


## School Principals' Opinions on the Schooling in Turkey During the COVID-19 Pandemic<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*An education crisis has emerged during the pandemic, and the purpose and existence of schooling has begun being questioned again. For this reason, this paper discusses school principals' opinions regarding the changes in schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research uses the phenomenological design, and the participants of the research consist of school principals. The data were collected using the semi-structured interview technique, with content analysis being used to analyze the data. According to the study's findings, school principals were determined to have difficulties in the fields of strategic leadership, instructional leadership, and social leadership during the pandemic. Regarding school-related difficulties during the pandemic, important benefits were emphasized for school processes under the themes of achievements focused on capacity building, socially oriented achievements, and goal-oriented achievements. The themes of administrative priorities, social priorities, and developmental priorities emerged regarding how to reduce adjustment problems to schooling during and after the pandemic.*

### Article Info

#### Article History:

Received  
February 8, 2022

Accepted:  
May 30, 2022

#### Keywords:

achievements,  
difficulties of the  
pandemic, COVID-19,  
crisis management,  
experiences, leadership,  
school principals,  
schooling

<sup>1</sup> This article was partly presented at the European Network for Improving Research and Development in Educational Leadership and Management Conference (ENIRDELM) 2021 in Norway.

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**Cite as:**

Erol, E. & Altunay, E. (2022). School principals' opinions on the schooling in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership*, 7(2), 395-433. <https://doi.org/10.30828/real.1070087>

**Introduction**

COVID-19 was first diagnosed on December 31, 2019 in Wuhan, China, and shortly after it was declared a pandemic (global epidemic) by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, many countries decided to close schools, colleges, and universities to prevent the spread of the virus as it had begun affecting a very large part of the population of the community. This led to a serious crisis in terms of meeting societies' educational needs. A crisis can be expressed as a serious and dangerous situation that negatively affects many people and may cause death (Filiz, 2007). A crisis is a difficult moment or period of depression in the life of a person, organization, or society. Crises create tension and uncertainty in terms of social life, can occur gradually or suddenly, and can cover a narrow or broad area (Akyüz, 2018). Based on social experiences, many crises are known to have been overcome until today. However, each crisis causes many changes and leaves traces in social institutions as well as people's attitudes, thoughts, and feelings. In this sense, criticisms have appeared alongside the education crisis that emerged from the point of view of educational institutions during the pandemic regarding the purpose of schools and the way they realize their purpose; even new perspectives on schools as a concept have begun to form.

As one of the most important institutions of human life, the institution of education temporarily stopped providing face-to-face



education due to COVID-19, after which each country tried to structure new teaching experiences according to countries' own opinions. Due to the need for education continuing despite school closures, distance education applications based on information and communications technology (ICT) began to replace face-to-face education. Many countries have established synchronous online and offline courses alongside a reduction in existing practices (i.e., face-to-face learning) to support teachers' and school heads' communication with students and parents. Due to the pandemic, many countries such as Argentina, China, Egypt, France, Denmark, Mexico, and the United States of America use online platforms connected to the Internet for continuous learning (Ahlström et al., 2021; Chang & Satako, 2020; Pollack, 2021). Some countries such as Croatia, China, France, Islamic Republic of Iran, Senegal, Spain, Peru, and present learning content with the help of television and other media; however, and some countries such as Costa Rica, Islamic Republic of Iran, Thailand also use existing practices to maintain communication between teachers and students (Can, 2020).

Turkey has applied different strategies for different education levels. In the first year of the pandemic, the Republic of Turkey's Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and Higher Education Institution (YÖK), which are responsible for public education in the country, conducted education and training remotely, both synchronously, and asynchronously, using digital tools in secondary and higher education. However, diluted face-to-face education continued in basic education (kindergarten and primary schools). Although these strategies being applied to different levels have political, economic, and sociological sources, the main premise involves the need for social isolation and the government's isolation

policy in order to increase physical distance for groups that are likely to be adversely affected by the pandemic. In this respect, the authoritarian policies and measures applied to the upper age group to control the pandemic in Turkey showed similar characteristics to those around the world. In addition, MoNE requested the use of the Educational Content Network (EBA) platform with regard to synchronous distance learning and the channel TRT EBA TV for asynchronous distance learning. Although these tools greatly assisted teachers in maintaining education during the pandemic, MoNE had to retrain teachers and school principals on developing new distance learning software and using distance learning materials. In general, the new teaching experiences show that countries have interpreted new conditions and distance learning in various ways (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2020; Klaiman et al., 2011).

Education is a development process that aims for individuals to become effective and productive members of the society in which they live and to live in harmony with other members of society (Cirik, 2008). In this process, individuals live in interaction with the environment, and individual learning is shaped according to individual and environmental factors. In order to increase the success of this process, taking students' environment into consideration has great importance. Defining a student's environment as school-centered causes it to expand to an environment that extends beyond the classroom, school, and family to the local society, national society, and universal society. Therefore, taking into account the characteristics, cultural diversity, and variations of students' in- and out-of-school environment throughout the education process contributes to the schooling process. In addition, schools should try to create a structure that is effective at responding to students' educational needs, at



increasing the quality of education, and at increasing students' success in line with the realities of their time. Because the world is changing very fast, schools must be dynamic, flexible, and open to innovations, for an educational institution that fails to keep up with the changes may cause it to become dysfunctional. The fact that schools have not fulfilled some of their functions due to the COVID-19 pandemic is a significant loss in terms of education and community life. According to the latest the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report, Turkey was among the top four countries to close schools for the longest time in 2020. Therefore, the failure to meet society's educational needs should be considered as a failure to provide the *right to education and training*, which falls within the scope of the basic human rights listed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as a failure to provide *economic and social rights*, as stated in the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey. In addition, viewing the concept of education only as *online teaching* can be considered a perspective that limits education and schooling. At the same time, the potential that online education has to reinforce the pre-existing social inequalities of students whose position is unfavorable with regard to accessing education (Bingöl-Schrijer, 2020) also creates problems in terms of ensuring social justice.

