



## THROUGH THE EYES OF THE POLITICIANS: SPECIAL EDUCATION POLICIES IN NORTH CYPRUS

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### **Abstract:**

The aim of this research is to determine politicians' views on special education policies in North Cyprus. Qualitative data were collected in the research and "semi-structured interview" technic was used which is one of the qualitative research methods. Study group consisted of 10 politicians living in North Cyprus. In order to determine views of politicians, 6 questions were prepared and asked. A comprehensive literature review was carried out in order to prepare the interview form of the research and the form was finalized after receiving experts' evaluations from the field of special education. The obtained data were analyzed with induction method and themes were formed. According to the results of the research, politicians stated that North Cyprus special education policies are insufficient, there are deficiencies in current legal regulations and more importance and necessary basis are needed for special education in parallel to the developments worldwide. In line with the results of the research, various recommendations were presented for further research, policies and practices.

**Keywords:** special education, special education policies, politician, North Cyprus

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## 1. Introduction

As a mandatory result of the laws, educational institutions restructured the opportunities to provide education for every individual together with the second half of the 19th century. In this context, individuals who differ significantly from their peers in terms of their cognitive, affective and physical characteristics gained the right to receive education within the scope of special education (Turnbull et al., 2013; Zirkel, 2015). Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) was declared by Turkish Cypriot society in 1983. However, TRNC is not recognised by any country except Turkey. The island is divided into two which are Turkish Cypriot North and Greek Cypriot South (Latif, 2019).

Education of individuals with special needs are provided in private and governmental special educational institutions and rehabilitation centers in North Cyprus. Special education institutions are defined as daily education institutions which aims to provide special education support to individuals with special needs, to prepare them for gaining and maintaining basic life skills based on individualized education programs (Baykoc-Donmez, 2010; Kim & Lee, 2018). In regard to the developments in the field of special education, an increasing number of students with special needs receive education in general education classes. Individuals with special needs are most likely to be together with their families and peers, and at the same time inclusion practices have been initiated in many countries in order to receive education in environments where they can be well received. Inclusion is defined as the education of students with special needs in general education classes in order to support their intellectual and social development and individuals have an increased chance of active participation in society and improving their quality of life through inclusion (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Armstrong, Armstrong & Barton, 2016; Tharp, 2018).

According to national education laws and regulations of North Cyprus, necessary protective, empowering and developing precautions are taken for children and young individuals with special needs in order to provide education for them to maintain their lives independently in the society considering contemporary and scientific education methods and opportunities due to their individual characteristics. Every student with special needs is entitled to compulsory special education services free of charge. In accordance with the general aims and basic principles of Turkish Cypriot national education, special education services aims to give every student with special needs the opportunity to develop their interests and abilities to the maximum extent; train students with special needs to become useful citizens for themselves and for society and provide vocational rehabilitation when necessary and appropriate (TRNC National Education Law, 1986).

In special education institutions, students with special needs register and receive education based on their disability categories. Legal, educational and support services provided in special education institutions constitute the basic services in this field. In particular, educational services starting at an early age to provide independent living and social life skills to individuals with special needs are important (Eripek, 2009). Necessary precautions should be taken for students with special needs to continue education with

their peers at academic and social level throughout their school life which has recently become prevalent and named as mainstreaming or inclusive education. These precautions also require planning which includes the requirements of the students in terms of social, educational and basic life skills (Ataman, 2012). Governments should ensure that laws and regulations employing the most appropriate educational practices for individuals with special needs and providing mainstreaming and inclusion practices for them to receive education with their peers and improve social skills through spending time with their peers at school.

Special education services have an important place in terms of socialization of individuals with special needs to express themselves more freely in society and to become more independent. Many problems arising from the education services of individuals with special needs have a snowball effect which increases the disadvantages for them in the society. At this point, implementation of special education practices in North Cyprus for individuals with special needs are extremely important in terms of developing and improving the quality of these services. In this context, policies on special education have a great importance in the implementation of special education services for individuals with special needs and policymakers play an important role in organizing laws, rules and regulations for special education. Therefore, it could be inferred that revealing the views of policymakers on special education policies are considered as important for determining the current situation and future directions for future special education policies.

