

School administrators' metaphorical perceptions of special education and children with special needs

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ABSTRACT

Children with special needs are included in the educational system more day by day. In this case, it is not only the task of the teacher to offer the right education environment to the student with special needs, but school administrators also have a very important role in this process. At this point, the approach and attitudes of school administrators to the concept of special education and individuals with special needs will affect school management practices. For this reason, we aimed to determine the metaphoric perceptions of school administrators about special education and children with special needs. The research was designed with qualitative research methodology and 108 school administrators were included in the research. Research findings emphasized that some of the school administrators are approaching children with special needs with their strong aspects, while some emphasized the sensitivity and passive aspects of individuals with special needs and special education. In this direction, the most common metaphors were “flower, sun, baby...”. These metaphors are similar to the findings of other metaphor research aimed at determining approaches to individuals with special needs.

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Introduction

The right to education is an important and vital right for all individuals in the world regardless of language, religion, race or development characteristics (IHEB, 1949). Individuals with special needs, just like all typical developing peers, have the right to participate in educational environments and receive education in accordance with their needs, and this right cannot be prevented (Aksoy and Akgün-Giray, 2018; Çitil, 2017). Nowadays, educational approaches in our country are progressing with integration-intervention paradigms that envision being educated together with special needs and non-special needs (eg Balcı et al., 2024; Sucuoğlu, 2004; Regulation on Special Education Services, 2009; Regulation on Pre-School Education Institutions, 2009). In this case, students with special needs and typically developing students study in the same classes and continue their students together at the same school. In this case, teachers take the necessary measures for the teaching and education of both special needs and typical developing students and make the necessary arrangements. However, inclusion is not only the responsibility and interest of the student and the teacher. At the same time, the administrations of these schools are obliged to take some measures and provide support for this process. In accordance with the Regulation on Preschool Educational Institutions, the duties of the school principal in the context of inclusion; Article 17 F: and 20.g. “Takes the necessary measures for children requiring special education”. At this point, school administrators should first be dominated by special needs and special education concepts and be expected to be in positive attitudes (Acarlar, 2013) in order to take the necessary measures for children and education with special needs. Moreover, a good school management requires a process that embraces and offers fair rights regardless of the developmental characteristics. In this case, with the participation of individuals with special needs in the school system, school administrators are to be equipped with the desired management skills on this.

The attitudes and behaviors of school administrators to students with special needs and special education are of great importance at this point. For the fact that all the students in the school where the education leadership will be undertaken will be associated with a healthy education life about how to operate managerial processes. A school principal who accepts and demonstrates the right approach will positively affect all stakeholders, including teachers, typically developing children and their families, children with special needs and their families. Various studies on the concept of individual education and special needs in the literature were carried out with different stakeholders (Adar-Cömert, 2019; Başgöl and Sağır, 2017; Bulut, 2018; Dayı et al., 2020; Efiltili et al. 2020). Perceptions of special education teachers (Kazu and Yıldırım, 2021), perceptions of classroom teachers (Başgöl et al., 2021), Perceptions of teacher candidates (Adar-Cömert, 2019; Bulut, 2018; 2021; 2021; Kocaoğlu, 2022; Fabric and Süer, 2020) can be sampled. On the other hand, there was no direct research on the perceptions of school administrators on the concept of “special education” and “children with special needs”. However, in his study, Dilekçi (2019) aimed to determine the metaphoric perceptions of school administrators on the concept of “inclusive education”. From this point of view, it is aimed to fill the gap in literature and to determine the perceptions of school administrators who are an important stakeholder for children with special needs and special education.

In this study, it is aimed to examine the metaphoric perceptions of school administrators about special education and children’s concepts with special needs. For this respect, research questions are as below:

- What are the metaphors produced by school administrators about the concept of special education?
- What is the analogy direction in metaphors related to the concept of special education?
- What are the metaphors produced by school administrators about the concept of children with special needs?
- What is the aspect of analogy in metaphors about the concept of children with special needs?