In terms of the future of education and schooling, inferences must be made based on teaching experiences during the pandemic process. For schools to maintain their function, ensuring schools' effectiveness and transforming their roles are necessary. In this sense, education administrators and school leaders have great importance in preparing schools for change. First, the school closures due to COVID-19 have increased uncertainty and caused disagreements about what and how to teach (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

However, nearly every crisis results in at least some trauma for everyone directly involved or affected by it and has an impact on school strategies, processes, and procedures in a way that makes fully recovering what has been lost impossible. Therefore, leading the recovery of the school community after a crisis involves a delicate balancing act that requires sensitivity to the needs of those affected by the crisis as well as the need to return to standard work routines as quickly as possible in the eyes of stakeholders and absorb the operational impact of the crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012). The crisis management process should involve identifying the possible problems and danger factors for the area of work and the future, identifying the appropriate types of responses and struggles, implementing measures to cope with the crisis, and evaluating reactions (Demirtaş, 2000).

According to Mayer et al. (2008), crisis management for most organizations involves a linear three-stage strategy: prevention, response, and recovery. The most common classification in the literature states the process to have three stages: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis (Alağaçalı, 2006). The stage common to most classifications is post-crisis recovery. This involves needing to get the crisis under control, to evaluate it, to learn from its shortcomings and experiences, and to restructure (Filiz, 2007). What needs to be done is to successfully manage the crisis and the chaotic situation it creates and to overcome it with minimal damage. Therefore, new experiences need to be taken advantage of for planning the future (i.e., returning to school after the pandemic). The need exists to evaluate the conditions for returning to school and to develop foresight in order to start over. After the crisis, the important things are to get things back to normal as quickly as possible and to clarify the uncertainties for all school members. In this sense, because the existential purpose of the school leader is to keep



the school organization (i.e., its members) united and to solve problems, strategic leadership characteristics are required for a school to be effective and for bringing appropriate solutions to the problems (Akyüz, 2018). Strategic leadership in the face of uncertainty can contribute to seeing the future, setting a vision, providing flexibility, and empowering employees (Ireland & Hitt, 1999). On the other hand, when evaluated in the context of critical theory, protecting the benefits of those affected by the education system requires the members of the system to act rationally. Otherwise, distorted communication strategies will be accepted as legitimate, the environment of free speech in society will become lost, and educational institutions may emerge where only certain masses are able to access education. With Habermas' self-reflection strategy, school members can only be liberated when they understand the wrong parts of their forms of consciousness and the challenges they are subjected to (Geuss, 1981). In other words, reflexive thinking can eliminate the illusions about the school that emerged during the pandemic process and develop a liberated consciousness.

Some studies in the literature that will be associated with the school process during the COVID-19 pandemic process investigated how the pandemic process has shaped education (Anderson, 2020; Külekçi-Akyavuz & Çakın, 2020; Sarı & Nayır, 2020) and its effect on educational leadership (Harris, 2020), as well as presented solutions for problems. Some studies are seen to have evaluated schooling (Huber & Helm, 2020), with researchers having found socio-psychological problems and opportunities after the pandemic (Koh et al., 2020) or looking at how the process has reflected on teachers (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). In addition, the studies from Ahlström et al. (2021), Jarvis and Mishra (2020), and Netolicky (2020) examined the

difficulties encountered in terms of school leadership during the pandemic. The studies from Oplatka and Crawford (2021) and Pollack (2021) discussed school leadership approaches during the pandemic. In this context, this study differs from the studies in the literature in that it evaluates the experiences involving the changes (e.g., difficulties, achievements related to the school process, and reducing school adjustment problems) in schooling holistically using empirical data based on school principals. Social distancing has become a new reality for many with the measures enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, with school closures having initiated a rapid transition from traditional education to distance education for many teachers and students (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic may end after a while in all countries, or human beings may survive by learning to live with its long-term effects. However, both cases need to evaluate the return to school for a fresh start and to develop foresight for the future. In this direction, the main purpose of this research is to investigate school principals' opinions about the changes in schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic and to offer suggestions for eliminating the problems encountered. In this direction, the research questions are as follows:

1. What are school principals' experiences regarding the difficulties experienced with their school during the pandemic?
2. What are school principals' experiences regarding the achievements related to schooling during the pandemic?
3. What are school principals' experiences with reducing school adjustment problems during and after the pandemic?





