Views of Classroom Teachers Concerning Students with Reading Difficulties

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Abstract

This study aimed to try to understand the views and attitudes of classroom teachers concerning students with reading difficulties. Data was collected using the semi-structured interview technique, which is among the qualitative data collection techniques. The researcher prepared a semi-structured interview with 5 questions to be addressed to classroom teachers. The findings were assessed under the headings "determination of reading difficulties", "reasons for reading difficulties", "effect of reading difficulties", "methods used by teachers to cope with reading difficulties" and "expectations of help". Teachers generally stated that they determined the presence of reading difficulties through knowing students' families, their own occupational experiences, students who were behind in class and the characteristics of their students. They associated the reasons for students having reading difficulties primarily with familial problems and then mental and psychological problems. They generally cope with reading difficulties by offering extra classes and giving homework. Teachers state that it is noteworthy that families often request cooperation. Considering the findings of this study, teachers think that the parents of students are central to the reasons behind and solutions to reading difficulties. Moreover, it is seen that children with reading difficulties are exposed to bullying by peers despite all efforts to create a positive classroom environment.

Keywords: Reading difficulties, views of primary teachers, qualitative research

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Introduction

The process of reading is defined as following a written text with the eyes, comprehending its meaning and vocalizing it when necessary (Sidekli and Yangın, 2005). Literature involves a number of reading definitions and the ability to read is generally expressed as the ability of cognitive and motor skills to vocalize symbols by working together. When students start primary school, they are subjected to certain preparatory exercises before they learn how to read. Students are prepared for reading and writing by introducing them to their classes and the school environment, providing them with orientation and conducting look-tell, draw-paint and line exercises (Eryaman, 2008; Akyol, 2013). The process of reading preparation is followed by reading education via the sound-based sentence method. Starting with the phase of feeling and recognizing the sounds, the sound-based sentence method continues with writing and reading the letters. Reading education is completed through reading the letters, syllables, transiting from syllables to words and finally by reading sentences in free texts. Teachers should conduct the reading education by keeping in mind that the ability to read is a process of inference that is supposed to be fluent, strategic and lifelong, and that children should be motivated to read (Akyol, 2013). Reading is a complex ability and there are various factors, which might involve physiological and psychological disorders and mental malfunctions that affect the process of reading. Reading difficulties consist of the inability to read fluently, the inability to recognize words, having a limited vocabulary and failing to comprehend what is read (Rasinski, Padak and Fawcett, 2010). The Glossary for Special Education states that there may be a brain-based learning problem and that individuals display a lower reading performance than expected although they have normal intelligence levels (Sucuoğlu, Diken, Demir, Ünlü and Şen, 2010). In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, the concept of dyslexia is described as problems with fluent word recognition, poor decoding and poor spelling abilities under the title of with impairment in reading (DSM-5, 2013). In the Special Education Services Regulation of the Ministry of National Education in Turkey the concept of "dyslexia" is considered among the special learning disabilities and an individual with special learning disabilities is defined as

"An individual who requires special education and an educational support service due to difficulties in listening, speaking, reading, writing, syllabifying, maintaining attention or conducting mathematical procedures, which may emerge in one or more of the processes of obtaining the information that is needed for comprehending and using language either in written form or orally." (Ministry of National Education, 2006).

Harris and Sipay (1990) identified reading difficulties as indicating a significantly lower reading age and learning potential than what is expected in successful reading and that it changes according to the cultural, lingual and educational experiences of students. Akyol emphasised that weak readers are individuals who fail in adapting their preliminary knowledge into reading in the process of learning of read and who use auxiliary strategies when they are unable to comprehend the texts; who read purposelessly; have no faith in the benefits of reading; fail to distinguish inconsistencies; have a lower ability to use hints and guesses; and fail in tests (Akyol, 2013). Sidekli (2010) identified that struggling readers generally made mistakes like misreading, skipping syllables/letters and adding letters, repeating words and syllabifying.

It has been emphasized that while good readers have a higher motivation and more advanced comprehension skills and vocabulary, weak readers have fewer skills and they avoid the act of reading (Cited from Stanovich by Yıldız and Akyol, 2011). Students with reading difficulties frequently make reading mistakes such as skipping words, adding words, misreading, repeating, inverting and ignoring punctuation (Akyol, 2013). As well as these mistakes, insufficient motivation and the academic failure of students decrease their reading motivation and cause a psychological and sociological regression in students with reading difficulties.