Method

Research design

This is a qualitative study with a phenomenological design that aims to determine the perceptions of school administrators regarding “special education” and “children with special needs” through metaphors. In the research qualitative research, the purpose of determination of participants has been adopted for these reasons. In this respect, data were collected from the school administrators and vice principals working in the schools of the National Education Directorate of Isparta Province. In order to create a maximum difference, the participants were included in the investigation group by taking into account the criteria for those who participated in the research with the criterion sampling method (Creswell and Clark, 2015). The method is about the title, gender, age, education status, branch and similar relative variables (Creswell and Clark, 2015). While school principals from different branches were taken to the research as a participant, the maximum diversity was applied in accordance with the sampling method. In addition, the criterion of whether the school administrators participating in the research had a special needed student in the school was evaluated according to the criterion sampling method. The criteria sought for research participants are; being an educational administrator in an institution affiliated with the Ministry of National Education, being a graduate of a faculty of education, and being willing to participate in the research. The demographic information about the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic data of participants

		<i>f</i>	%
Gender	Female	30	28
	Male	78	72
Age	25-29	4	4
	30-34	22	20
	35-39	21	19
	40-49	57	53
	50+	4	4
Graduation degree	Associate degree	2	2
	Bachelor's degree	78	72
	Master's degree	28	26
School management duty	School Administrator	76	70
	Vice principal	32	30
Being a student with special needs in school	Yes	83	77
	No	25	23
Teaching branch	Classroom teacher	35	32
	Others (Music Lecturer, Vocational Lecturer, PCG, Accounting, Electricity, etc.)	17	16
	Preschool teacher	14	13

Turkish teacher	8	7
English teacher	7	6
Social studies teacher	6	6
Religious culture and ethics teacher	5	5
Physical education teacher	5	5
Mathematics teacher	4	4
Turkish language and literature teacher	4	4
Science teacher	3	3

The data were collected online through the structured interview form created by the researchers. Data Collection Form includes the question “*Special education*” is similar to ... Because ...” and “*Children with special needs* are similar to ... Because...”. The data obtained was analysed with the content analysis approach in the Qualitative Data Analysis Program “Maxqda 22”. Qualitative data were examined in detail and reduced to meaningful sentences and words. Each meaningful expression was evaluated within itself, and sections were created. Code names were given to these sections. Qualitative coding, which is an important element of data analysis, has been used (Neuman, 2006). The code list was created after all qualitative data was coded. The same codes were combined in a significant way to determine the themes and sub-themes of the content. Considering the concepts in the literature, themes and sub-themes were classified in parallel with the research questions. The formation of the theme and sub-theme categories is important in achieving a valid and reliable finding in the analysis of qualitative data. In this respect, all data were coded, themes and sub-themes were identified. Quoting the opinions of the participants who participated in the research, their opinions were quoted using abbreviations such as SA1, SA2.

In the data analysis process of the research, the researchers carried out the coding process separately and compromised. The study was carried out in line with the expert opinions during the validity process. The reliability data were calculated by Miles and Huberman (1994) with the formula $x \times 100$. Research findings were examined by an observer having qualitative research experience and working in the field of special education and a large compromise was achieved in the end.

Results

Metaphorical perceptions of school administrators related to the concept of special education

It is seen that education managers produce a total of 103 metaphors, 52 of which are different from the concept of special education. Educational managers have compared the concept of special education to concepts such as “flower” and “growing flowers”. However, other metaphors with high frequency are such metaphors as “raising children”, “processing sun”, “children”, “farming”, “diamonds”, “a country you haven’t been to”. Some other metaphors with low frequency are such metaphors as “land”, “family”, “mining”, “fingerprint” and “craftsmanship”. All the relevant metaphors are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Metaphors of the concept of “special education” of school administrators