## Method

This study has preferred the phenomenological design, a qualitative research method, because it aims to obtain in-depth information about a specific situation. The phenomenological design is also a suitable research method for obtaining detailed information from people who experience the phenomena that occur in different forms in daily life and therefore have different understandings and comprehensions and who have basic characteristics that can express these phenomena (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2017). In this sense, using the phenomenological design has been deemed appropriate for determining the meanings school principals ascribe to their experiences in line with the changes in schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because COVID-19 quickly went from a distant, foreign threat to a phenomenon present in our everyday lives, the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the nature of school principals' work across the globe. Today, principals are expected to be exceptional managers and excellent leaders at a time when the pace of change has increased exponentially (Pollack, 2020). In this study, we question whether the principals were able to capture experiences and meanings accurately in this process or just opinions. In fact, we use phenomenology to attempt to simply approach their experiences by dealing with the meanings they represent. We analyze broad research questions and examples in depth by comparing the experiences of different people to get the gist of the phenomenon and have found discoveries and unanticipated themes. We phenomenologically examined in depth the meanings attributed to the facts based on individual experiences as the focal point from every angle through focused in-depth interviews in an attempt to obtain the psychological essence of their experiences.

## Participants

This study uses the purposeful sampling technique for determining the sample, as the aims are to discover and understand school principals' experiences during the pandemic and to gain a deeper insight into their experiences, and the purposive sampling technique allows for in-depth study of situations that are thought to be rich in information (Patton, 2015). Considering the subjective nature of the research, maximum diversity sampling is preferred for forming the participant group. This technique aims to create a relatively small sample that is heterogeneous in various aspects and to determine whether individuals who may be a party to the phenomenon under investigation have common or shared situations. Although the participants may have different characteristics individually, maximum diversity sampling is based on the idea that having certain common experiences in a highly diverse and heterogeneous group is an important finding (Patton, 2015). To do this, the participants in the research were selected from among the school principals working at public primary, secondary, and high schools in the city centers. Different types of applications have been attempted at all three school levels in Turkey during the pandemic. While face-to-face education was mostly maintained in primary schools, diluted face-to-face education was preferred for secondary schools and distance education for high schools. At the same time, we determined that the participant selection criterion should be at least two years of managerial experience, as this allows a principal to know the school organization and evaluate the school processes as a whole.

The researchers decided on a study group of 63 participants, and the saturation point was reached during the interviews. Although a study group of this number is not a common situation in qualitative research, observing similarities in the collected opinions can assist in



learning more from the participants' experiences. The participants are 23 women and 40 men. Although the number of female principals is low, the gender ratios are in line with the distribution of school principals in Turkey. The participants consist of 24 principals working in primary schools, 20 principals working in secondary schools, 17 principals working in general high schools, and 12 principals working in vocational high schools. Of the principals, 29 are between the ages of 31-40, 24 are between the ages of 41-50, and 11 are 51 years or older. When examining the principals' educational status, 52 are seen to have bachelor's degrees and 11 to have master's degrees. When examining the managerial experience of the participants, 14 were determined to have 2-5 years of experience, 20 to have 6-10 years, 13 to have 11-15 years, 14 to have 16-20 years, and 12 to have 21+ years of managerial experience.

### **Data Collection**

This study has utilized the interview technique, which is frequently used in phenomenological research. In order to reveal the experiences and meanings of the phenomena in the interviews, the participants need to be interacted with using open-ended questions and the context needs to be examined in depth through probing questions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2017). When preparing the semi-structured interview form to be used in the interviews, the relevant literature was first scanned, and an item pool was created containing open-ended interview questions for determining the changes in schooling with regard to their pandemic experiences. The next stage selected questions that were deemed appropriate from a pool and revised them according to criteria such as being easy to understand, being subject-oriented, being open-ended, avoiding being directing, not being multidimensional, and consisting of probes. In this way the

draft interview form was prepared. The third stage took field experts' opinions regarding the purpose of the questions, how the questions reflect the content, and the order in which they were asked; in this way, the pilot application form was determined. Afterward, the pilot application form was presented to five school principals outside of the study group and revised within the scope of pilot studies regarding the questions' suitability for the study purpose; in this way, the semi-structured interview form was prepared for implementation.

In the data collection process, the school principals were contacted before the interviews, their consent was obtained, and an appointment was made. The interviews were carried out face-to-face one at a time and voice recorded. The nature of the interviews was informal and conversational, which allowed the researchers to question participants' responses and get more details using probe questions. The phenomenological design supports the purpose of the research, as the school principals have stories and experiences that involve their feelings and moods regarding the practices carried out in the spring and fall semesters during the pandemic.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed in order to identify the structure of the phenomenon's meaning. This consisted of a reflective process, beginning with gaining an initial understanding of the entire texts from the interviews, followed by re-readings to analyze the sections, and lastly reconstructing the text to a new whole that describes the structure of the phenomenon's meaning (Dahlberg et al., 2008). In this context, we conducted an in-depth analysis within which we could explain the broad research questions. In this sense, the data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using content analysis. Content



analysis allows one to identify the meaning, or meanings, of what is presented, and to formulate and classify everything contained within the discourse (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016). The basic processes of content analysis involve gathering similar data within the framework of certain concepts and themes and organizing and interpreting them in a way that the reader can understand (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2017).

