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Turkish Early Childhood and Early Primary Grade Teachers' Experiences in Online Remote Learning

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Abstract

The emergence of the Covid-19 virus around December 2019 and its rapid spread through human-to-human contact around the world made it essential for Turkey to take precautions, too. The purpose of this study is to explore the early childhood and early elementary teachers' experiences as they were in the process of teaching in different modes of instruction during COVID-19 school closings in Turkey's educational context. The researchers used a semi-structured survey instrument that was available through Google Forms. The survey results provided important insights for Turkey's school districts to develop a viable plan for effective transition to alternate methods of instruction in case of emergency transition to remote learning. We can use the information from this study to build a better alternative teaching infrastructure that can be used in a moment's notice if the situation arises.

Keywords: COVID-19, Early childhood education, Elementary education, Online remote education, Teachers' experiences

Article Type: Original article

Ethics Declaration

The research reported in this article was conducted in accordance to the ethical guidelines by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at New Jersey City University (NJCU). The research proposal was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of NJCU.

Ethics committee permission information

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Öz

Covid-19 virüsünün Aralık 2020'de ortaya çıkması ve insandan insana temas yoluyla dünyaya hızla yayılması Türkiye'nin de ciddi önlem almasını zorunlu hale getirdi. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Türkiye'de ki okulların kapanması sırasında farklı öğretim biçimlerinde öğretime geçiş yapan erken çocukluk ve ilkokul öğretmenlerinin deneyimlerini araştırmaktır. Çalışmada, yarı yapılandırılmış bir anket oluşturulup Google Forms üzerinden katılımcılarla paylaşılmıştır. Uygulanan anket sonuçları, Türkiye'deki okul bölgelerinin uzaktan öğrenmeye acil geçiş durumunda alternatif öğretim yöntemlerine etkin geçiş için uygulanabilir bir plan geliştirmeleri için önemli bilgiler sağlamaktadır. Bu çalışmadan elde edilen bulgular, acil durum anlarında kullanılabilecek daha iyi bir alternatif öğretim altyapısı oluşturmak için kullanabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: COVID-19, ilkokul eğitimi, okul öncesi eğitim, Uzaktan eğitim, öğretmen deneyimleri

Introduction

The emergence of Covid-19 virus across the globe forced school buildings to be shut down, public places to be closed, social-interaction to be restricted and children to be confined to the parameters of a computer screen for schooling. The virus' capability to rapidly spread through human-to-human contact all over the world made it essential for Turkey to take precautions throughout every section of public life and service. In order to control the spread of the disease, orders for emergency stay-at-home and transition-to-online remote education have been put into effect by Turkey's government as of March 16, 2020. Initially, the schools and the teachers were given access to different educational formats (e.g., synchronous, asynchronous, etc.), student learning platforms (e.g., EBA, TRT School) and online meeting software (e.g., Zoom, Canvas, Teams) to continue education in online environment. However, the education stakeholders (teachers, students, parents, administrators, policy makers, etc.) who were not very familiar with distance education systems via digital platforms at that time, faced with the unexpected challenges of re-planning the curriculum of a massive P-12+ student population (around 25 million, including higher education) in Turkey. Specifically, the concerns about the education of students in prekindergarten to early elementary grades grew because this group of students is least likely to possess necessary technology skills to participate in schooling via online remote learning. Even though the schools in Turkey opened their doors for face to face education in 2021-2022 school year the first time in since March 2020, the spread of the virus remains very high across the country while the infection rates among youth create interruptions in their education.

Literature Review

According to the recent research conducted in Turkey, the Turkey's Ministry of National Education (MoNE), which is the centralized governmental entity overseeing formal education across the country implemented series measures to address the educational, technological and social-emotional needs of students, teachers and parents (Yucesoy-Ozkan et al., 2020). These measures included supplementing technological devices, creating Educational Informatics Network (EBA) learning platform, internet hot spots, creating educational apps, organizing in-service professional development opportunities for teachers, creating content for EBA-TV for students who live in rural areas but have no access to any technological device or internet connection. Despite the ministry's efforts to reach out and meet the educational needs of approximately 7 million preschool and primary grades students and 400,000 preschool and primary school teachers (MoNE, 2021), emergency

transition to online education proved to be an opportunity to improve in educational technologies as well as a hurdle to overcome for many educators.