Yıldız (2013) emphasised that there is a direct proportion between the time allocated by readers for reading and the increase of the amount of reading. In order to increase the reading motivation of students, teachers are required to allocate more time for their students with reading difficulties and increase the duration of reading in general. In their study, Ateş, Yıldırım and Yıldız

(2010) concluded that teachers did not have exact information about the reasons for reading and writing difficulties and the nature of these difficulties, and they felt incompetent in terms of educating students suffering from them.

This study aimed to try to understand the views and attitudes of classroom teachers concerning students with reading difficulties. With regard to the study's objective, the attempt was made to answer the following questions:

- What might be the reasons for reading difficulties?
- How do teachers cope with reading difficulties?
- How does reading difficulties affect a child's life?

Method

This study was conducted from a qualitative perspective. The literature includes many definitions of qualitative research. In general, qualitative research can be defined as a type of research that embodies certain philosophies and approaches based on a number of areas of application such as anthropology, sociology and education (Merriam, 2013).

Study Group

The study group consisted of five classroom teachers working in the provinces of Kastamonu and Çankırı in Turkey in the fall term of the school year 2015–2016. Participants had different classroom levels and occupational experiences. They were coded as T1, T2, T3, T4 and T5.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected using the semi-structured interview technique, which is among qualitative data collection techniques, and the aim was to try to understand the views of classroom teachers concerning their students with reading difficulties. The semi-structured interview technique neither provides as much independence for researchers and participants as the unstructured interview technique nor involves limited questions and clear answers like the structured interview technique. Being the middle of the three techniques, the semi-structured interview technique is a practical interview technique that is used frequently (Merriam, 2013). The researcher prepared semi-structured interview questions involving five questions to be addressed to classroom teachers. Teachers were reached via the purposeful sampling method. The reason for selecting the purposeful sampling method was that it would be able to provide rich data for the study objective (Patton, 2014). The sample was selected under the condition that teachers had a student with reading difficulties in their classrooms. Before starting the interviews, each participant was informed about the study objective, the voluntary basis of participation and that the data to be acquired from them would only be used for scientific purposes, and they were asked to sign consent forms. Individual interviews lasted for approximately 25 minutes and were recorded on tape recorders. After deciphering the data, the analysis process was begun using a strategy of inductive and comparative analysis. Similar and common concepts that occurred many times among the written documents that were read by the researcher were written on the code list and interesting pattern terms were recorded on a separate document. Categories and themes were formed by associating the concepts with each other.

Results

This part involves the assessment of the data and interpretations concerning the teachers. During the interviews each teacher was asked, 'Do you have a student with reading difficulties?, 'How did you determine this?', 'What do you think are the causes of these difficulties?', 'How does the problem of reading difficulties affect children?', 'What do you do with students with reading difficulties?' and 'What else can be done to remove this problem experienced by students?'. The answers were assessed within the context of their content and the study findings were collected under five dimensions (determination of reading difficulties, reasons for reading difficulties, effect of

reading difficulties, methods for teachers to cope with reading difficulties, expectations of help). In this part the concepts, the themes formed by the concepts and five headings associated with the themes were presented together with quotations from the participants.

Determination of Reading Difficulties

The teacher's means of determining which children had reading difficulty were separated into three different categories. These were "experience", "educational process" and "student's characteristics". Table 1 shows the data acquired.

Table 1. Teachers' views regarding the determination of reading difficulties

Categories	Determination of reading difficulty	Teacher's code
Experience	Knowledge of the environment	T1
	Occupational experience	T1,T5
	Knowledge of the families	T1,T5
	Pedagogical knowledge	T5
Educational process	Left behind	T2,T3,T5
	Observation	T2
	Does not put hand up	T3
	Listening to oral reading	T3,T4
	Instruction fetched	T5
Student's characteristics	Toddler	T2,T3
	Difficulty holding a pen	T2
	Reluctance to read	T3
	Irrelevant to the course	T2