Metaphors	f	%	Metaphors	f	%
Flower	16	15,53	Endemic plant	1	0,97
Growing flower	12	11,65	Sky	1	0,97
Raising children	5	4,85	Germ	1	0,97
Sun	3	2,91	Bamboo	1	0,97
Child	3	2,91	Service support	1	0,97
Farmer	3	2,91	Spare parts	1	0,97
Program	3	2,91	Carpet weaving	1	0,97
Diamond processing	3	2,91	Moon	1	0,97
Need	3	2,91	Raw egg	1	0,97
A country you haven’t been to	3	2,91	Arranged marriage	1	0,97
Soil	2	1,94	Tree	1	0,97
Family	2	1,94	Fingerprint	1	0,97
Life	2	1,94	Craftsmanship	1	0,97
Dig a well with a needle	2	1,94	World	1	0,97
Individual development	2	1,94	Mountain Hill/Summit	1	0,97
Ocean	2	1,94	Glass	1	0,97
Light	2	1,94	Colour	1	0,97
Respect for differences	1	0,97	Water	1	0,97
Mentoring	1	0,97	Scales	1	0,97
Life (2 different meanings in Turkish)	1	0,97	Struggle	1	0,97
Mining	1	0,97	Cycling	1	0,97
Rainbow	1	0,97	Notes/Music	1	0,97
A long trip	1	0,97	Child in need of protection	1	0,97

Delicate fabric	1	0,97	Holistic structure	1	0,97
Life water	1	0,97	Pearl	1	0,97
Painting	1	0,97	Sculptor	1	0,97
			TOTAL	103	100,00

An analogy aspect of the concept of special education

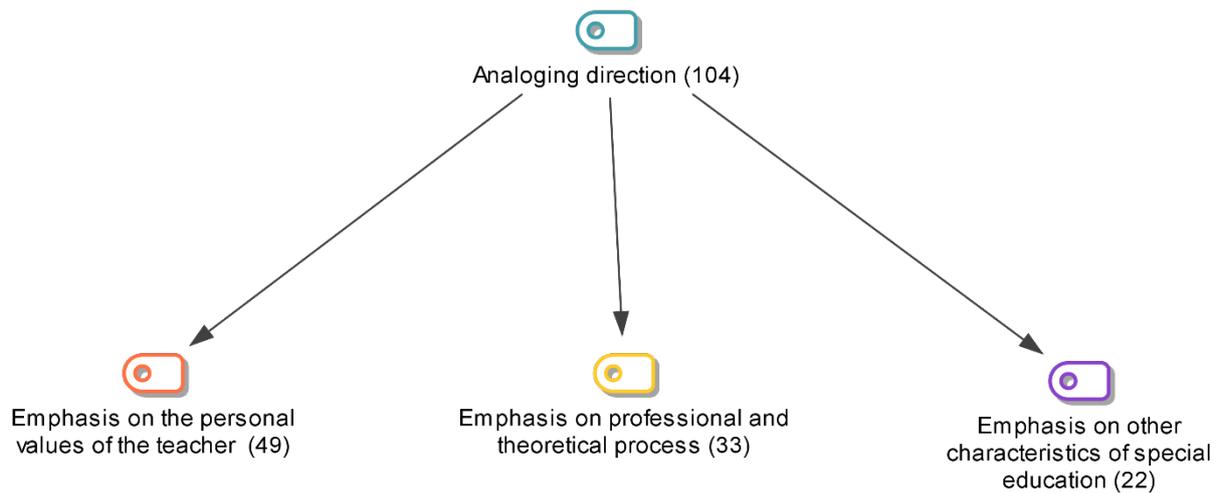


Figure 1. Metaphoric perceptions of the concept of special education

When the metaphoric perceptions of the concept of special education were analysed, it was observed that they were categorized under three themes. These themes are “emphasis on the personal values of the teacher (f=49)”, “emphasis on the professional and theoretical process (f=33)” and “emphasis on other characteristics of special education (f=22). The themes are as in Figure 1. In the theme of emphasizing the teacher's personal values, the categories of special education require labour, sensitivity, love and conscience. The categories are as in Figure 2.