Recent studies conducted on online remote education in Turkey revealed findings related to experiences preschool and primary school teachers, students and parents had during online remote education. Emergency transition to online remote teaching prompted even veteran teachers to reexamine their teaching skills and capabilities to teach in an unfamiliar format, and in turn seek professional improvement. Demir and Kale (2020) surveyed in-service teachers' perceptions of online remote teaching during COVID-19 school closings. The majority of the participants perceived themselves as sufficient and moderately competent in distance education teaching methods. Those who did not have experience and competence in online teaching pedagogy and tools expressed their willingness to improve their professional knowledge and increase their competencies in distance education process. Alan's study with a group of Turkish early childhood education teachers (Alan, 2021) revealed teachers' desire to learn new applications and tools that they could incorporate as well as improve their pedagogical knowledge to teach through online remote learning. In another study (Telli & Altun, 2020), the parents of preschoolers stated that the distance education, which started on March 23, 2020 and carried out with EBA content and other distance education activities, had very positive features in terms of organization, teacher effort and process management, time planning and scheduling. The parents also indicated that preschool teachers became both subject matter expert and a professional who supported children in many ways, especially in online environment.

More than half of the participants in the study of Demir and Kale (2020) indicated that they had sufficient infrastructure to teach remotely though some teachers revealed that inadequate infrastructure experienced by their students caused interruptions to distance education. Lack of internet access, inadequacy of the students' hardware tools, lack of technological knowledge of parents, and the variation in individual learning needs posed significant challenges for teachers to create an equitable learning space. For example, the parents stated difficulties in accommodating the hardware needs of multiple siblings who were supposed to log in the online remote learning (Telli & Altun, 2020).

Çakır, Külekçi and Akyavuz (2020) indicated that preschool teachers expressed their frustration about not being able to keep their students away from the digital screen [outside of online schooling] even though they created off-screen interactive activities that were shared with parents to be conducted at home. The teachers were concerned that their students would spend long sedentary hours in front of the screen, therefore develop a "screen addiction" in long run. The teachers were also concerned with students' mental health due to limited or lack of in-person interaction on- and off-school hours throughout the day. During the online meetings, the teachers carried out supportive activities to motivate the students, encouraged them to think hopeful for the future, praised their efforts and made them feel that the school still existed (Çakır, Külekçi & Akyavuz, 2020). Young student groups and students with special needs faced various difficulties and limitations during online remote learning. Lack of motivation to log in and attend online sessions, and inattention to the online instruction exacerbated the problems related to the quality of the online remote education (Akkaş, Ocak & Ocak, 2020; Demir & Kale, 2020). It was observed that the mothers of young students with special needs primarily shouldered the responsibility for communicating with school and helping learning at home. Mothers stated that their children often exhibited self-harming, aggressive behavior and lack of self-control. In addition, lack of eye contact with students, parents' heavy workload and unavailability to help learning tasks and multiple siblings who needed attention at home negatively affected the students' learning process. Lack of resources to reach out to students with special needs left the teachers with feelings of helpless (Karahan, Yıldırım Parlak, Demiröz, Kaya & Kayhan, 2021). While EBA was enriched by EBA TV programs for primary and upper grades, the absence of pre-school programs was a shortcoming. The preschool teachers participating in the study

of Akkaş et al. (2020) emphasized that especially children in preschool age need psychological support and that it is important for them to continue their learning with fun and motivating activities. Therefore, it is essential to improve and adapt online remote learning platforms (e.g., EBA) and the resources (e.g., EBA TV content) according to preschool children's development and learning styles.

COVID-19 pandemic made a significant impact on the world's human population and the implicit effects of this public health crisis were felt by the younger learners the most. This global health crisis urged many teacher educators and researchers such as the authors of this research to study and learn from the teachers' experiences in any specific cultural context to be better prepared for any future global health crisis that might require transition to emergency remote teaching.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the early childhood and early elementary teachers' experiences as they transitioned to teaching in different modes of instruction during COVID-19 school closings in Turkey's educational context.

Methods

This study is an instrumental case study. According to Stake (2005), an instrumental case study provides a deep examination and understanding of an issue, which eventually leads the researcher to pursuing other related issues. This study is also exploratory in nature because it is "an effort to develop more knowledge about a particular phenomenon with the expectation that the information gathered will be used to guide and shape additional research" (Willis, 2008).

Research Instrument and Data Analysis

The researchers used a semi-structured survey instrument that was available through a Google Forms hyperlink embedded within the recruitment email for the participants. Some of the questions were Likert-type questions. Teachers could respond to questions by choosing one of the five options - 1=Not effective at all, 2= Not effective, 3=Somewhat effective, 4= Effective, 5=Very effective.