Examining the table it is observed that teachers determined that students had reading difficulty under three categories. The sub-category of "knowledge of the families" under the category of "experience" involves the codes given to teachers' home visits and knowing parents at the beginning of school year. 2 out of 5 participants determined that students had reading difficulty based on their occupational experience and the opportunity to know the families. Examining the category of "educational process", while 3 out of 5 participants determined that students had reading difficulty because they were behind in the class, 2 out of 5 participants determined this while conducting oral reading in their classrooms. One of the teachers stated *"He always prefers to go more slowly because he makes mistakes, as he seems to be a bit scared. But other students get ahead of him as they are more active. He, on the other hand, remains the same. He always faces being overtaken" (T3)* to explain why the student with reading difficulty was always behind the others. In addition, the participants touched upon the emotional and physical properties of their students and 2 out of 5 participants stated that their students were toddlers: *"Both of these children are like babies. They get excessive attention at home. They are just kids; they have little daydreams and like drawing" (T3).* Another participant explained; *"He certainly had no interest in the lesson. He was entirely a play-loving child. When he came here, he was 60 months old, in other words 5 years old. I demand that children be at least 66 months old when they start school and warn families to never send their children to school unless they have received nursery class education. In my opinion, adaptation to the school culture is the most important thing. It is not that easy" (T2).*

Reasons for Reading Difficulties

Analysing the answers to the question, 'Why do you think the students with reading difficulties have this problem?' it is seen that there are five categories. These are "family", "personal differences", "education", "emotional factors" and "environmental factors". Table 2 shows the data acquired.

Table 2. Teachers' views regarding the reasons for reading difficulties

Categories	Reasons for reading difficulties	Teacher's code
Family	Familial problems	T1,T2,T3,T4,T5
	Insufficient cultural knowledge	T1,T2,T3,T5
	Wrong attitudes in families	T1,T2,T3,T5
	Financial problems	T1, T5
Individual differences	Age factor	T2
	Physical inadequacy	T2,T4, T5
	Mental factors	T1,T2,T3,T4,T5
Education	Failure to repeat the process of reading	T1,T3,T4
	Not completing homework	T1
	Instruction technique	T1
	Lack of preschool education	T2,T4
Emotional factors	Dislike of reading	T1
	Out of step with school culture	T2
	Not settling down to lessons	T3
	Attitude towards reading	T3
	Psychological factors	T1,T3,T5
Environmental factors	Lack of role models	T1
	Crowded classroom	T2
	Lack of stimulus to read	T4
	Living environment	T5

The category of family consists of the sub-categories "familial problems", "wrong attitudes within families", "insufficient cultural knowledge of families" and "financial problems". The sub-category of "familial problems" consists of the codes "family indifference", "time limitation of families" and "separated families". All the participants stated that family indifference would cause reading difficulties. The sub-category of "wrong attitudes within families" consists of the codes "intervention of older family members in children's education", "reflection of family problems on children", "wrong language training", "failure of control", "denying child's reading difficulty", and "ignorance of education". Examining the table, 4 out of 5 participants stated that students with reading difficulties had that problem due to the wrong attitudes of families and an inadequate cultural understanding among families. Regarding the intervention of older family members in the children's education, which is among the problems of extended families, one of the participants stated *"The grandmother plays a key role as protector. When my student does not do his homework, she never lets me get angry with him. If my student fights with one of his friends, she comes to the classroom to beat that child. My student is so precious to them"(T2)* which reveals one of the wrong attitudes of families. The same participant expressed the following regarding wrong language training, which is among the wrong attitudes found in families: *"The child had had a mass under his tongue when he was younger. He had had an operation. When he started primary school, I had a trouble with understanding what he said. For example, he would say 'pee-pee' in the wrong way and his parents would repeat his exact words. He also had some difficulty in talking and his parents never corrected him" (T2).* The sub-category of "insufficient cultural knowledge in families" consists of codes "lower educational level of families" and "denial of child's reading difficulty". Examining the category of "personal differences", all the participants thought that mental factors (difficulty in comprehending, misperceptions, mental deficiency, reading difficulties and intelligence type) caused reading difficulties in children. One of the participants stated *"The process of reading is a challenging process. They learn, shape and combine the sounds and give them a meaning there. However, reading alone is not enough. I ask them what they understand from texts"(T3)*, which emphasizes that mental factors cause reading difficulties. Examining the category of "education", 3 out of 5 participants gave the code of "failure to repeat the process of reading" as an answer. Examining the category of "emotional factors" ("out of step with school culture", "not settling down to lessons", "dislike of reading", "attitude toward reading", "psychological factors") 3 out of 5 participants gave the sub-

category of "psychological factors" as a reason for reading difficulties. One of the participants stated *"A child's quality of reading also matters. Some children, especially those with a mathematical intelligence, may not like to read" (T1)*, which is an example of one of the emotional factors.