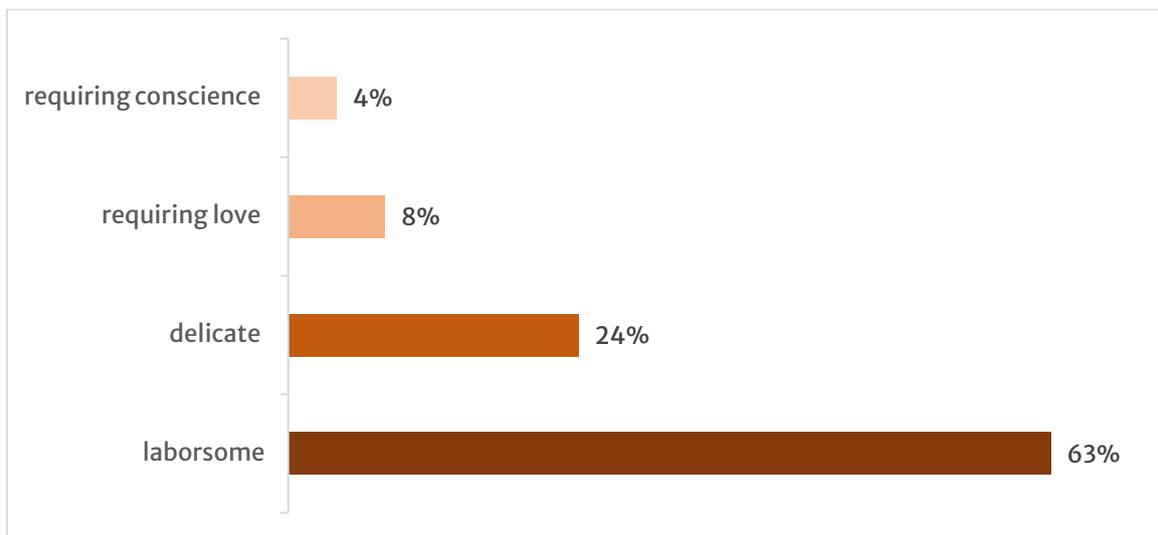


Figure 2. Emphasis on teacher's personal values

In the study, the examples of the metaphors produced by the school administrators who participated in the research under the theme of “Teacher's Personal Values” are as follows:

SA2: “Special education is similar to growing flowers. Because delicate and private individuals like a flower demand care and love just like a flower.”

SA13: “Children are like raising. Because they prepare in life by giving their missing skills compared to their other peers.”

SA82: “Special education is similar to the bamboo tree. Because you do not have anything to labour for years, but suddenly you can see an advanced individual.”

In the theme of emphasizing professional and theoretical process, the categories of special education require the use of the right method, continuity, being open to development and being personalized. The categories are as in Figure 3.