Some of the questions were open-ended questions and the teachers could write down their thoughts. Google Forms allows all responses to be returned to the principal investigators in an anonymous format. The survey was prepared in Turkish language and included rating and open-ended questions. The responses were translated from Turkish to English by one of the researchers who is fluent in both languages. The researchers used the data analysis feature in Microsoft Excel to run the descriptive analysis for the Likert-type questions. Translated open-ended questions were independently analyzed by adopting Glaser and Strauss' (1999) constant comparative coding method. Each researcher of the study independently coded the data and compared their results to maintain interrater reliability. All the survey items except demographics questions revealed 90% and over interrater reliability.

Research Participants

98 Early childhood and early elementary school teachers from different regions of Turkey (Kocaeli, Eskisehir, and Ankara) responded to the survey. See Table 1 for the participant demographics.

Table 1.
Participants' demographics

Gender	Age	Education	Grade Teaching	Years of Teaching	School	Ed. Degree
Female-84.7% (n=83)	20-25-7.1% (n=7)	B.S. 74.5% (n=73)	Pre-K 21.6% (n=21)	0-5 11.3% (n=11)	Public School 87.5% (n=85)	ECE 37.5% (n=37)

Male-15.3% (n=15)	26-35 34.7% (n=34)	Master's 24.5% (n=24)	K 23.7% (n=23)	6-10 19.6% (n=19)	Private 12.5% (n=12)	ELEM 41.6% (n=40)
	36-45 41% (n=41)	Other 1% (n=1)	1st 21.6% (n=21)	11-15 33% (n=32)		School counseling 4.16% (n=4)
	46-55 17.3% (n=17)		2nd 21.6% (n=21)	16-20 12.4% (n=12)		Others Degrees* 14.58% (n=16)
	56-up 2% (n=2)		3rd 24.7% (n=24)	21-25 15.5% (n=15)		
				26-up 8.2% (n=8)		
TOTAL: 100% (n= 98)	TOTAL: 100% (n= 98)	TOTAL: 98% (n= 97)**	TOTAL: 98% (n= 97)	TOTAL: 98% (n= 97)	TOTAL: 97% (n=97)	TOTAL: 97% (n=97)

*Chemistry, physic, psychology, German teaching, English teaching, Turkish teaching, special education, global education, agriculture, economy, journalism

**One participant only partially responded to the demographics questions and the rest of the survey.

Research Questions

1. What experience did Turkish teachers have in relation to the modes of teaching that they used during the online remote learning?
2. What kind of administrative and technical support did Turkish teachers receive during the online remote learning?
3. What experience did Turkish teachers have in relation to assessment of student progress and performance during the online remote learning?
4. What experience did Turkish teachers have in relation to accommodating the learners with special needs during the online remote learning?
5. What experience did Turkish teachers have in relation to parent involvement during the online remote learning?

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Results

R.Q.1-What experience did Turkish teachers have in relation to the modes of teaching that they used during the online remote learning?

The participants were asked to mark as many modes of teaching that they adopted during online remote learning (Table 2).

Table 2.

Modes of teaching used during online learning

*Modes of teaching during COVID-19 school closings	Percentage (n=97)
Teaching through ZOOM	87.6%
Teaching through EBA**	73.2%
Watching lessons on State TV	38.1%
Audio or/and video recording of the lessons	34%
Sending lessons/activities and homework to parents' emails/text	29.9%
Distributing home learning kits to parents	24%
Putting lessons on an online teaching platform	4.2%
Others	6%

*Participants marked as many as they could.
**The online student learning platform adopted by the Ministry of Education

The primary mode of teaching marked by the participants was the live sessions conducted through ZOOM software (87.6%). The teachers utilized the Educational Informatics Network (EBA) platform to upload their lessons and communicate with the students and the parents. The teachers who marked "others"' indicated that they used "WhatsApp" application to communicate with the parents for tasks such as sending and receiving home-work, making audio and video calls with students, sending educational videos and activities, and informing parents about school related information. The teachers were asked to rate their familiarity with software and hardware options that were available to them during transition to online remote learning by responding to Likert-type questions (1=Not familiar at all, 2= Not familiar, 3=Somewhat familiar, 4=Familiar, 5=Very familiar). Even though 87% of the participants utilized ZOOM as the primary software to conduct live session, only 39% of the participants were familiar or very familiar with ZOOM software (Table 3).