Firstly, the voice-recorded interviews were transcribed to the computer environment and converted into text documents. Once completed, the interviews were transcribed and closely read, with copious notes being made. The data analysis approach was interpretative, the intention being to uncover the meanings the individual participants had with their experiences and, through comparison (Chowdhury, 2015), to identify the emerging themes (Galletta, 2013). The second stage involves reading the data obtained from the interviews, determining the common concepts, and performing open coding. The third stage checks the codes based on the sources of differentiation in accordance with the participants' expressions using axial (i.e., focused) coding. The final stage conducts selective (i.e., conceptual) coding, with themes starting to get created by comparing the data with the conceptual framework. The codes were then categorized and the themes were named. Once the meanings relevant to the phenomenon had been identified and no inconsistencies were found, the most abstract level of the analysis (i.e., the essence of the phenomenon) emerged by moving between the parts and the whole (Carlsson-Lalloo et al., 2021). As a result, phenomenology does not prescribe a single method for analyzing data, but it does provide processes that can be applied flexibly while maintaining the analytical focus on exploring participants' experiences.

The research was conducted in compliance with ethical rules upon applying to the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Kütahya Dumlupınar University and obtaining their approval. Before the interviews, the participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the expected benefits, how it would be conducted, the possible risks, and what was expected from them. Their consent was obtained by having them sign a consent form. The semi-structured interview form contains no elements that would offend or disturb the participants. The principals' experiences were additionally coded and conveyed so as to observe the principle of confidentiality.

## Results

Table 1 presents the themes that emerged as a result of data analysis.

**Table 1.**

*Themes Generated as a Result of Data Analysis*

Research Questions	Themes
1. What are school principals' experiences regarding the difficulties with school processes during the pandemic?	Strategic leadership
	Instructional leadership
	Social leadership
2. What are school principals' experiences regarding the achievements related to school process during the pandemic?	Achievements focused on capacity building
	Socially oriented achievements
	Goal-oriented achievements
	Administrative priorities
	Social priorities



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3. What are school principals' experiences regarding reducing school adjustment problems during and after the pandemic? Developmental priorities

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As can be seen in Table 1, nine themes were obtained as a result of the analysis of the data. Accordingly, the themes of *strategic leadership*, *instructional leadership*, and *social leadership* were found in line with the sub-problem of school-related difficulties during the pandemic. In line with the sub-problem of schooling-related achievements during the pandemic, the themes of *capacity-building achievements*, *social achievements*, and *goal-oriented achievements* were formed. The themes of *administrative priorities*, *social priorities*, and *developmental priorities* were identified in line with the sub-problem of priorities in reducing school adjustment problems.

### **School Principals' Areas of Difficulty**

When analyzing the data on the areas where school principals had difficulty during the pandemic, the themes of *strategic leadership*, *instructional leadership*, and *social leadership* were identified. Among these themes, strategic leadership came to the fore the most. The principals emphasized compliance with central decisions, data sharing, management with uncertainties, increasing responsibilities, and providing technical support regarding their views on the theme of strategic leadership. Principals stated having the most difficulties in the area of *managing uncertainties* ( $n = 35$ ) with regard to strategic leadership. In terms of strategic leadership, they emphasized that neither the central organization nor the schools had previously developed a scenario plan for extraordinary situations such as pandemics. Therefore, the principals were identified to have been able to produce short-term solutions for this uncertain environment. When

considering the participant's views regarding this, a quote from one participant's views is as follows:

*We'd make an announcement to our teachers, and the next day the decision would be changed or canceled. Our teachers were embarrassed toward the parents and we were embarrassed toward our teachers. (M1)*

Another issue highlighted under the theme of strategic leadership is *providing technical support*. School principals mentioned some of their attempts at overcoming communication deficiencies for distance education applications. At the same time, the participants were determined to have had problems complying with the central decisions. Under the code of complying with central decisions, the principals mentioned how hard it was for them to constantly change the decisions received from the center. One excerpt from a principal's comments regarding this code is as follows:

*Uncertainties have been my biggest problem. We encountered questions that even my administrative superiors did not know. This got me into trouble. One fellow teacher was asking a question, it was hard for me to tell them I didn't know. I even had a hard time explaining it. It bothered me a lot. For example, on Friday, an official letter came, I announced it to my fellow teachers. On Sunday, a new letter arrived saying that the previous one had been canceled... This information had not only been shared with our teachers, they'd also shared it with the parents. Then we go back to the beginning. For example, this happened for course schedules, course hours, days for coming to school, event announcements, and competition announcements. (M20)*

Regarding sharing the received decisions with stakeholders under the theme of strategic leadership, some opinions stated the information sharing between parents and the school to have been limited. The extraordinary situations brought about by the pandemic conditions



have further increased principals' current responsibilities, and the legal requirement to monitor the process has caused them to have difficulty advancing their education activities.

The second theme regarding the difficulties experienced with schooling is the theme of instructional leadership, which prioritizes teachers who have been unable to reach their instructional goals sufficiently due to educational activities being interrupted during the pandemic. Within the scope of this theme, the participants touched on issues such as planning the online curriculum, monitoring students' progress, evaluating the efficiency of the online course, and ensuring continuity. The most emphasized code under this theme is monitoring students' progress ( $n = 30$ ). This code is more about the difficulties and uncertainties encountered when evaluating teaching activities. The principals stated that teachers have had difficulty evaluating the effectiveness of the lesson process and the school principals to be hesitant about reaching school goals. An excerpt regarding the experiences of school principals stating their difficulty monitoring students' progress is expressed as follows:

*We do tests online from time to time, but we don't know if the student did it themselves or if it was their sibling. We will see the best return for this on the LGS and YKS exams, but we actually have problems monitoring progress in general. (M21)*