Effect of Reading Difficulties

Participants were asked, 'How does the problem of reading difficulties affect children?' and four categories of effects were formed. These were "emotional", "mental", "behavioural" and "other". Table 3 shows the data acquired.

Table 3. Teachers' views regarding the effects of reading difficulties on the child's life

Categories	Effects of reading difficulties	Teacher's code
Emotional	Feeling sad	T1
	Introversion	T1,T3,T4
	Feeling of inadequacy	T3
	Disappointment	T3
	Acceptance of failure	T3
	Feeling afraid	T3
	Low self esteem	T3
Mental	Inability to perceive the whole	T1
	Difficulty in understanding	T1,T3
	Difficulty in comprehension	T1
	Academic failure	T4
Behavioural	Absence	T1
	Irresponsibility	T2,T3,T4,T5
	Extinction behaviour	T3
	Building game and inclusion	T3
	Not included in games	T4
	Causing harm	T5
	Choosing friends at their own	T4
	level	T5
	Disorganized	T4
	Not getting along with others	T1
	Shy	T2,T5
	Incompatible	
Other	Bullied by peers/put down	T1,T3,T4
	Remaining alone	T4

Examining the table, the effects on students with reading difficulties are generally observed as introversion in terms of the emotions, misperceptions while reading in terms of intelligence and irresponsible behaviours in terms of behaviours. Moreover, 3 out of 5 participants stated that students with reading difficulties were exposed to bullying and felt put down by others. One of the participants stated, *"Children with reading difficulties are a bit introverted. They avoid everything about reading as much as possible" (T4)*. This expresses how reading difficulties emotionally affects a student. The same participant expressed the following regarding the students who would practice bullying: *"When a successful student recognizes an unsuccessful student, he might start bullying him because children are a bit cruel. They do not have much compassion. They will never accept deficiencies" (T4)*.

Methods of Coping with Reading Difficulties

Activities performed by teachers for their students with reading difficulties were separated into 4 categories. These were "additional study", "family-teacher cooperation", "management of learning-teaching process" and "motivation". Table 4 shows the data acquired.

Table 4. Teachers' views regarding methods of coping with reading difficulties

Categories	Applications	Teacher's code
Additional work	Paired reading	T1,T3,T4
	Reading in unison	T1
	Summarize	T3
	Repeating	T1
	Additional courses	T1, T2,T4,T5
	Behavioural education	T1
	Instruction in classroom rules	T1
	Peer tutoring	T2,T3
	Dictation study	T2,T4
	Teaching the letters	T2
	Student-centered teaching	T3,T5
	Giving responsibility	T3,T4
	Reading time	T3
	Reading race	T4
	Memorization	T4
	Giving homework	T2,T3,T4,T5
Parent-teacher relations	Discussing with family	T1,T2,T4
	Sending note to family	T2
	Giving reading course to family	T1
Management of learning-teaching process	Disciplining	T1,T5
	Creating positive classroom environment	T3
	Asking advice from experienced colleague	T5
	Literature review	T5
	Giving feedback	T2,T4
	Assessment	T2
	Giving material	T2
Motivation	Rewarding	T1,T2,T4
	Guidance	T2,T4
	Encouragement	T2,T3,T4
	Enhancement	T2
	Teaching self-control	T3
	Setting targets	T4
	Making a sensation	T4
	Handing out books according to interest	T4
	Subscribing to library	T1