Table 3

Teachers' familiarity with Software and Hardware

Items/*Scale	*1(%)	*2(%)	*3(%)	*4(%)	*5(%)	TOTAL (n=97)
ZOOM	44.3%	13.4%	4.1%	9.27%	28.86%	100%
Google Classroom**	63.91%	18.55%	6.18%	5.15%	6.18%	100%
Student support learning platform***	24.74%	18.55%	10.30%	22.68%	23.71%	100%
Presentation software	11.34%	14.43%	18.55%	27.93%	27.93%	100%

Audio/video recording/ screen capturing	11.34%	16.49%	16.49%	28.86%	26.8%	100%

*Scale
1=Not familiar at all, 2= Not familiar, 3=Somewhat familiar, 4=Familiar, 5=Very familiar
** This was not a platform commonly used by the Turkish teachers.
***EBA-Student support learning platform adopted by the Ministry of Education

The participants were asked to list advantages and disadvantages of online remote learning in relation to their experience with the online teaching tools they utilized. The patterns of advantages emerged in the areas of communication, instructional advantages, technology skill improvement, continuity of learning and classroom management. The teachers across the board indicated that the software adopted enabled them to communicate with the entire class in real time as well as communicating with the colleagues in online meetings. Communication with families became better because of their presence at home while their children were attending remote online learning. In turn, the parents became more involved in their children's schooling. EBA and Google Classroom platforms allowed the teachers to share asynchronous instructional materials and tasks with students. During live sessions, the technology helped them screen share the lesson content or conduct interactive activities (e.g., singing songs and dancing) by having everyone turn on their video cameras. As far as the technology skill improvement, the teachers indicated that their competency in using technology increased. They were able to better appreciate the value of technology for education as well as communication when face-to-face interaction was not available. The participants mentioned that the technological means they used allowed the education to still take place despite the mandatory school-closings. Students were still able to maintain some level of contact with the formal education environment. It was also easier to promote prosocial skills such as turn-taking or listening to others by using the features of remote learning software.

As for the disadvantages, the themes that emerged were emotional connection with students, instructional difficulties, learner level factors and environmental factors. One of the most explicit disadvantages that emerged from the teachers' answers was the inability to connect with their students at personal, emotional level through online meeting software. One teacher mentioned the "lack of synergy" that affected the motivation to attend the online sessions or complete any offline work by accessing the online learning platforms (e.g., EBA, Google Classroom). Teachers voiced their concerns about the limitations of conducting instruction through online remote mode. For example, session contents were not covered most of the time due to time constrains. The students were left sitting idle in front of a screen because of limited interaction through online meeting software. Technological difficulties such as outdates software or devices, lack of working device and poor internet stream in students' homes often interrupted the learning. Learners' developmental level factored into problems with online learning. For example, younger students were not able to comprehend the features of the software adopted, therefore could not follow the synchronous meeting etiquette such as waiting to connect, muting to listen, raising hand to speak through the camera, etc. Finally, the participants mentioned environmental disadvantages such as having multiple siblings who needed to use the same device to connect to live sessions and families' lack of familiarity with the software and devices.

R.Q.2- What kind of administrative and technical support did Turkish teachers receive during the online remote learning?

Two of the survey questions asked the participants to identify and rate the effectiveness of the administrative and technical support they received by responding to Likert-type questions (1=Not familiar at all, 2= Not familiar, 3=Somewhat familiar, 4=Familiar, 5=Very familiar). As seen in Table 4, advance notice to online teaching was most frequently rated item with the effectiveness rating evenly distributed from not effective at all (20.61%) to very effective (18.55%). This sporadic rating could be explained with the differences in individual school administrations' attitude and adequacy

toward handling transition to online remote learning. The qualitative responses revealed that some participants received frequent communication and support from the administration whereas some did not receive any administrative guidance on how to handle online remote learning. For example, one of the participants from the private school site stated that, "There was administrative support in the distance education process. We continued the process by collaborating. We created training environments with the information we learned in EBA in-service training." A teacher from one of the public school sites stated that "Not being able to get administrative and technical support was the biggest shortcoming." Another public school teacher mentioned that "Because the administration was not effectively informed by the ministry, they were confused. The administration also did not have the competence to support the teachers."