It is considered that this research is crucial in terms of expressing the current situation in terms of special education policies in according to politicians' views. In addition, this research would shed light on the future research and practices for improving special education policies in North Cyprus. This study aims to determine politicians' views on special education policies in North Cyprus. In line with this general aim, answers to the following questions were sought in this study:

What are the politicians' views on:

- 1) Current special education policies in North Cyprus?
- 2) Special education laws and regulations in North Cyprus?
- 3) Schooling related to special education in North Cyprus?
- 4) Treatment of special education system in North Cyprus?
- 5) Special education teacher training in North Cyprus?
- 6) How special education policies should be in the future?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Research Model**

Semi-structured interview which is one of the qualitative research methods was used in this study. More systematic, comparable and in-depth information is obtained through semi-structured interviews because the interview is conducted in accordance with the pre-prepared interview protocol and this method is one of the most commonly used and most basic data collection methods in qualitative research (Yildirim & Simsek, 2005; Flick,

2018). It is the type of interview in which the questions are determined in advance and a detailed interview plan is prepared until the questions are asked. In such interviews, the respondent is asked to answer a predetermined set of questions within predetermined response categories.

## 2.2. Study Group

Study group consisted of 10 politicians in North Cyprus which were selected through convenience sampling which is one of the purposeful sampling types. Convenience sampling enables to collect information from participants who are easily accessible to the researcher (Palinkas et al., 2015). Researchers took permission from parliament and appointments were organized according to the appropriate times of the politicians. Table 1 shows demographic characteristics of politicians participated in the study. As it can be seen from the table, all politicians are male, and their ages are between 37 and 74.

**Table 1:** Demographic characteristics of politicians

Code names of politicians	Age	Gender	Department
P1	37	Male	Political Science and Public Administration
P2	47	Male	Music Education
P3	45	Male	Public Relations and Publicity
P4	74	Male	Faculty of Medicine
P5	56	Male	Political Science and International Relations
P6	43	Male	Political Science and International Relations
P7	52	Male	Economy
P8	59	Male	Mathematics Education
P9	51	Male	Chemical Engineering
P10	55	Male	Faculty of Medicine

## 2.3. Data Collection Tools

In the study, semi-structured interview form was used as data collection tool. During the formation of interview form, a comprehensive literature review was carried out and questions were created. In order to ensure content validity, opinions of 3 experts from special education field and 1 language expert about the suitability of these questions were obtained. In line with the expert opinions received, the questions were finalized. The interview form consisted of two parts. In the first part, there are questions about demographic characteristics of politicians and second part included 6 questions prepared within the scope of the research.

- 1) What do you think about current special education policies in North Cyprus?
- 2) What do you think about legislation related to special education in North Cyprus?
- 3) What are your views on schooling related to special education in North Cyprus?
- 4) What do you think about special education system and its functioning in North Cyprus?
- 5) What are your views on teacher training in North Cyprus?
- 6) In your opinion, how special education policies should be in the future?

Interviews were carried out with politicians face-to-face by getting appointments. The interview data were noted and recorded. The duration of the interviews was

approximately 30 minutes. After the necessary corrections were made in line with the opinions of the experts, a pilot application was made. During the pilot, the interviews were recorded with an audio recorder. The audio recorder was listened, and the interviews were written by the researcher. Voice records and written documents were examined by the researchers and some questions were facilitated to simplify the politicians' answers. The politicians interviewed during the pilot implementation were not included in the research.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

Qualitative data obtained by using semi-structured interview method were evaluated according to content analysis method. The main purpose of content analysis is to explain the concepts that can explain the collected data and to reach relationships. The basic process of content analysis is to bring together similar data within the framework of certain concepts and themes and to organize them in a comprehensible way (Yildirim & Simsek, 2005). For this reason, politicians' responses to interview questions are coded according to the basic concepts they pointed out. The coded data are classified according to their contents and themes obtained from the data are presented in tables and numbers. Data were analyzed by coding using NVivo 11.0 qualitative data analysis program.