As seen in Table 4, the activities performed by teachers for their students with reading difficulties were collected under the categories of "additional study", "parent-teacher relationship", "management of learning-teaching process" and "motivation". Examining the category of "additional study", while the majority of teachers (4 out of 5 participants) stated that they gave homework and additional courses to their students with reading difficulties, 3 out of 5 participants stated that they did paired reading. Regarding the additional courses one of the participants stated: *"In addition to this, I think about this in my time off, which we all do very often. I mean, classroom teachers mostly spend their free time on their students. This is valid for normal students as well. Because we, the classroom teachers, are never at peace unless we are able to make the children successful"* (T5). This expresses the reason for extra classes. In the category of "parent-teacher relationships", the majority of participants stated that they had discussions with the families of students with reading difficulties. One of the participants, who put family and especially the mother at the centre in terms of success, stated: *"This is a triangle. This is a tripod: Mother, student and teacher. The teacher suffices up to a certain point. I even organized an emergency meeting for my student once. Care from the family can achieve*

anything. After all, fathers in our culture do not take much responsibility. If something happens, the fathers will blame the mothers... Yes, we have a group of people who spend all their time in cafes and avoid taking responsibility" (T1). In the category of the "management of learning-teaching process", 2 out of 5 participants stated that they coped with reading difficulties by disciplining the students who had reading difficulty. Similarly, 2 out of 5 participants stated that they coped with reading difficulties by giving feedback. Examining the category of "motivation" it can be seen that 3 out of 5 participants encouraged and rewarded their students with reading difficulties. One of the participants stated: *"For example, I have enrolled my students in the library. As an entire class, we have decided to read at least 30 books by the end of May and I will have dinner with the winner" (T1).* This expresses the encouragement and reward given to students. Another participant stated: *"For example, when you reward a class, you should reward not only the successful, but also the others. Then those children will also have a chance to succeed...Small rewards like chocolate, a pencil or stars will work well." (T4).* This expresses the encouragement and reward given to students with reading difficulties.

Expectations of Help

Participants were asked, 'What else could be done to remove this problem?' and 3 different categories were created. These were "family", "school" and "educational system". Table 5 shows the data acquired.

Table 5. Teachers' views regarding expectations of help for their students with reading difficulties

Categories	What can be done	Teacher's code
	Parent-teacher relationship	*T1,T2,T3*
	Priority given to the child	*T1,T3*
	Family support	*T1,T4*
	Warm home environment	*T1,T5*
	Avoiding out-of-school visits	*T1,T3*
	Being with the child	*T1*
Family	Setting fixed hours of sleep	*T1*
	Protecting the child	*T3*
	Creating a disciplined lifestyle	*T3*
	Respecting the child	*T4*
	Quality time	*T4*
	Raising awareness	*T4*
	Buying interesting books	*T4*
	School administration support	*T1*
School	Guidance counsellor support	*T1*
	Other teachers' support	*T2*
	Authority of teachers	*T1*
Education system	Parents' education	*T1,T3*
	Objective inclusion report	*T5*

3 out of 5 participants gave their expectations of the families of children with reading difficulties as: Keeping in touch with teachers, supporting their children, not visiting relatives and friends during school hours, creating a warm home environment, setting their children's hours for sleeping, spending quality time with their children, being with their children, giving their children an awareness of responsibility, shaping a disciplined lifestyle for their children, respecting, prioritizing and protecting their children. Regarding the parent-teacher relationship, one of the participants stated, *"If we don't have a good dialogue with parents, the children won't feel attached to us. Children of parents who have good and respectful dialogue with teachers are more disciplined, more respectful and more attached to their teachers" (T3).* Another participant stated, *"Have you ever noticed that children never talk about their conversations with their teachers at home? They are like grown-ups at school. Have you realized this? They talk about the familial and personal problems with their*