Another code that stands out under the theme of instructional leadership is evaluating online course efficiency. School principals stated shortcomings to be present regarding evaluating the achievements of distance education; they stated not being able to be sure of the courses' effectiveness for many reasons such as the short duration of the courses, the large number of students, insufficient student participation, problems connecting to the Internet, the

students' young ages, and insufficient parental support. Also under this theme, the unpredictable and sudden changes created by the pandemic conditions also created various difficulties in terms of *planning the online curriculum* for conducting and operating the courses. One quote from the principals' views for this code is as follows:

*At the top of the areas where we had administrative difficulties in this process was adjusting the curriculum. Opening schools and reducing or increasing course hours as needed are all things that should be done within a plan and program. Saying that we will open schools in 2 days is easy in terms of a sentence. Schools will be open for 2 days, but when schools open for 2 days, but saying what courses will be given to students, which courses will be reduced, which courses will be increased, or whether the course hours of our teachers will be sufficient becomes a problem for each of these. (M14)*

Regarding the theme of instructional leadership, the participants also stated attempting to ensure students' continuity with their lessons. School principals stated that they had difficulty taking measures against high absenteeism in online classes: They created parent WhatsApp groups to ensure continuity, sent warnings to parents, and had teachers monitor the number of students in attendance.

The third theme for school-related difficulties is social leadership and involves principals' communications with stakeholders. The theme of social leadership involves the codes of providing motivation, digital communications with staff, maintaining school-environment communications and relations, and reducing stakeholder concerns. The code that came most to the fore under this theme is providing motivation ( $n = 31$ ). Participants stated that teachers and students lost motivation because face-to-face communication was limited during the pandemic process. Under the code of providing motivation, the



principals stated trying to help their teachers adjust to distance education, especially through communication technologies, despite not being face-to-face. One excerpt from the principals' comments on this code is as follows:

*In order to keep the motivation of the teachers high, we held an online meeting once a week and exchanged views in a conversational mood. Sometimes I tried to make them realize that we were with them by making one-on-one phone calls. (M25)*

Regarding the code of maintaining school-environment communications and relationships under the theme of social leadership, maintaining and developing these relations was said to be limited in accordance with the pandemic measures, with emphasis on the inefficiency of online meetings compared to meeting in person. Another prominent issue under this theme is digital communications with the staff. School principals stated mostly using ICT-supported tools when communicating with staff, with communications generally occurring as official correspondence. Meetings and information sharing were done online, as well as distance learning. In addition, communications with security units, district occupational health and safety units, and transportation units were made online. The principals also mentioned trying to *reduce the concerns* the pandemic process had caused for the stakeholders and trying to hold meetings by taking the necessary precautions and pushing the limits of their means.

### **Schooling-Related Achievements During the Pandemic**

When analyzing the data on schooling-related achievements during the pandemic with respect to the school principals, the themes of achievements focused on capacity building, socially oriented achievements, and goal-oriented achievements emerged. Among these

themes, achievements focused on capacity building came to the fore, under which the following codes were emphasized: increasing technological knowledge, preventive behavior, needing to be open to innovations, and caring about professional development. The most emphasized code regarding this theme is increasing technological knowledge ( $n=24$ ). Regarding this code, the principals mentioned how the pandemic process had contributed to theirs and teachers' perspectives and competencies on technology and how this had contributed to the education-teaching process. When considering the participants' views in this aspect, an excerpt from one participant's view is as follows:

*With the distance education method, we realized that we could continue our operations with remote live lessons in all kinds of situations such as snow and rain without closing the school. For example, we can offer live remote lessons to students with various illnesses such as broken legs who are unable to come to school. In fact, we will demand this method more and more because distance education is more economical.*  
(M27)

Under the theme of achievements focused on capacity building, the principals also emphasized the importance of taking *preventive actions* in order for school members to adapt more easily to extraordinary conditions that may arise during the pandemic. The following is an excerpt from one principal's views regarding the code of preventative behavior:

*We may experience such problems in the future. From the top (MoNE) down, we all need to be prepared. Our ministry was also unprepared for this process. There have always been decision and implementation changes. I think our ministry should have a plan for such situations. In particular, we being the teachers and administrators clearly needed to*



*improve ourselves and follow the innovations in education. In addition, measures should be taken for both students and schools regarding inequality of opportunity. (M22)*

Another issue emphasized under the theme of achievements focused on capacity building is the code of caring about professional development. For this code, principals expressed their thoughts on the changes to teacher profiles and the need for professional development, as well as their experiences during the pandemic. The last issue emphasized under this theme is the code of needing to be open to innovations. Within the scope of this code, the participants stated that the innovations encountered were adopted faster due to the uncertain and dynamic nature of the pandemic, with education being able to be carried out not only at school but also anywhere.

