtained by Coşkun, Dündar and Parlak (2014) in their study which analyzed graduate theses/dissertations and concluded that individuals with intellectual disabilities (42%) were the most commonly studied disability group. However, according to the findings of the project studies examined by Yıldırım Dođru, Özlü, Kançeşme and Dođru (2015) in the field of special education, the most commonly targeted disability group for implementing projects was the individuals with visual impairment (14.39%) followed by individuals with intellectual disabilities (13.38%). This difference in target groups observed the projects may be related to the fact that project studies focused on visual impairment in different disciplines such as medicine and engineering.

When the distribution of dissertations was examined according to research method, it was found that the two most commonly used designs were single subject (29%) and experimental (19%) designs which are quantitative research methods. Similarly, Diken, Ünlü and Karaaslan, (2008) and Eliçin and Diken, (2011) concluded in their studies that single-subject studies were more common. In their study, Yıldız, Melekođlu and Paftalı, (2016) stated that the most common method was the survey method, but single-subject design (75%) was most commonly preferred in experimental studies. One reason for the frequent use of single-subject research designs is that these methods are appropriate for the areas studied with a limited number of participants. When the dissertations were analyzed according to method, it was noteworthy to see that that qualitative case and quantitative validity-reliability methods were used only in two of the studies. It is believed that the competence and expertise of advisors may have an effect on the concentration of dissertations on certain research methods.

When the findings were examined, it was found that the distribution of subjects covered in the dissertations enormously varied. The most studied subjects under this heading were found to be curriculum (21%), family studies (16%) and skills instruction (16%). Such a result can be considered normal given that social skills are included among the skills that are necessary for individuals with special needs and the importance of participation of individuals with special needs in society. While some topics stood out in this list, the distribution of the studied subjects in general was found to be similar. This finding suggests the existence of diversity and substantiality of special education subject matters in doctoral studies. The findings of the study are similar to the findings obtained by Yıldız, Melekođlu and Paftalı (2016) in terms of subject matter. In their study, Yıldız, Melekođlu and Paftalı (2016) examined the keywords used in studies. The keywords obtained in their studies were found to be similar to the findings obtained in this study. Similarly, the study carried out by Yıldırım Dođru, Özlü, Kançeşme and Dođru, (2015) reported that the topics of family support, providing education and helping acquire social experiences were prominent subjects as in the current study.

However, the findings of this study do not match the findings of the study conducted by Coşkun, Dündar and Parlak (2014). In their study, family education studies were at the bottom of the list (1%), while skill instruction was not even mentioned. This difference may be due to the grouping and addressing of subjects, as well as to the fact that the study carried out by Coşkun, Dündar and Parlak (2014) covered both master's theses and doctoral dissertation studies and included the studies for only the period of 2008-2013. This finding suggests that there may be significant differences between the subjects studied in the master's theses and doctorate dissertations and that there may be differences between the subjects studied in recent years and the previous subjects.

Analysis of the distribution of dissertations examined in this study by years demonstrated a significant increase in the number of doctoral dissertations carried out in recent years. The number of doctoral dissertations carried out in each period was found to have increased significantly compared to the previous period and 94 doctoral dissertations were submitted in the last five years. Similar findings were obtained in the studies conducted by Yıldırım Dođru, Özlü, Kançeşme and Dođru, (2015) and Yıldız, Melekođlu and Paftalı (2016). It is believed that the

increase in the number of studies carried out over the years is due to the increasing number of academic staff, departments and graduate programs in the field of special education.

Lastly, the distribution of doctoral dissertations according to university was examined in this study. Findings point that the highest number of doctoral dissertations was submitted in Anadolu University (25%) while Gazi University (21%) took the second place in terms of the number of submission. This finding is similar to the results obtained by Yıldız, Melekoğlu and Paftalı in their study (2016). However, there are differences between this finding and the findings of the study conducted by Coşkun, Dünder and Parlak, (2014) who reported Gazi University as the university with the highest number of graduate theses/dissertations followed by Anadolu University, with Ankara University remarkably at the bottom of the list. This finding may be due to the fact that the study conducted by Coşkun, Dünder and Parlak (2014) covered only the period of 2008-2013 and included both master's theses and doctoral dissertations. The fact that the completed doctoral dissertations are generally submitted in certain universities may be related to well-established doctorate programs in the special education departments of these universities with larger academic staff compared to other universities. Therefore, establishing new doctorate programs in universities may change these data in the future and demonstrate a more diverse distribution.

This study aimed to reveal the general situation of doctoral dissertations in the field of special education. There is a significant increase in the number of doctoral studies and this increase will make positive contributions to overcome the shortage of academic staff in the field of special education. In terms of the target groups in the doctoral dissertations, the need for studies with individuals with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, individuals with physical disabilities and individuals with multiple disabilities is clearly observed. In addition, it is noteworthy that many studies have been conducted with teachers, especially in recent years. The fact that the number of addressed subjects is close to each other in distribution and that there are studies with different content demonstrate that studies are being carried out not only on certain subjects but also on a wider subject area. However, changes and trends in the study subjects can be examined in more detail in future studies by focusing on shorter intervals. Considering the development of the special education field in recent years, it can be said that document review studies carried out at shorter intervals will also contribute to the monitoring of the developments in the field.

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