Table 4

Administrative technical support received

Items/*Scale	Response (n=97)	*1(%)	*2(%)	*3(%)	*4(%)	*5(%)
Advanced notice to online teaching	63.9%	20.61%	18.55%	25.77%	16.49%	18.55%
Assessing if teachers and students had adequate hardware	45.5%	34%	16.49%	25.77%	12.37%	11.34%
Providing teachers and students with hardware	13.4%	56.7%	20.61%	9.27%	7.21%	6.18%
Assessing teachers knowledge about non-face-to-face teaching mediums	30.9%	34%	24.74%	20.61%	10.30%	10.30%
Providing PD opportunities for teachers	25.7%	34%	26.80%	17.52%	10.30%	11.34%
Providing technical support	16.5%	47.42%	24.74%	13.40%	8.24%	6.18%
Check-in with administrators	54.6%	15.46%	22.68%	25.77%	16.49%	19.58%

*Scale

1=Not effective at all, 2= Not effective, 3=Somewhat effective, 4= Effective, 5=Very effective

Check-in with administrators was the second highest marked item by the participants (54.6%) though the distribution of the ratings was parallel to the advance notice to online teaching.

Even though the administrative and technical support was not consistent across the schools, the majority of the participants (79.4%) indicated having frequent opportunities to collaborate with peers to consult and learn from each other about many different topics related to teaching in an online remote environment. The participants were asked to list the advantages of administrative and technical support that they received. Through online meetings with the administration, the teachers felt supported. Some school administrations relayed the information in a timely manner One of the participants indicated "[administration] Informed the teachers about the road map and the online mediums and tools to be used." The professional development opportunities provided by either the administration or the Ministry of Education, timely and daily information dissemination along with periodic check-ins and meetings with the teachers helped them feel supported and handle the challenges of online remote learning much easier. The participants also listed challenges related to lack of or inadequate administrative and technical support. The answers to the open-ended question

revealed a general sense of exhaustion and being overwhelmed. Inadequate or no equipment support (e.g., computer, mic, camera, headphones, etc), lack of communication and lack of training on the part of administration appeared very frequently in the participants' responses. One of the public-school teachers indicated "Buying all these equipment put an extra financial load on us. The fact that there is no technical personal causes some problems [technology related] left unsolved or solved very late." Another teacher stated that, "Everybody learned the techniques and strategies by themselves through trial/error, Google search and YouTube videos. There was no professional support and education provided."

It is puzzling to see such variation in this sample of Turkish early childhood and early primary teachers' experiences even though pre-k to 12-grade curriculum, timelines and assessments are designed and managed by centralized by the Ministry of Education across the entire country including the private schools. Each individual school is a social unit in which the social agents (e.g., administrators, staff, teachers, students and parents) impact its dynamics and functions regardless of whether it needs to follow a uniform education program. Therefore, the individual school administration's approach to advance notice of changes and new implementations, assessment of teachers' and students' needs for hardware and software, and most importantly support of teachers' professional readiness to teach in online remote environment seemed to create a significant impact on the success rate of emergency transition to online education.

R.Q.3- What experience did Turkish teachers have in relation to assessment of student progress and performance during the online remote learning?

The participants were asked to explain if they had to do any modifications to their existing assessment methods during online remote learning. 53.6% of the participants answered "yes" and 47.4% answered "no" to this question. Those who answered "yes" explained that they relied on parents' input and file sharing (e.g., WhatsApp), used online software to organize assessment tasks, changed the assessment criteria, and observed the students during the live sessions. Early primary grade teachers used online software such as Kahoot, Google Form, Quizzes to assess the students' knowledge during live sessions. In spite of these modifications, the participants in general indicated that it was very challenging to assess the students via online remote education because they could not connect with the students at a social-emotional level. The scheduled content was not covered in the given live session timelines, so was the assessment of student learning. Chronic absenteeism, mostly due to lack of internet access or a device to connect were among the challenges to appropriately and accurately assessing student learning. One teacher indicated that "Teachers cannot [get to] know the students [in online environment] so they don't believe the assessment results are accurate." Young children in particular had hard time attending to the online education and sitting in front of computer for long periods of time. Parents' frequent interference and answering the questions for their students or feeding the answers to their children frustrated many teachers. In fact, when the participants were asked whether the assessment during online remote learning captured the students' performance accurately, 68% answered "no."

Teachers were asked if the chosen non-face-to-face instruction was appropriate for the age group they taught regardless of the variation in students' learning needs. 58.8% of the participants answered "yes" and 44.3% answered "no." They were asked to recommend effective alternative strategies for non-face-to-face instruction. Several preschool teachers responded that the online education is not suitable for young children and that there is no alternative to face-to-face education. They raised the issue of lack of appropriate preschool content on EBA platform. Other teachers mostly recommended creating different instructional materials such as teacher video recordings, educational play apps in which teachers and students could log in and play, sending activity kits to home and using different online programs (e.g., Mentimeter, Whiteboard, Web2 Tools). Some of the participants recommended training for parents to support education at home.