To ensure reliability in the research, data were individually coded by the researchers, and the percentage of agreement between coders was calculated using the formula ( $\text{Reliability} = \text{Consensus} / [\text{consensus} + \text{divergence}]$ ) put forward by Miles and Huberman (1994) and the value was found to be 90%. Therefore, it has been concluded that the coding is sufficiently reliable (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In order to ensure validity in the research, the integrity of the data has been constantly reviewed and detailed explanations regarding the research processes have been made. Sample expressions of politicians' answers are provided and "P" was used as abbreviation for politician.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Politicians' views on current special education policies in North Cyprus

**Table 2:** Views on current special education policies in North Cyprus

Theme	n
Insufficient number of guidance and psychological counselor at schools	5
Need for collaboration	3
Improvement of education system	1
Problems and inadequacy in special education practices	1
Total	10

Table 2 shows the themes regarding politicians' views on current special education policies in North Cyprus. According to the responses given to the question "What do you think about current special education policies in North Cyprus?", there are 4 different themes including insufficient number of guidance and psychological counselor at schools, need

for collaboration, improvement of education system and problems and inadequacy in special education practices. Most of the politicians emphasized the absence of a special education law in North Cyprus and problems arised by this absence. As it can be understood from this situation, the need for special education law in North Cyprus is not fully met and there is an urgent need to develop a policy on this issue. Although the fact that individuals with special needs are members of the society and that they have the right to live and receive education in the society are universally accepted, this situation is not yet applicable in North Cyprus in terms of laws, policies and regulations. Some sample expressions of politicians' views on this question are as follows:

*“Unfortunately, there is not a special education law in this country. Therefore, policy development is needed firstly. Non-governmental organizations and the government are trying to do something with some cooperation, but in my opinion even a current needs analysis has not been done to take an action. Therefore, we need to create a policy at the beginning, we need to do needs analysis and a structuring is needed.” (P3)*

*“Now, if there is a lack of legal legislation on this subject, of course, the political parties should take this into their programs especially in the upcoming period. In addition, parliament and the Ministry of Education should work on this issue. We have been working on this subject, but unfortunately, a desired result could not be achieved. As I said, we have to increase special education emphasis in our education policies. I think these are the first things to do.” (P9)*

*“Actually, special education practices were not so common in North Cyprus in the past. Now, of course, the quality of education increased, and the government has begun to be more sensitive on special education. Special education schools in Cyprus are still insufficient. There have been many innovations and improvements over the years in the field of special education, but it is not enough. The law governing special education has not yet been passed. Special education is trying to be directed under the Department of Primary Education.” (P10)*

### 3.2. Politicians' views on legislation related to special education in North Cyprus

**Table 3:** Views on legislation related to special education in North Cyprus

Theme	n
Lack of legal regulations	7
Inadequacy of schools	2
No answer	1
Total	10

Table 3 shows the themes constituted from politicians' responses to the question “*What do you think about legislation related to special education in North Cyprus?*”. According to the results, it was revealed that all of the politicians mentioned about a lack of legislation and need for new regulations and specifications on special education and the answers to the

first question support this question. It was also emphasized that families of individuals with special needs have great difficulties in receiving educational services and number of special education units should be increased. Some examples of politicians' views on this question are provided below.

*“Legal regulations are necessary in our country, yes, there is a need for a number of regulations related to the legislation on special education. These needs must be implemented in accordance with the law immediately.” (P6)*

*“Dissemination of special education practices is needed. Now, we have 6 districts and we need special education and rehabilitation centers which are fully equipped as a place where children with special needs will spend time from morning to noon in these districts.” (P7)*

*“In regard to legal regulations, the special education law in our country is still pending in parliament. Clearly, special education law should be passed immediately. Families have difficulty in meeting their children’s educational needs, and therefore the number of units responsible for special education needs to be increased.” (P8)*

*“It is seen that the legal regulations prepared for individuals with special needs are inadequate, but parallel to the developments in the world, there is a rapid change and developments in special education practices in the recent years as well.” (P9)*

### 3.3. Politicians’ views on schooling related to special education in North Cyprus

**Table 4:** Views on schooling related to special education in North Cyprus

Theme	n
Need for more prevalent schooling of special education	5
Qualified educational practices	3
Need for occupational training	2
Total	10

Table 4 shows the themes regarding politicians’ views on schooling related to special education in North Cyprus. According to the answers to the question *“What do you think about schooling related to special education in North Cyprus?”*. Results revealed that 5 politicians stated the need for more prevalent schooling of special education, 3 politicians mentioned that there are qualified educational practices in terms of schooling of special education and 2 politicians emphasized the need for more occupational training in special education schools. Some examples of politicians' views on this question are provided below.