teachers, but they never talk about them at home because they are always considered as children who wouldn't understand anything at home." (T4). This emphasizes the necessity for parents to pay attention to their children. The expectation of the participants in the category "school" was determined as having guidance counsellors who would enable students with reading difficulties to repeat reading in Turkish lessons and help them with this. In the category of "education", on the other hand, 1 of the 5 participants emphasized the necessity for teachers to have authority and 2 out of 5 participants emphasized the necessity of organizing family seminars. Participants expected the school administration to offer cooperation between school, family and teacher.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to try to understand the views and attitudes of classroom teachers concerning students with reading difficulties. Thus, the discussion will be shaped around this objective. The classroom interviewed expressed their views concerning students with reading difficulties. In accordance with the findings of the study, the interview data were collected under five dimensions. These were "the determination of reading difficulties", "reasons for reading difficulties", "effect of reading difficulties on children", "methods used by teachers to cope with reading difficulties" and "expectations of help". Participants determined that reading difficulties was present with the help of their experiences, based on the characteristics of students in the specific phase of education. Among the participants 6 stated that they determined reading difficulties based on experience, 8 based their determination on the educational process and 5 based it on the characteristics of students. Teachers also stated that they determined that reading difficulties was present as their students were behind in the class in the educational process. Students with reading difficulties fall behind their peers and they have a lower level of academic achievement. In his study, Yıldız (2013) concluded that there was a very strong connection between academic achievement and the components of reading. The result of this study parallels the views of the participants in this study. Participants stated that they determined reading difficulty was present while conducting oral reading with students during the educational process. During oral reading, children with reading difficulties may read incorrectly, by inverting, skipping, adding and repeating words (Akyol, 2013). There are many studies aimed at finding and removing these mistakes during oral reading (Dündar and Akyol, 2014; Yüksel, 2010; Çaycı and Demir, 2006; Duran and Sezgin, 2012; Taşkaya, 2010; Çeliktürk, Sezgin and Akyol, 2015; Özkara, 2010). Among the participating teachers, only one participant stated that he determined the presence of reading difficulties with the help of his pedagogical knowledge. Accordingly, it could be suggested that the teachers participating in the study had too insufficient pedagogical knowledge to determine the presence of reading difficulties.

Among the participants 15 associated the reason for reading difficulties with families, 9 with personal differences, 7 with educational and emotional factors, and 4 with environmental factors. It was emphasized that the family was the biggest reason for reading difficulties and participants generally mentioned familial problems. Based on this result it could be suggested that families have a great effect on the reading difficulty of their children. Familial problems are followed by an insufficient cultural awareness and misguided attitudes in families. Familial problems consist of family indifference, time limitations in families and separated families. This finding runs parallel with the study of Altun, Ekiz and Odabaşı (2010).

With regard to "family", participants related the reason for reading difficulties to mental factors, which are personal differences between individuals. Mental factors may consist of mental deficiency, intelligence types, as well as comprehension, perception and reading disorder; these mental factors cause reading difficulties and this problem may be removed by suitable intervention methods (Kurtdede, Fidan and Akyol, 2011). Whether emotional factors cause reading difficulties or reading difficulties emotionally affects children remains a mystery (Razon, 1982). 15 participants stated that reading difficulties affected the behaviours of children and children with reading difficulties displayed irresponsible behaviours. According to this study finding; it could be suggested that children with reading difficulties may display irresponsible behaviours. 9 participants also stated that children were emotionally affected and became introverted.

Among the teachers, 28 participants stated that they coped with reading difficulties by giving extra classes and 5 participants stated that they coped with this problem through cooperation between families and teachers. This finding shows that teachers arrange extra classes to tackle the reading difficulties of students by giving up their free time and thereby try to overcome this difficulty. In their study concerning the difficulties experienced by classroom teachers Altun et al. (2010) stated that teachers generally coped with reading difficulty through reading hours and rewards, whereas in this study, teachers were observed to cope with reading difficulty through giving homework and behavioural training. On the other hand, Cooper, Civey and Patall (2006) suggested that giving homework to primary school students would not affect their academic achievement.

Among the participants 19 stated that students with reading difficulties generally expected help from their families and 3 from school. It was concluded that even though teachers mostly desired to cooperate with families, they kept family-teacher cooperation at a minimum. According to the statements of the participants, it is seen that they variously felt themselves to be insufficient, oppressive, uneasy and devoted individuals. However, they wanted to use all opportunities, to be a role model, to raise awareness, motivate and guide others, to communicate with families, to feel responsible and not to be academically inadequate. Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that seminars on reading difficulties could be specifically organized for teachers and parents. Teachers could organize daily reading hours and oral reading not only in the first grade, but also throughout primary school. They could also teach, especially to their students with reading difficulties, self-regulation strategies and give them the motivation to read. In addition, it is recommended that reading specialists be trained and employed for developing the academic skills of students with reading difficulties.

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