R.Q.4- What experience did Turkish teachers have in relation to accommodating the learners with special needs during the online remote learning?

The participants were asked if they were able to accommodate and modify their instruction and assessment for students with special needs as they did in their face-to-face instruction. 29.9% of the participants answered "yes" and 71.1% of the participants answered "no". Those who answered "yes" were prompted to list the accommodations/modifications they created. The answers included strategies such as working with students one-on-one, modifying the activity for individual needs, collaborating with the parents and providing them with tips about how to help the students at home, communicating via phone, etc. Lack of special education support from the school, absence from the live sessions because of attention problems and communication limitation in the online environment were among the challenges to accommodating for students with special needs. One of the participants explained that "It was hard to provide individual attention to that student while leaving the other students, therefore it [accommodations/modifications] was not effective."

R.Q.5-What experience did Turkish teachers have in relation to parent involvement during the online remote learning?

The teachers were asked which of the resources the students had at their homes based on their observations and interactions with their students and their parents. Help with online 87.6% of the participants reported that the students had access to a smart phone and 79.4% reported that the students had a computer and instructional textbook. 32% of teachers indicated students' access to student learning platform (e.g., EBA) and 29.9% mentioned the access to a quiet place for study. The participants identified and rated the ways the parents were involved in their children's education during online remote learning by responding to Likert-type questions (1=Not familiar at all, 2= Not familiar, 3=Somewhat familiar, 4=Familiar, 5=Very familiar).

Table 5

Experience related to parent involvement

Items/*Scale	*1(%)	*2(%)	*3(%)	*4(%)	*5(%)
Helping children manage the online learning	6.18%	13.40%	22.68%	24.74%	32.98%
Helping children stay focused on the learning tasks during and after instruction	6.18%	9.27%	27.83%	25.77%	30.92%
Communicating with the teacher (e.g., sending feedback, seeking further assistance, etc.)	8.24%	10.30%	16.49%	21.64%	43.29%

*Scale

1=Not effective at all, 2= Not effective, 3=Somewhat effective, 4= Effective, 5=Very effective

The participants were asked to identify the most challenging problems their students and families had to deal with during non-face-to-face instruction. Parental knowledge and skills to help their children's education was an area mentioned frequently by the participants. The participants' answers were revolved around the following challenges: understanding and helping with the educational content, lack of technological knowledge and skills, inability to motivate their children to attend the sessions and complete their homework, establishing a routine at home to follow the school schedule. Another area of challenge for parents was the lack of resources to enable effective learning through an online remote environment. The teachers mentioned that many families either did not have internet access or had limited internet access. Inconsistent internet connection, outdated software on the devices contributed to the challenges, lack of quiet work space, too many siblings

needing a device for their school work, even lack of paper to write on posed significant the difficulties. Finally, struggles related to familial, spousal relations and parents' work schedule colliding with school schedule negatively affected students' attendance and attention to online learning, in turn created an extra layer of challenge to creating an optimum online remote education environment. Because of inadequate time between job and home tasks, parents could not take their children outside to play or exercise. One of the participants explained that:

> It was hard to gain the students' attention. They did not have the motivation. Parents were disinterested. They were turning on [computer or live session], not checking whether the students listened. Arguments, voices overlapping, students chatting in the background, drawing on a shared screen, not turning on the video, not listening to the lesson. We cannot control these. We could not get feedback from the students and we could not attend to the students one-on-one.

Discussion and Recommendations

The study reported in this paper aimed to present Turkish early childhood and early primary grade teachers' experiences related to teaching in an online remote learning environment. The responses to the online survey revealed important findings in relation to the means utilized by the teachers to conduct online education, administrative and technological support, assessing student performance, accommodating for students with special needs and parent involvement. Even though the school curriculum programs and timelines are administered according to centralized guidelines by Turkey's Ministry of Education, teachers' experiences related to online remote education reported in this study greatly varied. The results revealed that teaching in online environment helped some participants improve their technological and pedagogical knowledge and skills. Online meeting software (e.g., ZOOM) provided more opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues and instantly communicate with school administration as well as parents of their students. On the other hand, the responses demonstrated some very important challenges that the teachers experienced as they transitioned to online remote education. Individual school administrations' inadequate effort to manage emergency transition to online education, lack of hardware (e.g., computer, mic, headphones, etc.) and information technology support, and lack of professional development opportunities appeared to significantly impact the teachers' experiences. The solution to building a teaching workforce that possesses strong technological and pedagogical knowledge and skills requires comprehensive planning and coordination. Periodic professional development opportunities that are not only for teachers but also for administrators who are the first point of contact in emergency situations should be a general practice. Schools should have on-site instructional coaches who are specialized in online instruction and teaching methodologies. Additionally, establishing an educational technology department in individual school districts should be a standard procedure so that teachers could receive immediate technological assistance.