*“If there is more prevalence in schooling, we will contribute more easily to future special education.” (P2)*

*“At this point, there are special education departments in the universities in our country and there are people who have graduated from these departments. We do not have enough human capacity to provide special education services to individuals with special needs at any age. Now, special education services have become more common and this will be reflected as a serious contribution in this area. The government should encourage more attention to it, and in this sense, this will help facilitate the lives of individuals with special needs.” (P5)*

### 3.4. Politicians' views on special education system and its functioning in North Cyprus

**Table 5:** Views on special education system and its functioning in North Cyprus

Theme	n
Absence of a system	5
Needs analysis	2
Professional team	2
Family education	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>

Table 5 shows the themes constituted from politicians' views on special education system and its functioning in North Cyprus. According to the responses to the question *“What are your thoughts about the special education system and its functioning in North Cyprus?”*, themes were determined as absence of a system, requirement for a needs analysis, professional team and family education. Some examples for expressions of politicians' views on this question are as follows:

*“In order to put special education into practice, especially in schools, a more regular and systematic functioning is required. I think there are more efforts for special education practices when compared to the past, but there are things to do for improving functioning of special education practices. More importantly, special education professionals should have a voice to improve special education practices in North Cyprus.” (P6)*

*“I do not think that there is a certain rule integrity in the current system and operation, it must be ensured.” (P9)*

### 3.5. Politicians' views on teacher training in North Cyprus

**Table 6:** Views on teacher training in North Cyprus

Theme	n
Inadequacies in teacher training	8
Need for a greater number of special education teachers	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>

Table 6 shows the themes related with politicians' views on teacher training in North Cyprus. As it can be seen, there are two different themes constituted from the question *“What do you think about teacher training in North Cyprus?”*. Themes were determined as



inadequacies in teacher training and need for a greater number of special education teachers. According to the results, it was revealed that more studies and efforts are required for successful teacher training and there is a crucial need for a greater number of special education teachers based on politicians' views. Some examples for expressions of politicians' views on this question are as follows:

*“The teaching profession and the quality of teachers have become a frequent issue in many countries. This reveals the importance of teacher training systems and teacher training programs in universities. There are different systems for teacher training in different countries and societies and universities apply different educational programs. Within the scope of teacher training, the admission requirements of universities, the quality of education received, and the evaluation systems vary in each country. There are not enough teachers in our country in terms of number, but we are better than the old years, and many universities have been opened and all departments are available.” (P1)*

*“Studies should also be carried out in order to train better quality teachers. I can add that the teacher equipment needs to be supported by the government to specialize in the fields where they need to become more qualified either in the university they are studying in or during Professional life.” (P7)*

*“Of course, the biggest problem is that there is no planning in our country. So there is a problem with planning of education as well. Therefore, after minimizing the pros of this strategic planning, it is necessary to answer this question depending on the analysis, how the quality of the teacher will meet and whether our own facilities are sufficient or not. I think that we can undertake a general education strategy within our own universities. I think that the special education system and its functioning should meet the needs of teachers and analyze what is the current situation, and the answers that will be given without a comprehensive study should be approached in a way that is not sufficient and more complete.” (P9)*

*“To share the experiences of teacher training (pre-service and in-service) and teacher competencies, a comprehensive analysis is needed. From the past to the present, it is seen that the criteria laid down and applied in teacher training are often complex and contradictory and not sufficient. Therefore, I think that teacher training programs should be increased and improved.” (P10)*

### 3.6. Politicians' views on how special education policies should be in the future

**Table 7:** Views on how special education policies should be in the future

Theme	n
Absence of special education law	4
Importance of special education	4
Planning of education	1
No answer	1
Total	10

Table 7 shows the themes regarding politicians' views on how special education policies should be in the future. Results showed that there are 3 different themes including absence of special education law, importance of special education and planning of education. Some examples for expressions of politicians' views on this question are as follows:

*"We need to make special education law and develop it within this scope, and we need to focus on this issue and make more sensitive studies on this issue. Special education law is expected to come soon, and serious studies are underway for this." (P2)*

*"First, education should be given great importance, especially special education should be given more importance. Therefore, in this way, it will be ensured that the policies related to special education will be spread in our country in a more concrete way in the future. As of now, we can say that the special education opportunities offered are going well, but it needs to do its part in order to increase this, to make it widespread and to reach it to everyone in need. But I think it is not enough to say it clearly. In the following periods, that is to say 5-year planning, special education as well as normal education is a must to be meticulously studied." (P6)*