The second theme for schooling-related achievements during the pandemic is socially oriented achievements. This theme includes awareness of protecting health, increasing communications with stakeholders, and social responsibility. This theme prioritizes the need for environmental support in ensuring the continuity of education. The most emphasized code under this theme is health protection awareness ( $n = 33$ ). For this code, principals talked about the changing hygiene habits in schools with COVID-19. An excerpt from one principal's views regarding health protection awareness is as follows:

*First of all, attention was paid to cleanliness and distance. These have been our priority. These perhaps should always have been, but we didn't see much. With this process, we saw the need for more. The hygiene documents and children's self-sacrificing efforts in terms of cleanliness in particular gained great importance. These needed to be done anyway, and the value of our school has increased even more. (M4)*

The code of social responsibility ranked second under the theme of socially oriented achievements and involves school principals' increased responsibilities outside of school, showing sensitivity to the needs of teachers and students, and being supportive. An excerpt from one participant's views on this code is as follows:

*We tried to protect each other more because of the disease. The more we try to protect and care, the more we value each other. We have friends among us who tested positive for COVID. We conveyed our best wishes to them and supported them. Because our COVID-positive friend couldn't leave his house, I brought him much of what he needed. This increased the unity between us. Reducing physical contact between people has increased the contact between hearts. (M8)*

Finally, the third most emphasized code under the theme of socially oriented achievements is giving importance to communication with stakeholders. It involves actions to bridge the deficiencies of losing face-to-face interaction by using ICT tools. In order to do this, the principals' experiences involved mentioning suggestions such as increasing the frequency of school-parent communications by telephone and dealing with parents' problems individually so that students can attend class.

The third theme under schooling-related achievements during the pandemic is goal-oriented achievements, which consists of the codes of adapting to online teaching, understanding the pressure of academic success, and awareness of unequal opportunities. This theme involves the principals' views on learning how to adapt to the new situations that arise in maintaining their schools' efforts to achieve its goals. The most emphasized code is adapting to online teaching ( $n=29$ ). With regard to this code, the principals talked about how to learn distance education applications, strengthen schools' infrastructure,



and the orientation process alongside the pandemic. An excerpt from the principals' views on adapting to online teaching is as follows:

*It turned out that, if the infrastructure problems related to distance education are resolvable, the overall costs spent on school and education will be much lower. While it had been obligatory to use only MoNE domain internet, now we can find our own source. Our schools have started to develop more on the Internet and digitally. We discovered and learned how to teach with deficiencies in infrastructure, together with our teachers. (M25)*

The second-most emphasized code under the theme of goal-oriented achievements is understanding the pressure of academic success, which concerns the externality of distance education. The importance of students' social needs during distance education and the intensity of courses became clearer with regard to this code. The third most emphasized code under this theme is awareness of unequal opportunities. With regard to this code, school principals mentioned how the unequal opportunities among students had become deeper during the distance education applications and emphasized solving these inequalities that had not been taken into account before more, suggesting that online education could be used in addition to face-to-face education in order to reduce the inequalities existing in the education system.

### **Priorities for Reducing School Adjustment Problems**

When analyzing the school principals' views regarding school priorities in order to reduce the adjustment problems during and after the pandemic process, the themes of administrative priorities, social priorities, and developmental priorities emerged. Among these themes, administrative priorities came to the fore and consists of the

following codes: preparing a safe physical environment, providing equal opportunities, maintaining achievements, raising awareness, and identifying problems and expectations. The theme of administrative priorities involves what needs to be done to find solutions to the problems caused by the new normal with regard to schooling and maintaining new achievements. The most emphasized code regarding this theme is the preparing a safe physical environment ( $n = 32$ ). This code addresses hygiene practices in the event that schools maintain face-to-face or transition to hybrid teaching during and after the pandemic. In this regard, a quote from one participant's views is as follows:

*An order regarding the physical environment is considered to have been established. In line with the instructions from MoNE, we need to prepare to make classes less crowded. We need to build ventilation systems and air conditioners must be installed in all classrooms, because air circulation must be provided in crowded classrooms just as in shopping malls. Whatever needs to be done technologically in places where people are concentrated, we will turn to it. (M13)*

The second code under the theme of administrative priorities is providing equal opportunities and involves the impossibilities that cause inequality among students in distance education and the efforts to eliminate them. One excerpt from the principals' views regarding this code is as follows:

*Our priority was to correct the injustices in tablet distribution. The number of siblings, success, and financial status of students should be reported. Our state is not a very poor one... The state should have provided the infrastructure for this. At my school, 6 people did not switch to reading. They had no Internet infrastructure. They were trying to connect from their mobile phone. Rich families' kids and the*





*kids of government officials have a computer at home, a tablet, and a mobile phone. The family is conscious, they are learning the lessons. This is the village boy... The quota for those who have Internet is running out. Injustices have increased. Distance education did not reach everyone. (M12)*

Under the theme of administrative priorities during the pandemic, the code of maintaining achievements was also emphasized. To this end, some principals said that the gains in cleaning and technology use should continue after the pandemic. In addition, some principals stated that priority should be given to activities that *raise awareness* regarding the practices that have been made or can be done to ensure that stakeholders are psychologically ready for the pandemic process and what comes after. An excerpt from one principal's views regarding the code of raising awareness is as follows:

*We held meetings with our teachers to help them adapt. In the beginning, we were away from the students for two and a half months. Currently, our school is divided in half, and face-to-face education continues. We only do distance learning on Wednesday. I see that students also miss school and their friends. Our Guidance Service provides services for resolving the uncertainty and psychological problems COVID has created. I hear that some of our parents do not want to send their students. In order to break this understanding, I have the guidance teachers and parents meet. We try to resolve problems by presenting different ideas and approaches. (M24)*