Lack of rapid and clear communication from the Ministry of Education and school administrations was one of the problems during this process. Consequently, educators were left to their own volition to teach in online remote environment with the added stress of inadequate knowledge, resources and guidance on teaching online. Studies such as this one provides important insights on teachers' online remote teaching experience for Turkey's Ministry of Education as well as school administrations to revamp the lines of communication and increase teachers' input and voice in any decision-making process. Two-way, vertical and horizontal communication would lead to making more effective educational decision making and in turn improve the quality of emergency online remote learning for children.

The participants reported problems such as lack of availability of resources both for teachers and students, inadequate hardware and inequalities among students in the form of lack of access to online education platforms, no or limited internet access, inadequate or outdated devices and parents'

lack of technological knowledge. Crisis such as pandemics require "resilient school communities" as stated by Baytiyeh (2017). Baytiyeh explained that "The importance of resilience lies in its need to increase the capacity of individuals and communities, such that they can withstand and/or adapt to a wide range of risks" (p. 695).The results of current study emphasize the importance of assessing infrastructure (e.g., device, access to strong internet network) both in school and in home environment and increase awareness of parents about online remote learning in cases of emergency transition to online remote education (Telli & Altun, 2020).

Some of the participants of this study indicated that the online remote education is not appropriate for young children, especially those in preschool age. Also, considerable number of participants expressed their inability to reach and teach students with special needs during the online schooling. Some teachers explained that young children and students with special needs had hard time to attend to online instruction and that their need for face-to-face social interaction and interactive-sensorial learning opportunities was the biggest challenge to creating an effective online remote learning environment. Lack of interactive instructional resources to engage young students in preschool and early elementary grades in online environment was another obstacle even though the teachers tried to incorporate music, dance and online videos in their instruction. Early childhood is a period when young children's minds are most receptive to new experiences and inquisitive to explore so many new phenomena they recognize in their environments such as school, home, neighborhood, city, etc. In order to establish a sustainable and quality online remote education system in case of transition to emergency online education, we recommend to tackle planning online remote learning for young children and students with special needs separately than the older and typically developing students. Young children's developmental need for play and social communication should be a priority when designing online instruction content. Learning kits that could be prepared and sent home along with a schedule that the parents or guardians could follow at home would ensure to involve students in meaningful activities. Student with special needs require an individualized online schedule in which they can have one-on-one online instructional session with their teachers and specialists to support their specific learning needs.

Parents, particularly mothers shouldered the task of helping students connect and attend the online sessions. Because the parents were overwhelmed with the task of handling work and children's schooling tasks, communication with the teachers should be consistently maintained through online software just like the participants of this study tried. Parents should be well informed about online school schedule, list of tasks that they need to and can do at home to support their children. It is recommended to develop activity programs that parents can implement at home to protect children's psychological, social and physical health during the distance education process and to provide students with the necessary competencies to function in school (Demir & Kale, 2020). Furthermore, teachers and administrators should carefully survey the resources available to each family and whether there are any risks around family ecosystems that might cause disruptions to students' education. They should implement effective, family-based intervention programs to protect the welfare of young children and their parents during emergency transition to online education (Karahan et al., 2021).

In order to establish a sustainable and quality distance education system even after the emergency online education ends, the current study proves the importance of investing in infrastructure, increasing access to hardware and software, and increasing parent awareness of the goals of education wherever it may take (e.g., online or face-to-face)(Telli & Altun, 2020). Most important group of stakeholders who can benefit from the results of this study are children themselves. The school principals and teachers collaboratively could plan strategies to transition students to alternate modes of learning with appropriate support and resources. Studies such as this could provide us with valuable information from the experiences of teachers who continued to do their jobs under dire circumstances. We can use this information to build a better alternative teaching infrastructure in place that can be used in a moment's notice if the situation arises.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the early childhood and early elementary teachers' experiences as they transitioned to teaching in different modes of instruction during COVID-19 school closings in Turkey's educational context.