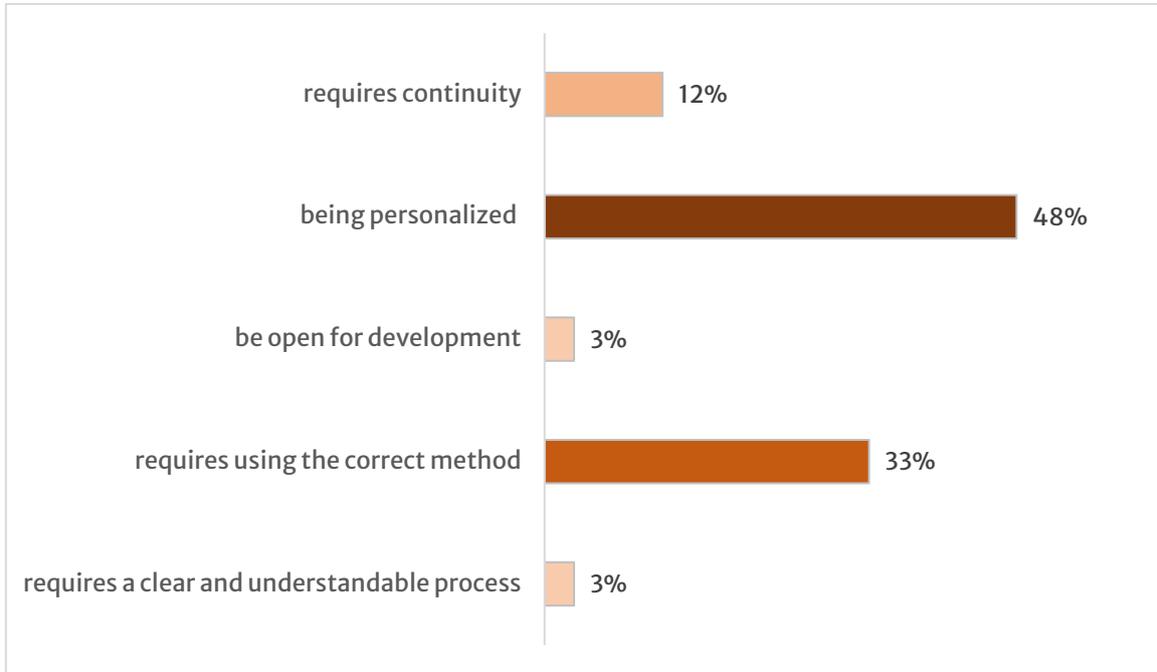


Figure 3. Emphasis on professional and theoretical process

In the study, the examples of metaphors produced by school administrators who participated in the research under the theme of “Professional and Theoretical Process” are as follows:

SA41: “Special education is similar to human beings. Because every child learns differently.”

SA56: “Special education is similar to a teaching approach that focuses on individual needs. Because each student has a different learning style and speed.”

SA90: “Special training is similar to notes. Because if you use the right notes in the right place, a nice harmony will emerge.”

In the theme of emphasis on other characteristics of special education, the categories of being an uncertain process, being a deep area, being an area where labour is rewarded and guidance feature are determined. This theme is shown in Figure 4.

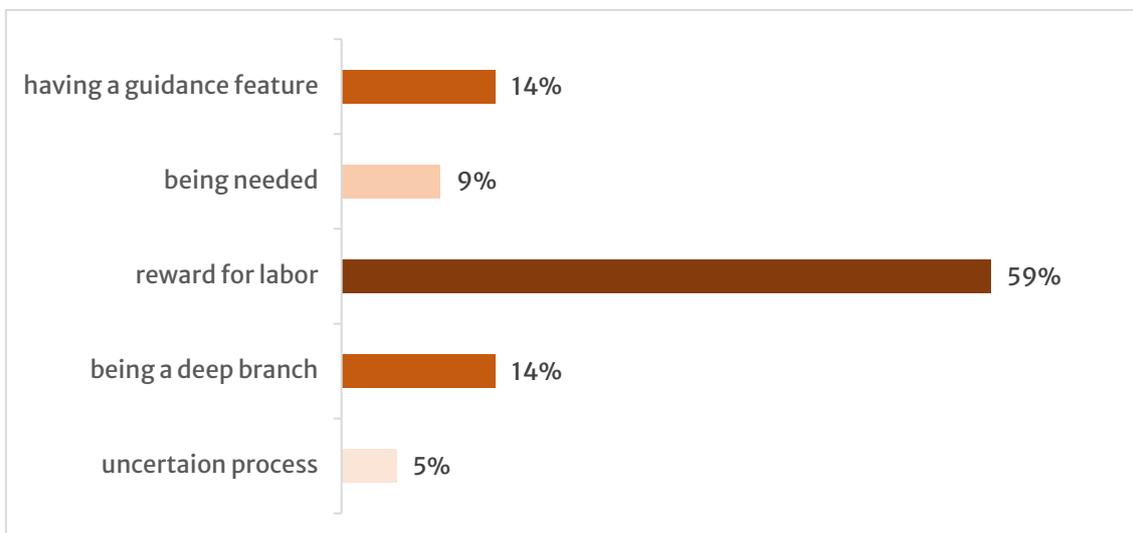


Figure 4. Emphasis on other characteristics of special education

The examples of the metaphors produced by the members of the participating schools under the headings of "other features of special education are emphasized" in the research are as follows:

SA63: "It is similar to mentoring. Because it is essential to educate the student in every aspect."