*"First of all, when we look at the education system in general, there is already a problem. Not only in special education, but also in the education system, all individuals should receive education in line with their own interests, abilities and expectations, but in such an education system configuration, it should be determined that children with special needs should be identified at a younger age and these trainings will be developed in order to develop certain skills. After teacher education, family education should be provided in that it is important for the family to know that the individual has a place in the society. And I think it would be more meaningful to be involved in a lifelong education for individuals with special needs." (P7)*

*"Lack of special education law and special education policy is a big problem for North Cyprus. If the law is introduced, special education will become more quality and more efficient. I think it is important that the education of individuals with special needs at all types and levels is sustained without interruption". (P8)*

#### **4. Discussion**

The present study tried to determine politicians' views on special education policies in North Cyprus. According to the results obtained about the current special education policies in North Cyprus, it is seen that there is not a clear and sufficient special education policy in North Cyprus based on politicians' views. In addition, inadequate intervention in terms of special education is an indication that the right to life of individuals with special needs is underestimated and this is contrary to universal law and human rights. In addition, the limited number of studies in the field of special education policies in

North Cyprus is another shortcoming for the improvement of special education policy and practices. It is considered that this situation can have a crucial effect if the academic studies can give sufficient emphasis on this subject.

The lack of special education law in North Cyprus is a major shortcoming for people with special needs living in the country and inadequate policies for people with special needs will be a clear proof that this is a concept that needs to be addressed in the country. As a result of this research, it was revealed that the politicians interviewed tried to make sacrifices but did not receive enough support. In this sense, it is considered that views of politicians on this issue are expected to be important as the country's leading figures in order to expand and develop special education policy and practices in North Cyprus.

In parallel with the results of the study, Abbasoglu (2016) found that teachers working at primary schools in North Cyprus stated that current education law is insufficient for students with special needs and there is a need for an improvement. Basmaci (2013) also reported that in addition to the education staff, student distributions and training programs to be implemented in Special Education Centers in North Cyprus; legal conditions that determine the physical conditions of these centers and standards such as educational tools should be made and a special education regulation or law to be introduced is important in terms of the regulation of the practices in this field, in addition to the staff needed by the special education centers and the appropriateness of the education in the field of special education. In addition, Dagli and Oznacar (2015) revealed that teachers, managers and families living in North Cyprus stated that a separate special education law would be healthier and lack of such a law is a big problem.

This study reveals that special education practices will be improved through appropriate policy and practices based on the needs, desires and competencies of individuals with special needs and politicians emphasized the need for a scientific approach and a professional special education team. A team of experts in the field should provide education and additional supports to individuals with special needs under the supervision of government. It is recommended to provide employment and education for individuals with special needs through an institution such as "Center for Finding Job for Persons with Disabilities" and "Education without Obstacles Project". that has trained and expert staff to be established under state supervision (Gokbay, Ergen & Ozdemir, 2011). In parallel with the results of the study, Hastbacka and Nygard (2012) Disability Policy results show that people with special needs see social participation as a group with equal rights. Moreover, the role of municipalities is seen as very important in achieving this objective through providing support and services. However, there are signs that there is a shift towards active citizenship among people with special needs, as long as measures to facilitate employment are emphasized, while some claim to be more mutually entitled to disability rights.

Another result of the study showed that schooling policies in North Cyprus are quite sufficient according to politicians' views. However, this situation is in contradiction with the insufficient policies towards schooling in the field of special education. It is a concept that should be discussed that schooling and education policies need to be under

a specific special education law, legislation and policy. The most important inference that can be developed in this regard is to ensure that some of the steps taken in schooling in North Cyprus support the steps to be taken in the field of special education. In all interviews, it was argued that there was no special education system. This situation really raises a huge humanitarian problem. The right to life and education of individuals with special needs is universal. No one's legal rights can be blocked. However, deficiencies in special education in North Cyprus are at a level that can be noticed by everyone. However, this study also showed the importance of the researches that should be done in the field of special education. The most important recommendation that needs to be developed in this regard is that further research is needed in North Cyprus. It is considered that scientific studies may have healing effects on special education policy and practices.

In conclusion, this study revealed that special education law needs to be enacted urgently in order to ensure the proper functioning of special education services in North Cyprus. In line with the results of the study, some recommendations are presented for further research and practices. Special education experts, professionals and academicians might be encouraged to raise more awareness on the need for a special education policy in North Cyprus. This research was conducted by qualitative research method. For further research, more general and in-depth results can be obtained by using different research methods and increasing the number of samples. Families of children with special needs may be informed about the crucial need for a special education policy and encouraged to seek their rights for their children.

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