Method

This study is an instrumental case study. The researchers used a semi-structured survey instrument. 98 Early childhood and early elementary school teachers from different regions of Turkey (Kocaeli, Eskisehir, and Ankara) responded to the survey. The researchers used the data analysis feature in Microsoft Excel to run the descriptive analysis for the Likert-type questions. Translated open-ended questions were independently analyzed by adopting Glaser and Strauss' (1999) constant comparative coding method.

Findings

R.Q.1-What experience did Turkish teachers have in relation to the modes of teaching that they used during the online remote learning?

The primary mode of teaching marked by the participants was the live sessions conducted through ZOOM software (87.6%). The teachers utilized the Educational Informatics Network (EBA) platform to upload their lessons and communicate with the students and the parents. The teachers who marked "others''' indicated that they used "WhatsApp" application to communicate with the parents for tasks such as sending and receiving home-work, making audio and video calls with students, sending educational videos and activities, and informing parents about school related information. The participants were asked to list advantages and disadvantages of online remote learning in relation to their experience with the online teaching tools they utilized. The patterns of advantages emerged in the areas of communication, instructional advantages, technology skill improvement, continuity of learning and classroom management. As for the disadvantages, the themes that emerged were emotional connection with students, instructional difficulties, learner level factors and environmental factors.

R.Q.2- What kind of administrative and technical support did Turkish teachers receive during the online remote learning?

Advance notice to online teaching was most frequently rated item with the effectiveness rating evenly distributed from not effective at all (20.61%) to very effective (18.55%). This sporadic rating could be explained with the differences in individual school administrations' attitude and adequacy toward handling transition to online remote learning. The qualitative responses revealed that some participants received frequent communication and support from the administration whereas some did not receive any administrative guidance on how to handle online remote learning. Even though the administrative and technical support was not consistent across the schools, the majority of the participants (79.4%) indicated having frequent opportunities to collaborate with peers to consult and learn from each other about many different topics related to teaching in an online remote environment.

R.Q.3- What experience did Turkish teachers have in relation to assessment of student progress and performance during the online remote learning?

The participants were asked to explain if they had to do any modifications to their existing assessment methods during online remote learning. 53.6% of the participants answered "yes" and 47.4% answered "no" to this question. In spite of these modifications, the participants in general indicated that it was very challenging to assess the students via online remote education because they could not connect with the students at a social-emotional level. Teachers were asked if the chosen non-face-to-face instruction was appropriate for the age group they taught regardless of the variation in students' learning needs. 58.8% of the participants answered "yes" and 44.3% answered "no."

R.Q.4- What experience did Turkish teachers have in relation to accommodating the learners with special needs during the online remote learning?

The participants were asked if they were able to accommodate and modify their instruction and assessment for students with special needs as they did in their face-to-face instruction. 29.9% of the participants answered "yes" and 71.1% of the participants answered "no". Lack of special education support from the school, absence from the live sessions because of attention problems and communication limitation in the online environment were among the challenges to accommodating for students with special needs.

R.Q.5-What experience did Turkish teachers have in relation to parent involvement during the online remote learning?

The teachers were asked which of the resources the students had at their homes based on their observations and interactions with their students and their parents. Help with online 87.6% of the participants reported that the students had access to a smart phone and 79.4% reported that the students had a computer and instructional textbook. 32% of teachers indicated students' access to student learning platform (e.g., EBA) and 29.9% mentioned the access to a quiet place for study.

Discussion

The solution to building a teaching workforce that possesses strong technological and pedagogical knowledge and skills requires comprehensive planning and coordination. Periodic professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators should be a general practice. Schools should have on-site instructional coaches who are specialized in online instruction and teaching methodologies. Additionally, establishing an educational technology department in individual school districts should be a standard procedure so that teachers could receive immediate technological assistance.

Two-way, vertical and horizontal communication would lead to making more effective educational decision making and in turn improve the quality of emergency online remote learning for children. In order to establish a sustainable and quality online remote education system in case of transition to emergency online education, we recommend to tackle planning online remote learning for young children and students with special needs separately than the older and typically developing students. Young children's developmental need for play and social communication should be a priority when designing online instruction content. Student with special needs require an individualized online schedule in which they can have one-on-one online instructional session with their teachers and specialists to support their specific learning needs. It is recommended to develop activity programs that parents can implement at home to protect children's psychological, social and physical health during the distance education process and to provide students with the necessary competencies to function in school (Demir & Kale, 2020). Furthermore, teachers and administrators should carefully survey the resources available to each family and whether there are any risks around family ecosystems that might cause disruptions to students' education.