SA8: "Similar to the sky, the sky contains beauties worth discovering."

SA5: "Similar to endemic plants, it cannot grow everywhere."

Metaphoric perceptions of education administrators for the concept of children with special needs

Table 3. Metaphors of the concept of children with special needs of the participating school administrators

Metaphor	f	%	Metaphor	f	%
Flower	34	33,01	Passenger standing at different stops	1	0,97
Jewel	7	6,80	Coal	1	0,97
Plant	6	5,83	Precision instruments	1	0,97
Baby	5	4,85	Striking colours	1	0,97
Special person	4	3,88	Wheat spike	1	0,97
Star	4	3,88	Empty glass	1	0,97
Child	4	3,88	Glass	1	0,97
Endemic plant	3	2,91	Hard problem to solve	1	0,97
Rainbow	2	1,94	Vase/fragile	1	0,97
Gift	2	1,94	Blank	1	0,97
Butterfly	2	1,94	Pandora's box	1	0,97
Play dough	2	1,94	Field	1	0,97
Blackboard	1	0,97	Soap	1	0,97
Sands	1	0,97	Egg	1	0,97
Rain	1	0,97	Light	1	0,97
Seed	1	0,97	Hand woven carpet	1	0,97
Garden	1	0,97	Basil	1	0,97
Mountain	1	0,97	Cotton	1	0,97
Waterfall	1	0,97	Computer program	1	0,97
Angel	1	0,97	Bird	1	0,97
			TOTAL	103	100,00

They produced 40 different metaphors regarding students with special needs of school administrators. The most metaphors performed by school administrators are shown in Table 3. According to the table, school administrators compared "children with special needs" to "flower" (f=34). Then, other metaphors with the highest frequency progress as ore (f=7), sapling (f=6), baby (f=5). In addition, children with special needs by school administrators "Endemic Species", "Rainbow", "Trust/Gift", "Field", "Soap" and so on.

An analogy regarding the concept of children with special needs

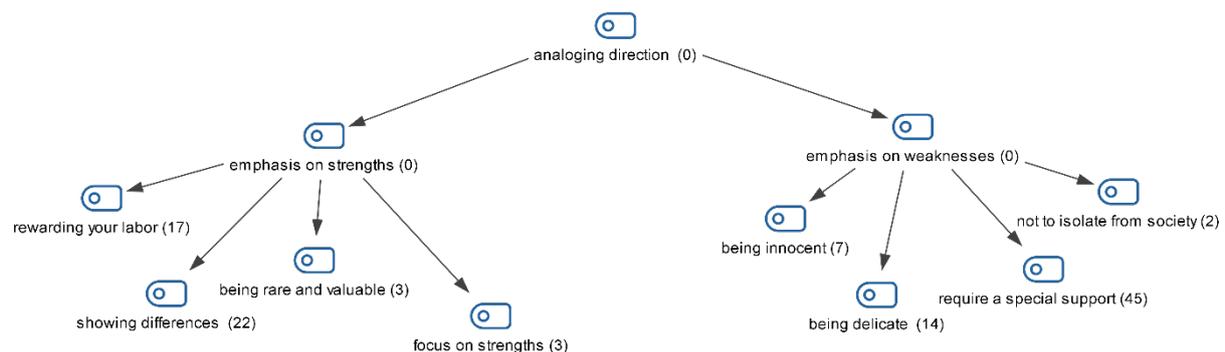


Figure 5. Analogy regarding the concept of special needs child

When the metaphors produced by school administrators regarding the concept of "children with special needs" are analysed, there are two main distinctions. These include focusing on the strengths of the children with special needs and focusing on the passive or weak aspects of the children with special needs. The analogies regarding strengths form four categories within themselves. These are getting the reward of labour, exhibiting differences, being callous, focusing on strengths. The emphasis on weaknesses also form four categories within themselves. These are being innocent, being sensitive-fragile, requiring special attention, and not being isolated from society. The analogy regarding the concept of child with special needs

is shown in Figure 5. The examples of the metaphors produced by school administrators participating in the research under the theme of “emphasis on personal values of teachers” are as follows:

SA17: *“It is like a basil; it gives a nice scent to its surroundings as you touch and wave it.”*

SA88: *“They are sensitive like butterflies. It is necessary to adjust that fine precision well.”*

SA70: *“It is like grains of sand. Because in the hands of experts, it turns into a shining glass jar.”*

SA9: *“Students with special needs are like a problem that is difficult to solve. Because they have many different dimensions.”*

Discussion

This study aimed to determine the perceptions and attitudes of school administrators towards special education and children with special needs through metaphors. In this direction, it is observed that the findings of the research have common points with the findings of the studies conducted on the concepts of special education and children with special needs in the literature (Adar-Cömert, 2019; Başgül and Sağır, 2017; Bulut, 2018; Efilti et al. 2021; Kazu and Yıldırım, 2021; Kocaoğlu, 2022; Kumaş and Süer, 2020; Merç and Koç, 2017; Sezer, 2024; Zelyurt, 2020). In addition to this, the research findings support the results of the research findings on inclusive education conducted with school administrators (Dilekçi, 2019).

The research findings have shown that school administrators mostly have positive attitudes towards the concept of special education. At this point, the most frequently encountered special education metaphors include positive connotations such as "flower", "child" and "sun". What's more, when considered in terms of analogy, the dimensions of special education were determined as "emphasis on professional and theoretical process (f=33)", "emphasis on personal values of the teacher (f=49)" and "emphasis on other features of special education (f=22)". The findings of the study conducted with school administrators, teachers and candidate teachers also show that analogies such as "flower", "growing flowers" and "raising children" are frequently encountered in studies (Acar et al., 2017; Aydın and Arslan, 2022; Baştuğ and Servi, 2021; Dayı et al., 2020). At this point, the fact that the participants frequently produced metaphors such as “flower” and “growing flowers” for special education. This indicates that school administrators' understanding of special education, and it can also be interpreted as a process that requires effort, continuity and love.

The research findings show that school administrators' metaphors regarding the concept of children with special needs are mostly metaphors such as "flower", "gem", "sapling" and "baby". The metaphors produced were examined in two aspects: emphasizing the weak aspects (needing support) of the child with special needs or emphasizing his/her strengths. In the context of emphasizing weaknesses, the approach to children with special needs is seen as innocent, fragile, sensitive and in need of protection. In the context of emphasizing strengths, there is an emphasis on getting the reward of labour and being rare. This confirms the findings of different studies examining approaches to children with special needs (Dayı, 2020; Efilti et al., 2021; Kazu and Yıldırım, 2021).

It may be good for school administrators to see children with special needs as passive individuals who need protection in the context of taking some precautions for them. However, the desired point is to adopt an approach where the strengths of children with special needs are seen, and their rights are ensured. At this point, it may be recommended that school administrators be provided with more systematic training regarding individuals with special needs. Furthermore, it may be recommended for all stakeholders to briefly introduce special education methods and emphasize that special education is a systematic process.

This research aimed to examine the metaphorical perceptions of school administrators, teachers and candidate teachers working in only one city regarding the concepts of special education and special needs. Nonetheless, conducting more in-depth interviews with school administrators, teachers and candidate teachers on these issues and organizing services in line with these interviews may be recommended for further research.

Declarations

Ethics statements

In this study, research and ethics committee permissions were obtained from the relevant university and the Directorate of National Education.

Informed consent

Participants were school administrators who volunteered to participate in the study. Voluntary participation was taken into consideration. Participants were given code names, and their identities were concealed.

Competing interests

No potential financial conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Authors' contributions

Two authors took equal part in the conduct and reporting of the research.

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