The second theme for schooling-related priorities during and after the pandemic is social priorities. This theme offers some suggestions for coping with the psychological depression caused by the social isolation that entered our lives through the pandemic. Under this theme are the following codes: providing social support,

increasing social activities, and providing motivation. The code with the highest frequency under this theme is increasing social activities ( $n=27$ ). The code involves activity and application suggestions that will facilitate students' and teachers' adaptation to schooling in the face of the psychological distance caused by the social distance. One quote from the principals' views regarding this code is as follows:

*If schooling continues like this, we may have things such as nature walks for the students in the afternoons. Students missed acting together. Students who never come to school almost forgot about school. They forgot to talk, they forgot to play, they forgot their friends. They have already forgotten their teachers. After the pandemic process is over, social activities should be held with teachers. Social activities are necessary to increase teachers' commitment to the school and to strengthen communication. Teachers should be supported with activities. (M11)*

The second most-emphasized code under the theme of social priorities is providing motivation. This code exemplifies what needs to be done in order to overcome negative emotions such as the burnout, inefficiency, and aimlessness caused by the constant changes and uncertainties in the education system. The following is one excerpt from the principals' comments regarding this code:

*Our students have developed psychological imbalances. In order to overcome these, we need to motivate those students at regular intervals. For example, if their first lesson starts at 9:00, we have to do something fun with music in the garden for the first hour of the lesson. (M5)*

The last theme determined regarding schooling priorities during and after the pandemic is developmental priorities. This theme prioritizes the codes of providing academic support and providing emotional support. Regarding this theme, the principals emphasized



what needs to be done to eliminate the educational and instructional deficiencies created by the different education systems employed through trial and error during the pandemic process. Regarding the code of providing academic support, which the principals mentioned the most under this theme ( $n=23$ ), the principals talked about their practices for eliminating the educational differences between students. The following is an excerpt from one principal's comments regarding this code:

*There was a difference in students' academic levels. The students who had the opportunity continued distance education, but those who did not were unable to finish their grade. These children need to start from scratch again or the achievements need to be stretched accordingly. A way must be followed in order to win over the child with a low academic level. Teaching past subjects more intensively to students who were unable to attend will eliminate the level difference (M13).*

The second most highlighted code under the theme of developmental priorities is providing emotional support. This code expresses the principals' experiences with the rehabilitation practices for teachers, students, and parents. During the process of returning to schooling, principals emphasized carrying out studies with psychosocial support groups. In order to do this, applying the tests guidance teachers and experts prepared for the students and acting in accordance with their reports would be appropriate. This is because the principals had a hard time getting students to adapt and had noticed behavioral disorders.

### **Discussion, Conclusion, and Suggestions**

This study has determined that the areas where school principals had difficulty in managing the process of schooling during

the pandemic are gathered under the themes of *strategic leadership*, *instructional leadership*, and *social leadership*. The school leader's goal is to create a school environment that enhances students' learning and well-being under all circumstances. Leadership is a tool for reducing the inequalities that hinder the desired environment. The fact that school administrators have defined their experiences in the literature mostly through the concepts of uncertainty and instability during the pandemic support the findings of this research (Martinez et al., 2021). In times of crisis, school leaders' ability to ensure the effectiveness of the school and to bring appropriate solutions to problems includes various difficulties, and they are expected to show strategic leadership characteristics (Akyüz, 2018). Strategic leadership involves setting a vision, providing flexibility, and empowering employees to bring about the desired change (Ireland & Hitt, 1999). According to Daniels and Ramey (2005), a school leader is expected to make a systematic evaluation (i.e., situation analysis) by using the information they collect in order to understand and manage the school's environment during and after the pandemic. Because schools in Turkey are structured according to the principle of centralized management, the slightest change or uncertainty in the central organization is felt more strongly in schools, which are known as provincial organizations. When evaluated in the context of chaos theory, as the wavelength between the center and the periphery grows due to the principle of centrifugation, the effect the central government has on schools also grows exponentially. For this reason, principals resorted to short-term solutions in their schools and therefore stated having difficulties displaying their *strategic leadership* characteristics. Another reason for this result may be the inadequate scenarios for crises found in MoNE and the schools before the pandemic, as was also seen throughout the world. In addition, the interruption of classes due to pandemic



conditions, the inability of teachers to achieve the desired educational goals, and the inability to communicate with stakeholders face-to-face may have caused principals to feel inadequate and/or experience difficulties in terms of leadership. Schools should be evaluated in the context of critical theory, not only to serve the development of certain students or train socially-oriented workers, but also to train empowered, knowledgeable, and highly skilled democratic citizens with the confidence and mastery to make the social environments in which they live, work, and act more vibrant and to develop their lives inclusively (Kincheloe, 2008). From this point of view, the influence a school leader has in times of crisis is to focus on minimizing the damage to stakeholders and ensuring the survival and development of the school.

The research results show that the pandemic process has had some important benefits in terms of schooling-related *achievements focused on capacity building, socially oriented achievements, and goal-oriented achievements*. Among these themes, achievements focused on capacity-building came to the fore. According to the literature (Sarı & Nayır, 2020), the primary opportunities for education during the pandemic process have been for providing healthier school conditions, revising education plans, and developing new assessment systems and distance education programs. Secondary education opportunities involve developing new ways of communication, preparing schools for periods of crisis, increasing parental participation, expanding online learning, developing teachers' technical and pedagogical skills regarding integrating digital devices into education, redefining the roles parents, teachers, and education policies/politicians will have in the education process after the epidemic, and trying to make education systems stronger and fairer. Bowen (2012) mentioned that, as another

opportunity brought by the pandemic, how traditional education institutions have moved content distribution and mixed/hybrid forms to online media can be exemplified as having increasing the quality of face-to-face teaching by moving content distribution online. According to Buheji and Ahmed (2020), the revision of education can be seen as an opportunity to update the methods that have moved away from the basic philosophy of education and to discuss their validity in many respects. At a time when the attention of the whole world is focused on education as well as health systems, transforming education policies into a more inclusive and fair structure should also be an opportunity both for today and the future. The literature and these research findings show that the school organization has been forced to change due to environmental conditions. In other words, the classical education style has evolved into digital education to maintain the existence of the school organization and education system as an evolutionary instinct resulting from the environmental factors created by the pandemic process. This can be claimed to have enabled school members to attempt to develop themselves personally and professionally. We could say our findings are consistent with Senge's (2006) learning organization theory. In this respect, crisis experiences can be considered as the gains from the pandemic process and to have namely increased the individual and professional capacities of school principals and teachers for developing preventive behavior, acquiring technological knowledge, being open to innovations, and attaching importance to professional development.

Findings from the study show that the themes of administrative priorities, social priorities, and developmental priorities emerged with respect to the school principals' experiences regarding reducing the problems associate with adjusting to the pandemic and the subsequent



schooling process. Administrative priorities are at the forefront of these themes. Having to live long-term with the pandemic measures has brought about certain restrictions in the lives of school members or the adoption of different attitudes. Maintaining pandemic measures within a school requires implementing and monitoring new rules while adding new responsibilities for school principals. Therefore, the need exists to carefully evaluate the side effects of measures that may adversely affect the adaptation process (Harris & Jones, 2020). According to the research from Yıldırım et al. (2021), things such as crisis management centers or boards can be established during a crisis in order to provide expert support regarding adaptation problems during the post-crisis return to school. On the other hand, long-term measures may create a perception that additional rules are present that restrict and exhaust individuals' behaviors, causing them to be ignored. In some cases, a lack of personal control over subjective decisions and feeling controlled externally may cause people to avoid adaptive behaviors (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2010). Bergdahl and Nouri's (2020) research emphasized the negative effects of social distance measures in schools and the emotional deprivation caused by individuals with limited social interactions. According to Giannini and Lewis (2020), other problems that may arise as a result of continuing measures after the pandemic are the growth of existing inequalities in the education system, the emergence of long-term negative consequences in addition to missed learning opportunities, many children and young people losing access to the healthy meals schools offer them, experiencing economic problems, and being exposed to social stress.

All in all, when evaluating the research results collectively, school principals were identified as having the most difficulty displaying their strategic leadership characteristics, and the pandemic

contributed to the principals through the emergence of the administrative priorities that resulted from their experiences with the pandemic. Furthermore, administrative priorities being brought to the fore could indicate a shift in principals' attitudes toward imposing responsibilities on themselves, ensuring school improvement by learning from problems, providing equal opportunities for disadvantaged students, and turning process experiences into opportunities. In this regard, the following recommendations can be made:

School leaders stated having difficulties in the areas of strategic leadership, social leadership, and instructional leadership skills. Therefore, new policies may be made to support the development of these skills. Furthermore, school principals have the most difficulty in exhibiting strategic leadership; therefore, strategic plans may be made based on several scenarios that give autonomy to schools at the central and provincial levels. School principals can also be mentored to improve their competencies regarding strategic leadership.

According to the findings, the school principals most frequently mentioned that opportunities exist for capacity development and infrastructure investments should be made by increasing the share of national income allocated to education. Although the pandemic caused a sharp shift to the digital era, one in which the principals experienced many difficulties and uncertainties, the schools and principals encourage online teaching and feel responsible for accessing technological resources for teachers and students. In many respects, education policymakers may thus use the teaching and learning processes that occurred through distance learning and other similar formats to support a return to normality.





The principals emphasized most that administrative priorities should be put to work after the pandemic, and the new management model created by the new normal should be standardized and applied at the school level. Principals may wrestle within their practice around creating conditions for students to learn and teachers to teach while at the same time seeking out new ways to support online learning and the operations of public schooling through extensive digital leadership. As such, they need to develop their digital leadership skills.

The themes of administrative priorities, social priorities, and developmental priorities emerged with respect to the school principals' experiences regarding reducing the problems associated with adjusting to the schooling process during and after the pandemic. People may develop negative emotions and feelings such as a sense of loneliness or frustration due to experiencing long days of quarantines and social isolation (Dor-Haim & Oplatka, 2021). School leaders should support their staff in coping with any feelings of loneliness and frustration they may have experienced, thereby encouraging staff to manage their emotions in class and to show similar support to their students. To cope with these and other related negative emotions, teachers and school principals should be supported in their emotion management and regulation.

### **Limitations of the Research**

In terms of method, this research is limited to analyzing data collected from a semi-structured interview form based on a qualitative approach using content analysis. Future research using other data collection approaches may additionally strengthen the findings and increase the generalizability of the results. The research is limited to

the principals working in primary, secondary, and high schools in Turkey in the 2020-2021 academic year. The study did not take teachers' experiences into consideration, which may have caused limited data to be reached. Due to the central governmental policies of the Ministry of National Education, the principals may also not have been able to clearly express their negative feelings about the pandemic process.

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